

**Migration, Mining, and Experience:  
Solidarity in the Labour Milieu of the  
Alès Coalfield in France, 1918-1940**

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Owen Coughlan  
Balliol College

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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	2
<b>Abstract</b> .....	1
<b>Long Abstract</b> .....	3
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	13
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	14
<b>Introduction. ‘Odious Exploitation’: Migrants and Industry in Interwar France</b> .....	15
<b>Ch.1 Arduous Work: The Making of a Diverse Extractive Environment</b> .....	50
<b>Ch.2. ‘A cry of pain’: Workplace Accidents, Discrimination, and Strategies of Self-Defence</b> .....	95
<b>Ch.3. ‘Beauties of the regime’: Moral Economies of Housing, Heating, and Pollution ...</b>	143
<b>Ch.4 ‘Their place is not on the barricades’: Diversity, Radicalism, and Strikes, 1923-33</b>	187
<b>Ch.5. ‘His right to life’: Migrant Protection and Trade Union Politics in the Popular Front Movement</b> .....	228
<b>Ch.6. ‘An empty word’? Solidarity Action with the Spanish Republic and Colonial Workers</b> .....	271
<b>Conclusion. Sensitive Solidarity through the Second World War and Beyond</b> .....	313
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	329

## Abstract

This thesis examines processes of solidarity construction in an interwar French coalfield marked by large-scale immigration and economic rationalisation. Unlike recent migration histories of the Third Republic that have tended to focus on citizenship and the state, I approach European and colonial migrants' experiences of interwar France by situating them in an environmental 'labour milieu'. By exploring the complex mixture of risks to which workers in the Gard coalfield were exposed, I uncover how embodied experiences of coal capitalism differed according to class, race, nationality, and gender. This situation of differential exploitation was mediated through the rationalisation of mining work, the experience of workplace accidents, and the management of the material environment beyond the pits – realms in which practices of cooperation, mutual aid, and moral economies were an immanent but unguaranteed possibility. The first part of this thesis offers a fresh perspective on migrant experiences of interwar France, by presenting a non-deterministic perspective on quotidian solidarity, which considers the range of social, economic, and environmental factors that influenced its development, and limits.

The second half of the thesis explores political solidarity. By focusing on different forms of working-class struggle – strike action, Popular Front trade-union institutions, and engagement with international questions of fascism and colonialism – the thesis develops a complex picture of solidarity which held a defence of working-class life and a critique of differential exploitation at its centre. This conception of political solidarity developed through everyday interactions and conflictual flashpoints in which migrants and French citizens participated, and manifested itself through discursive, practical, institutional, and programmatic practices. These actions sought to challenge hierarchies of exploitation, but remained hampered by a muted regard for colonial or gender

oppression. Ultimately, the thesis argues that a developing sensitivity to differential experience was fundamental to the often contradictory process of constructing of quotidian and political solidarities.

## Long Abstract

This thesis explores the historical process of solidarity construction in an interwar French industrial context marked by immigration and rationalisation. Taking the ‘labour milieu’ of the Gard coalfield in southern France as a case study, the dissertation analyses the processes by which these migrant groups experienced what French communist trade-unionist Arthur Vigne described as differential ‘odious exploitation’, the ways in which this shaped quotidian relations, and how labour politics developed new visions and practices of solidarity in response. To examine these questions, I adopt an environmental lens that centres the material and lived experiences of the dangerous and toxic ‘labour milieu’ in and beyond the mines in order to shed new light upon migrant experiences of interwar industry and political organisation.

This approach incorporates a broad range of actors to arrive at an understanding of the historical complexity of solidarity. The first three chapters explore the functioning and development of the ‘labour milieu’ in terms of evolutions in the composition of its population, work experiences, accidents, and social reproduction beyond the mine, uncovering the environmentally mediated everyday hierarchies rooted in class, nationality, race, and gender. From these experiences of exploitation arose opportunities for solidarity that stemmed from materially rooted situations of unevenly distributed risk and precarity, to which coalfield inhabitants responded in various ways. Solidarity was not an automatic response to shared material conditions, but was constantly co-constructed. The final three chapters investigate the implications of these hierarchies for a new form of political solidarity that began to engage seriously with difference as the necessary point of departure. This became, across the inter-war period, a feature of claim-making, and, at times, a principle of praxis. French trade unionists did not have the

monopoly on this process. These final chapters interrogate different forms of working-class struggle, ranging from strike activity and institutional practices during the formation of the Popular Front to internationalist solidarity with the Spanish Republic and engagement with particularist interest groups formed by colonial workers. Here, I argue that a tension developed between what I term a worker-universalist approach to working-class political activity and an emergent, sensitive solidarity that took seriously differential experience.

These insights make a number of contributions to the historiography of migration in France. First, I re-centre labour and class exploitation as fundamental to the migrant experience, in a historiographical context marked by the work of Mary Lewis, Clifford Rosenberg, Nimisha Barton, and Danielle Beaujon that has tended to prioritise experiences of state power with the attendant categories of citizenship, inclusion, and exclusion. This thesis takes an environmentally conscious, non-deterministic approach to the labour milieu of coal extraction, focusing on a different set of factors that defined migrant experiences of interwar France, alongside state institutions. The first half of the thesis leans upon the ‘embodied approach’ of an Environmental History of Migration to trace the ways in which coalfield inhabitants were differentially exposed to, and experienced, the dangers, precarities, and toxicities of mining both in and beyond the workplace. This approach builds upon recent directions in French labour history – notably those of Judith Rainhorn, Renaud Bécot, and Bastien Cabot – that study the intersection between work, environment, and health, by probing how such dynamics were sensorially experienced differently depending upon class, nationality, race, and gender. The first half of the dissertation, in particular, shows how rationalisation techniques, workplace accidents, resource management, and pollution were contradictory forces, in that they

produced difference while also creating opportunities for covert or overt cooperation and solidarity between working-class people.

The second half of the thesis investigates how solidarity evolved as a political practice. Drawing upon the labour geography of David Featherstone, I trace the interwar emergence of a new politics of solidarity that was sensitive to, recognised, and sought to redress differential experiences of capitalist exploitation, emerging in tension with a worker-universalist solidarity rooted in the affirmation of proletarian sameness as the basis for joint action. This new form of solidarity was rooted in a range of practices within and beyond the workplace to protect vulnerable lives, and assumed discursive, institutional, and programmatic form through the radical intervention of migrants and women in labour disputes as well as interactions with internationally significant events and colonial structures of power. This activism took place within the era of the Popular Front, but my approach displaces the centrality often accorded to the moment of May and June 1936 as marking the ‘integration’ of migrants into the working class, in favour of locating the dynamics of the Popular Front era in Alès and its surrounding communities within a local framework of activism across the inter-war decades. By focusing on a coalfield rather than a national-level institution – as has been the approach of Maria Grazia Meriggi or Cole Stangler – my analysis seizes the micro-dynamics, dispersed agency, and situated material stakes that constituted the complexity of the often contradictory process of solidarity construction. Overall, the thesis thus uncovers the interaction between environmentally mediated exploitation and difference, everyday solidarities and forms of cooperation, and trade-union politics in a coalfield inhabited by French citizens, European migrants, and Algerian colonial subjects.

Engaging with recent literature in environmental history, this thesis proposes the concept of the mining ‘labour milieu’ as a new scale of analysis with environmental and

spatial dimensions that brings novel insights to social history. As well as casting an ecological eye on the productive workplace, the ‘labour milieu’ approach encompasses a broader spatial and conceptual understanding of labour, including reproductive inputs and the management of desired and undesired consequences of extraction. As such, the ‘labour milieu’ encompasses housing, cleaning, and reproduction, a changing working environment, conflicts over coal outputs and pollution, and the actions of the people who worked and inhabited it. This enables the investigation to approach extraction as a more total socio-environmental process through which hierarchies of experience were mediated. In this way, the ‘labour milieu’ approach adopted in this thesis offers a conceptual perspective useful to migration history. Moreover, in an industry which led single and married men to travel across land and sea to work in a dangerous and toxic environment, deaths, injury, and diseases often had emphatic transnational repercussions for families and communities, far from France.

Central to the purpose of this thesis is a focus on how coalfield inhabitants’ *experiences* of the labour milieu shaped social and political relations. The category of experience has been used in diverse ways by social historians since E.P. Thompson, fuelling many debates about class and subjectivity. My employment of the term understands experience in a socio-environmental context, following recent work by Rob Boddice and Mark Smith that proposes to understand ‘historical lived experience’ as a ‘mutable product of a situated world-brain-body dynamic.’ In practical terms, this means focusing on how Gard inhabitants *lived* the changing and dangerous labour milieu. Moreover, to understand experience, one must recognise its co-constructed nature. It emanated from the actions and interactions – ranging from the interpersonal to the institutional – of individuals and groups mediated through their material conditions and personal identities.

An in-depth analysis of experience and relations of solidarity that ties together the everyday and the institutional is best achieved through a local case study. In this respect, the specificities of the Alès coalfield provide new insights into the history of French coalmining and migration. In demographic terms, the coalfield hosted diverse communities of European migrants from Italy, Spain, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, as well as colonial migrants from Algeria. This makes Alès more representative of French interwar diversity than mono-ethnic studies of other coalfields, thereby allowing for more tightly-focused insights into the experience of racial hierarchies that have been analysed by Elisa Camiscioli at the national level. Moreover, the significant presence of Algerians in Alès affords important insights into the specificities of colonial labour oppression, and the interactions of these ‘French subjects’ with other migrants. In political terms, the coalfield was one of the few in France where the Communist Party predominated from the 1920s. As such, it is an important case study for probing the local contexts of communist practices of solidarity. Finally, in economic terms, the companies of the coalfield pursued policies of rationalisation from the late 1920s – qualified by Marie-France Conus and Jean-Louis Escudier as a moment of ‘mastery over nature’ – that shaped experiences of the labour process. By studying these processes and how workers responded to them, negotiated them, and how they shaped relations between diverse groups of people, this thesis provides new insights into migration and colonial histories of twentieth-century France through an embodied approach to labour.

The study of the labour milieu and of solidarity in this thesis draws upon a diversity of perspectives and actors from a range of sources. In the opening three chapters, archival sources shed light on everyday life, dynamics of power, and the experience of differential treatment. Alongside company records including the perspectives of directors,

recruiters, mine guards, engineers, and police surveillance, the dangers of the labour milieu are traced through novel, rich, and multi-perspectival workplace accident reports, petitioning over pollution, epidemiological studies, autobiographies, and the contemporary communist and socialist press. These sources illuminate the experiences of extraction by French and foreign workers, their families, company lawyers, doctors, union officials, local political representatives, and more. This breadth of perspective demonstrates the force of foreign nationality or the colonial condition in shaping the lived experience of the environment of coal extraction. By the same token, the sources reveal the everyday practices and strategies of negotiation, cooperation, and contestation through which people related to the system of extraction and to one other.

The second half of the thesis uses a different set of documents to probe the political construction of solidarity. To do so, I consider the practical, discursive, institutional, and programmatic dimensions of trade-union activity through a careful reading of police and employer surveillance documents, trade-union archives, prefectural reports, union programmes, and press of a range of political persuasions and scales of distribution. Seeing political solidarity as based on, evinced in, and generated through action, the approach consists in reading sources as both representative of a certain state of solidarity, and indicative of a dynamic attempt to influence mobilisation. By paying attention to the actions of marginalised coalfield inhabitants, the thesis reveals that the construction of solidarity was a process with significantly dispersed agency. Rather than being imposed by party bureaucrats from Paris, or even being the product of ideological reflection among French trade unionists, solidarity politics was an often-contradictory and uncertain multi-actor process, forged in struggle and characterised by conflicting visions and practices.

The opening chapter of this thesis explains the specificity of the diverse labour milieu of the Gard. First, I assess the conditions that explain the fluctuating ethnic diversity of the Gard, before demonstrating how this population experienced hierarchies based on nationality, race, and gender. Next, the chapter analyses the changing nature of coal extraction in the interwar period. Rationalisation brought significant changes to the working environment, with longwall mining generating new dangers and facilitating stricter productivist discipline. Finally, I uncover hitherto unseen sources in which workers recount the labour process in their own words to probe the experience of rationalisation, and to elucidate everyday interactions of discipline, hierarchy, cooperation, and solidarity.

The second chapter addresses workplace accidents as a constitutive feature of the labour milieu and a dimension of coalfield history long associated with an automatic solidarity. Moving between the different stages and associated spaces of a workplace accident and resultant indemnity reclamations, the chapter demonstrates the specific discriminations faced by migrants in the moment of being injured, in accessing the legal process, in the courtroom, and when interacting with doctors. This was especially so of the experience of pain, with experts of different kinds being deployed to cast doubt on the sensory experience of pain reported by migrants in particular. In response, solidarity emerged out of miners giving testimonies to confirm the experiences of pain suffered by their fellow workers. The chapter also reconstructs the institutions and networks of solidarity as well as the moral economies that developed in order to support and sustain injured migrants and their families, including those who remained distant from the Gard. In this way, the focus on accidents demonstrates that mining solidarities were not automatic, and developed in relation to specific forms of sensory and embodied experience.

In the third chapter, I argue that certain moral economies emerged in relation to the extractive environment – in its built, mined, and polluted forms – beyond the workplace through a range of contested issues, including the discriminatory allocation of housing, failures of hygiene and heating, and the pollution of air and water. Drawing upon a range of archives spanning communist press and medical hygienists' reports on Algerian housing, mine-guard surveillance reports, and petitions presented by washerwomen, I probe how disputes around these matters gave shape to a moral economy based around the provision of basic vital minima. Key to this construction of this moral economy was the contradiction between company domination and worker autonomy. While critiques of unhygienic housing and polluted public resources denounced companies' unwillingness to guarantee decent living conditions, spaces of relative autonomy were essential to the emergence of practices of disobedience and resistance.

The second half of the thesis turns to investigate the political construction of solidarity politics in this diverse and evolving context. Rather than focusing exclusively on the internal policies of unions or parties, Chapter Four argues that participation in radical strike action by women and migrants brought about a fundamental shift in how labour politics conceived of the practice of solidarity. Recognising that they could no longer simply insist on proletarian sameness, the Communist CGT began – albeit not without shedding worker-universalism – to adopt discourses, forms of action, and specific demands that were sensitive to the specificity of migrants' experiences.

Chapter Five of the thesis argues that the Popular Front was not simply an effervescent moment, but the product of a process of institutionalisation and strengthening of forms of solidarity that dated back to the legacies of the First World War, and first became apparent around January 1929. At a time of increasing xenophobia in national debates, trade-union and municipal politics were increasingly defined by the

defence of migrants' 'right to life' and the institutionalisation of their participation. At the beginning of 1936, an important strike broke out at Le Martinet. This strike reflected the maturation of embodied critiques of certain dimensions of the labour milieu, through its contestation of the unequal exposure of migrants and all workers to health degradation. As such, it was indicative of the expanding agenda of solidarity which would remain evident throughout the 1936-7 era. This emphasises the place of migrants and health concerns in the local construction of the Popular Front, while reflecting the continued marginalisation of the concerns of women and colonial workers.

Solidarity politics in the Gard under the Popular Front were not uniquely influenced by local labour issues. The final chapter of this thesis turns to two case studies of issues of international significance – the movement to support the Spanish Republic, and the demands of colonial workers based in the Gard – to argue for a more complex and contradictory understanding of solidarity. The contrast between the emphatic engagement of the local Communist press in the collections and demonstrations of consensual solidarity with Spain, while suppressing any mention of the concomitant local Algerian campaign for equal rights would suggest a clear colonial colour line to solidarity, and one that reflected the shift in national-level Communist politics away from a critique of colonialism. This colour-line was explicitly critiqued by the campaigning Algerians, and, despite the CGT's eventual incorporation of some of their demands, critiques of racism remained marginal. Nevertheless, assessing the two movements together shows the imbrication of labour politics with questions of international oppression and domination and the dispersed and often conflictual agency that shaped both campaigns.

Taken together, the two parts of the thesis underscore the importance of embodied experience to environmental labour histories, and of sensitivity to difference to the labour politics of interwar France. The first of these points is methodological, encouraging

scholars to employ an embodied approach to processes of capitalist extraction. There is a need to consider hierarchy and discrimination as environmentally mediated processes while not neglecting how people responded to, and contested, their experiences. The second is historiographical, and emphasises that a sensitive solidarity to migrant difference was not specific to the post-Second World War world. Overarching both of these themes is the overall purpose of the thesis, which seeks to critique a reading of solidarity as a natural outcome of working-class existence or as impossible in a context of diversity and hierarchy. Instead, the experience of the Alès coalfield across the inter-war decades suggests that the construction of solidarity was an iterative (and reversible) process, based on working through divergences and convergences of socio-environmentally situated experience to pursue cooperative and conflictual aims.

## List of Figures

Figure 0-1 Gustave-Frédéric Dollfus, <i>Les houillères européennes</i> (Paris: Chatel & Dollfus, 1931).....	39
Figure 0-2 Erhard brothers, <i>Plan topographique des concessions de la Cie des mines de la Grand'Combe</i> (Paris: Erhard, 1903).....	41
Figure 1-1 French and Foreign Workforce, 1923-1938.....	59
Figure 1-2 Foreign Workforce of the Gard, 1923-1938 .....	60
Figure 1-3 Grand'Combe Workforce.....	62
Figure 1-4 Bessèges Foreign Workforce .....	62
Figure 1-5 Rochebelle Foreign Workforce .....	62
Figure 1-6 Tréllys Foreign Workforce .....	63
Figure 1-7 Nord d'Alais Foreign Workforce.....	63
Figure 1-8 AMA 5/Fi/GC26, Women and men at the cleaning stations of Grand'Combe, undated .....	77
Figure 2-1 ADG 11Fi00274, Postcard of Alès civil hospital, early twentieth century. .	115
Figure 3-1 AMA 5FiGC12, New housing development in La Grand'Combe, 1923.....	149
Figure 3-2 AMA 5/Fi/GC1, Postcard of the public washroom in La Grand'Combe, C. Artige fils, <i>Le Gard pittoresque</i> collection, undated. ....	179
Figure 3-3 AMA 13Fi/Alès/2-65, Washerwomen in the Gardon, undated. ....	180
Figure 4-1 . <i>L'Humanité</i> , 19 Jan. 1929. 'Hardened, firm, and resolute features. The wives of the Gard miners took their place in the first row of the battle...' .....	202
Figure 4-2 <i>L'Humanité</i> , 20 Jan. 1929. Top to bottom: Polish refectory in Alès; two Algerian strikers at Grand'Combe; miners' women and children at a people's soup-kitchen in Alès. ....	208
Figure 5-1 IHS-CGT 71/1/10, Table of representatives, Minutes of fusion meeting of the miners of Alès, 20 Oct. 1935. ....	247
Figure 5-2 AMA 5/Fi/575, <i>The Popular Front of Alès</i> , 1936. ....	259

## List of Abbreviations

ADG	Archives départementales du Gard
ADSSD	Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis
AMA	Archives municipales d'Alès
AN	Archives nationales
ANMT	Archives nationales du monde du travail
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
CCHF	Comité central des houillères de France
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CGTU	Confédération générale du travail unitaire
FNMIT	Fédération nationale des mutilés et invalides du travail
FNTSS-CGT	Fédération nationale des travailleurs du sous-sol et similaires de la Confédération générale du travail
IHS-CGT	Institut d'histoire sociale de la Confédération générale du travail
MMA	Médiathèque municipale d'Alès
PCF	Parti communiste français
SFIO	Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière
SRI	Secours rouge international
UFMG	Union Fraternelle des Musulmans du Gard

## Note on translation

All quotations have been translated – largely from French, in some cases from Spanish and Polish – by me. Where the original phrasing is adjudged to have particular relevance, I leave it in italicized French. I have chosen to leave all names as they appear in the original sources, aware that in many cases French administrators misspelt foreign names, or translated them into their French equivalents. In addition, I leave mining job titles, legal language, and some political terms in the original French to avoid potential errors that may arise in attempting to find direct translations.

## **Introduction. ‘Odious Exploitation’: Migrants and Industry in Interwar France**

‘The Gard employs a number of foreigners, among whom one sector is even more particularly odiously exploited than the rest.’<sup>1</sup>

With this intervention on 1 April 1938 at the annual national congress of the *Fédération nationale des travailleurs du sous-sol et similaires de la Confédération générale du travail* (FNTSS-CGT) in the municipal theatre in Alès, local communist trade unionist Arthur Vigne recognised a hierarchy of exploitation within the Gard coalfield’s working class. Delivered during a debate on colonial and European migrant workers, Vigne’s oration critiqued how coal capitalism differentially exploited the working population of the late 1930s Gard. Algerians, Czechoslovaks, Italians, Poles, Spaniards, Yugoslavs and other foreign nationals comprised between one quarter and one third of the coalfield’s mining workforce between the wars, labouring under the auspices of private companies that were pursuing policies to rationalise their extraction methods.

This thesis is a study of the processes by which these migrant groups experienced differential ‘odious exploitation’ in the interwar period, the ways in which this shaped coalfield relations, and how labour politics developed new visions and practices of solidarity in response. To examine these questions, I approach mining work through an environmental lens that centres the material and lived experiences of the dangerous and toxic ‘labour milieu’ in and beyond the mines in order to shed new light upon migrant experiences of interwar industrial France.

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<sup>1</sup> Institut d’histoire sociale de la Confédération générale du travail (IHS-CGT) 74/1/17, Proceedings of the Congrès National de la Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Sous-Sol CGT 1938 (hereafter *Congrès*), Vigne, 1 Apr. 1938.

The first three chapters of this dissertation explore the functioning and development of the 'labour milieu' in terms of demographics, work experiences, accidents, and social reproduction beyond the mine – exploring socially, politically, and environmentally mediated hierarchies, moral economies, and solidarities. By probing how these dimensions of life were experienced and responded to, I present solidarity as a processual relation, both contradictory and iterative, that was co-constructed and thus contingent upon the everyday practices of a broad range of actors in contexts of differential exploitation. Vigne's recognition of hierarchy was both a reflection and an act of a new form of solidarity that took an awareness of and engagement with difference as the necessary point of departure: a feature of claim-making, and, at times, a principle of praxis. Nonetheless, French trade unionists did not have the monopoly on this process, as the final three chapters of this thesis demonstrate. They interrogate different forms of working-class struggle, ranging from strike activity and trade-union institutional practices during the formation of the Popular Front to internationalist solidarity with the Spanish Republic and engagement with particularist interest groups formed by colonial workers. This analysis uncovers a tension between what I term a worker-universalist approach to working-class political activity and a new, emergent solidarity that was sensitive to differential experience, that was forged as much by migrants as it was by union institutions.

These insights go beyond the specific historical experience of the Gard. First, they bring labour and conflict back to the centre of the history of migration in interwar France. Studying in detail the multidimensional, environmentally mediated experiences of labour, both in the mining workplace and beyond it, delivers a fuller image of divergences and convergences of working-class experience. Structural hierarchies and very material, practical differences such as those of language coexisted in daily life with opportunities

– albeit not always taken – for mutual aid, cooperation, and support in the face of exploitation and oppression by companies and state. On a broader, political level, this regional case study permits a complex and nuanced understanding of the contingent, contradictory, and iterative processes of the interwoven everyday, practical, discursive, institutional, and programmatic facets of solidarity construction in a context of hierarchy and difference.

### **Histories of Migration to France between Capitalism and the State**

This thesis engages with the historiography of migration to France, drawing upon new directions in labour history that concern socio-environmental experiences and the development of solidarity. Initial histories of immigration to France took labour and capitalism as the central analytical framework. Focusing on the interwar period during which France became the world's principal recipient of migrants, Gary Cross's 1983 study explored the 'making of a new labouring class'. This new class was regimented through state-directed border and recruitment regimes that subjected it to the 'hegemony of employers'.<sup>2</sup> Working at a different scale, Gérard Noiriel published his doctoral research the following year, a (comparatively) *longue durée* analysis of the place of migration in the formation of the working class in the iron-mining zone of Longwy (Meurthe-et-Moselle). This more localised study sketched out a complex narrative regarding the centrality of migrants to industrial development, the varied forms of exploitation they faced, and the place of social and political struggle in the relationship between class, nation, and ethnicity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gary S. Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France: The Making of a New Laboring Class* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1983), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *Longwy: immigrés et prolétaires, 1880-1980* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984).

Half a decade later, Noiriel elaborated a more theoretical standpoint in his landmark work *Le Creuset français*, in which he again insisted upon the centrality of immigrants to the making of the French working class. On a conceptual level, Noiriel proposed the emergence of a ‘Republican integration model’ in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, with experiences guided by the bureaucratic practices and nationality laws of the state alongside economic socio-professional integration.<sup>4</sup> Translated into English as *The French Melting Pot* with reference to US frames of analysis, this book was hugely influential in opening up lines of enquiry into processes of migrant group experiences and the complexities of nationality law.<sup>5</sup>

During the ensuing period, a series of community studies developed knowledge on the social and cultural experiences of different groups within France. Early iterations were rooted in labour history, such as the work of Nancy Green on Jewish migrant workers in Belle Epoque Paris that explored their autonomous cultural and political organisation.<sup>6</sup> The most prominent was Janine Ponty’s study of the 500,000 Poles who arrived in France following the signature of a migration treaty in 1919. For Ponty, the fate of these *travailleurs étrangers* – many of whom worked in the coalmining industry – was most greatly impacted by hostile treatment by state and society, which spurred the formation of a strong ethnic cultural community.<sup>7</sup> The richness of this research prompted a veritable explosion of community studies that examined the experiences of a great range of national and ethnic groups in France.<sup>8</sup> Albeit in sometimes limited ways, these studies

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<sup>4</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *Le Creuset français: histoire de l’immigration, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*, trans. Geoffroy de Laforcade (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Green, *The Pletzl of Paris: Jewish Immigrant Workers in the Belle Epoque* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Janine Ponty, *Polonais méconnus: Histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l’entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Milza (ed.), *Les Italiens en France* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1986); Yves Frey, *Polonais d’Alsace: pratiques patronales et mineurs polonais dans le bassin potassique de Haute-Alsace, 1918-1948* (Besançon: Presses universitaires franc-comtoises, 2003).

built upon theoretical insights by Abdelmalek Sayad, who called upon researchers to study not only the immigrant or the emigrant, but to consider the experience of migration in its totality.<sup>9</sup> The implication here was that France was a diverse nation, composed of migrants with other roots. This view was captured in Pierre Milza and Émile Temime's ten-volume series entitled *Français d'ailleurs, peuple d'ici*, that explored Italian, Jewish, Polish, Armenian, Algerian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Spanish experiences of diaspora in France.<sup>10</sup> These histories served to complicate contemporary political debates around immigration, citizenship, and French identity.

In the early 2000s, historians ceased to treat migrants as *travailleurs*. Instead, their relations with the state came to occupy a new generation of scholars. In a work initially commissioned by the socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Patrick Weil asked 'what is a Frenchman' – tracing the legal shifts in access to French citizenship as contingent upon the state's priorities.<sup>11</sup> Engaging with Foucauldian readings of state power and governmentality and critiquing the absence of the category of race from French historiography, a series of social histories by US-based historians problematised the notion of citizenship in the multicultural variegation of French 'melting-pot' cities under the Third Republic.<sup>12</sup> Mary Dewhurst Lewis' *Boundaries of the Republic* studied deportation dossiers from interwar Lyon and Marseille to examine the complexities of grounds for exclusion by state officials, revealing that inclusion was more about a complex set of hierarchies and distinctly local 'social relationships' than the 'blind

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<sup>9</sup> Abdelmalek Sayad, 'Les trois « âges » de l'émigration algérienne en France' *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 15 (1977), 59; Laure Teulières, 'Immigration and National Identity: Historiographical Perspectives in France' in Steven Ellis and Luda Klusáková (eds.), *Imagining frontiers, contesting identities* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2007), 70.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Milza and Émile Temime (eds.), *Français d'ailleurs, peuple d'ici* (Paris: Autrement, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Henri Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français ? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution* (Paris: Grasset, 2002). See also Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader (eds.), *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004).

application of republican principles.’<sup>13</sup> For the case of Paris, Clifford Rosenberg showed how a hierarchy of surveillance and social-service provision was constructed in close relation to perceived political threat and colonial status. Alongside repressive measures, the French state offered opportunities to all migrants – European and colonial – to be ‘included’ on the condition of docility and obedience.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Elisa Camiscioli’s *Reproducing the French Race* analysed the construction of public sphere discourse through the statements of politicians, journalists, and the immigration experts of the epoch.<sup>15</sup> The book identifies the purity of the generational reproduction of the French nation as key to understanding the racial hierarchies that privileged the integration of Europeans over colonial migrants.<sup>16</sup> This set of scholars brought several innovations to migration histories of France. Their complication of notions of citizenship, their accordance of agency to migrant actors, and their assertion of the existence of complex racial and gendered hierarchies in multi-ethnic realities exposed the contradictions of the Third Republic’s universalism. But through focusing on state practice and discourses of power, these studies minimised the unescapable fact that subaltern migrants, regardless of their legal status in France, had to work to survive.

Labour was a fundamental feature of existence for all migrants, including the most marginalised. During the Great War, the French state brought colonial subjects to France to work in industry as well as to serve in the military. Tyler Stovall saw this labour

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Rosenberg, *Policing Paris: The Origins of Modern Immigration Control between the Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Such as Georges Mauco, *Les Etrangers en France: leur rôle dans la vie économique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1932).

<sup>16</sup> Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). On gender and migration, see also Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), Ch.5.

experience as crucial for understanding race relations in early twentieth-century France.<sup>17</sup> Equally important was the decision to deport the great majority of colonial workers in 1918-19 – cast by Stovall as the enactment of ‘whiteness’ as grounds for inclusion in interwar Third Republic society.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, despite this ‘colour line’ policing, many Algerians continued to work in France. The few studies that have centred their labour experiences have emphasised their subordinate position within the Parisian working class, the racist discourses that pathologised them as inferior and legitimised their exploitation, or most recently their management by state administrators.<sup>19</sup> While the US-based scholars of the early 2000s integrated colonial subjects into a broader analysis of migrants and citizenship during the Third Republic, their status as workers in relation to French capital and as the ‘lowest layer’ of the working class remains largely unexamined.<sup>20</sup>

The nexus between labour, migration, and solidarity under the Third Republic has re-emerged in a series of new, innovative studies. Microhistories of xenophobic riots in the early 1890s at Aigües-Mortes and in the Pas-de-Calais by Noiriel and Bastien Cabot respectively probe how economic crises and ideologies of protectionism could force a

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<sup>17</sup> Tyler Stovall, ‘The Color Line Behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War’ *The American Historical Review* 103.3 (1998), 737-69.

<sup>18</sup> Tyler Stovall, ‘National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor After World War I’ *Representations* 84.1 (2003), 52-72.

<sup>19</sup> Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, *Des Algériens à Lyon: De la Grande Guerre au Front Populaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995); Stéphane Sirot, ‘Les conditions de travail et les grèves des ouvriers coloniaux à Paris des lendemains de la Première Guerre mondiale à la veille du Front populaire’ *Revue française d’histoires d’Outre-Mer* 311 (1996), 65-92; Laura Levine Frader, ‘From Muscles to Nerves: Gender, “Race” and the Body at Work in France 1919-1939’ *International Review of Social History* 44 (1999), 131-4; Hugo Mulonnière, ‘Protéger les «Nord-Africains» en métropole : construction et usages d’une protection sociale d’exception (années 1920-1950)’ *Revue d’histoire de la protection sociale* 16 (2023), 99-119.

<sup>20</sup> Tyler Stovall, ‘Travailleurs de couleur dans la France de l’entre-deux-guerres’ in Nicolas Hatzfeld, Michel Pigenet, and Xavier Vigna (eds.) *Travail, travailleurs et ouvriers d’Europe au XXe siècle* (Dijon: Presses universitaires de Dijon, 2016), 257-70. There is some exploration in Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Internationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Ch.3.

breakdown of class-based solidarities.<sup>21</sup> On reading these striking histories, those with *Alltagsgeschichte* sympathies may wonder about labour and everyday relations in less extraordinary circumstances.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, a wholly different approach is taken by Fabrice Langrognet in his microhistory of ethnic and neighbourly relations through the lens of a Saint-Denis tenement building during the Third Republic.<sup>23</sup> Common to these studies is a belief in the heuristic power of the micro scale, and a questioning of the micro-mechanics of solidarity.

Recent socio-legal approaches have shed fascinating light on the interaction between productive and reproductive work and migrants' relationships with the state. Nimisha Barton's monograph *Reproductive Citizens* applies a new lens of domestic labour to explore 'intercultural solidarities' and the ways in which migrant women could interact with gendered state ideologies and institutions to access administrative inclusion or community protection.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Federico Del Giudice has uncovered how migrants used the labour courts to assert their rights and effectively included themselves in social laws that did not necessarily apply to them.<sup>25</sup> These approaches are useful for the emphasis they place on the dynamic between migrant, labour, and state, in the reproductive and productive spheres.

Rather than seeing actions of mutual aid uniquely as strategies to achieve 'inclusion' in state welfare structures, a more sustained analysis of what 'solidarity' meant

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<sup>21</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *Le Massacre des Italiens, 17 août 1893* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); Bastien Cabot, *A Bas les Belges ! L'expulsion des mineurs borains (Lens, août-septembre 1892)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Alf Lütcke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Fabrice Langrognet, *Neighbours of Passage: A Microhistory of Migrants in a Paris Tenement, 1882-1932* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Nimisha Barton, *Reproductive Citizens: Gender, Immigration, and the State in Modern France (1880-1945)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Federico Del Giudice, 'Foreign workers in the French labour courts. A battlefield for the recognition of social rights' in Beate Althammer (ed.), *Citizenship, Migration and Social Rights: Historical Experiences from the 1870s to the 1970s* (London: Routledge, 2023), 75-95.

and how it was practised is worth consideration. An overtly political history of solidarity between French Left institutions and migrants has been developed in recent years. Books by Maria Grazia Meriggi on the dialectical pairing of ‘fraternity and xenophobia’ and more recently Jean Vigreux and Dimitri Manassis on the roots of migrant participation in the Resistance have explored the institutional structures erected by the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) and the *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (CGTU) to envelop migrants into interwar activism.<sup>26</sup> Central to these studies are the practical measures taken by French activists to open politics to foreigners, such as separate language groups and secrecy methods to prevent deportation. These studies have sought to uncover a ‘social history of politics’ by investigating the development of institutional practices over time.<sup>27</sup> Scholarship regarding the second half of the twentieth century has begun to analyse the difficulty posed to trade unionists by the apparent contradiction – already present in the interwar period – between working-class universalism and migrant particularism.<sup>28</sup> This set of practical, institutional, and ideological issues are fundamental to understanding migrant and working-class political organisation. While highly useful in tracing trade-union practices, these studies leave a gap between such institutional politics and the everyday experiences of capitalism and state. An historical study of solidarity must address these interlinked dimensions of social reality.

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<sup>26</sup> Maria Grazia Meriggi, *Entre fraternité et xénophobie: Les mondes ouvriers parisiens dans l’entre-deux-guerres et les problèmes de la guerre et la paix* (Paris: Arbre bleu, 2018); Dimitri Manassis and Jean Vigreux, *Avec tous tes frères étrangers: De la MOE aux FTP-MOI* (Montreuil: Libertalia, 2024), 11-82.

<sup>27</sup> Gérard Noiriel, ‘Une histoire sociale du politique est-elle possible?’ *Vingtième siècle, revue d’histoire* 24 (1989), 81-96. See also, Pietro Pinna, *Migranti italiani tra fascismo e antifascismo* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Laure Pitti, ‘Grèves ouvrières versus luttes de l’immigration: une controverse entre historiens’ *Ethnologie française* 31.3 (2001), 465-76; Vincent Gay and Anton Perdoncin, ‘Français et immigrés, même patron, même combat ? La CGT et les immigrés, une tension dans l’universel ouvrier’ in Sophie Bérout, Élyane Bressol, Jérôme Pélisse and Michel Pigenet (eds.), *La CGT (1975-1995). Un syndicalisme à l’épreuve des crises* (Paris: Arbre bleu, 2019), 155-66; Cole Stangler, *La solidarité et ses limites: La CFDT et les travailleurs immigrés dans les « années ’68 »* (Paris: Arbre bleu, 2021); Daniel Gordon, *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May ’68 and the Rise of Anti-Racism in France* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2012).

## Approaches to Solidarity in Mining History

This dissertation takes an innovative approach to migration and labour in interwar France. Picking up on the historiography's interest in solidarity, I propose to engage with new directions in environmental labour history in order to tell a story rooted in material realities and local context. First, this section explains the suitability of the historically specific sector of coalmining to this approach. Second, I unpack how advances in environmental labour history inform this dissertation's perspective on mining and migration. Third, I set out this dissertation's understanding of solidarity as a social practice of cooperation and struggle that grapples with convergent and divergent experiences. Finally, I explain the adoption of the Gard coalfield's 'labour milieu' as the case study for this history. The approach set out here aims to offer new perspectives on the social history of migration in interwar France and on the political history of solidarity.

Coalmining possesses several characteristics that make it a particularly pertinent sector for this approach. In academic research and popular culture, mining has long been related to political radicalism and heroism on the one hand, and exposure to danger and death on the other. Sociologists have long cast the radicalism of mining communities as flowing from geographical separation from other industrial centres and internal homogeneity, thereby making them an 'isolated mass'.<sup>29</sup> Internal community dynamics were driven by the logics of capital, with for example Rolande Trespé's thesis analysing the rise of trade-unionism in the mines of nineteenth-century Carmaux in dialectical opposition to capitalism's avarice.<sup>30</sup> But the materiality of coal extraction itself also played a fundamental role. 'Habits of solidarity', qualified by Donald Reid as 'legendary',

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<sup>29</sup> This hypothesis generated much controversy, see PK Edwards, 'A Critique of the Kerr-Siegel Hypothesis of Strikes and the Isolated Mass: A Study of the Falsification of Sociological Knowledge' *The Sociological Review* 25.3 (1977), 551-74.

<sup>30</sup> Rolande Trespé, *Les mineurs de Carmaux, 1848-1914* (Paris: Editions ouvrières, 1971).

were formed in direct response to the dangers of mining work and came to define communities.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, with mining closures in latter twentieth-century Western Europe, the image of coherent and politically radical communities attracted growing critique. Dick Geary's challenge to this picture emphasized that 'ethnic, confessional, gender and age factors can fragment the capacity for solidarity', which would be conditional upon homogeneity.<sup>32</sup> Mining histories have sought to deconstruct myths of harmonious uniformity through an engagement with global and comparative labour histories. Given that mining is 'place-bound by geology', it is always accompanied by migration, most often resulting in a 'fragmented labour force'.<sup>33</sup> A great range of histories have demonstrated how ethnicity and race have been fundamental principles in organizing labour hierarchies.<sup>34</sup> This large and diverse body of research has rendered redundant any facile assertions of homogeneity of experience and resultant solidarities.

Gender, too, was an important factor structuring unequal experiences of coalfield life. Women experienced a state-enforced exclusion from the principal source of waged work in coalfields when they were banned from underground work in France in 1874.<sup>35</sup> This served to reinforce the male breadwinner household model in Western European

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<sup>31</sup> Roy Church and Quentin Outram, *Strikes and solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain, 1889-1966* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139-41; Donald Reid, 'The Role of Mine Safety in the Development of Working-Class Consciousness and Organization: The Case of the Aubin Coal Basin, 1867-1914' *French Historical Studies* 12.1 (1981), 99.

<sup>32</sup> Dick Geary, 'The Myth of the Radical Miner' in Stefan Berger, Andy Croll, and Norman Laporte (eds.), *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 56. See also Marion Fontaine, 'Les mines: un terrain d'expériences' *Société d'études jaurésiennes* 230.4 (2018), 10; Marc Lazar, 'Le mineur de fond: un exemple de l'identité du PCF' *Revue française de science politique* 35.2 (1985), 190-205.

<sup>33</sup> Ad Knotter and David Mayer, 'Migration and Ethnicity in Coalfield History: Global Perspectives' *International Review of Social History* 60 (2015), 7.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview, see *Ibid.*, 13-39. For example, Duncan Money and Limin Teh, 'Race at Work: A Comparative History of Mining Labor and Empire on the Central African Copperbelt and the Fushun Coalfields, ca. 1907-1945' *International Labor and Working-Class History* 101 (2022), 100-17.

<sup>35</sup> Karen Fiorentino, 'Protéger l'enfant ouvrier. La loi du 19 mai 1874, une « législation intermédiaire » ?' *Revue historique* 682.2 (2017), 327-58.

mining.<sup>36</sup> While labour historians initially neglected women's experiences, Hester Barron and Caroline Waldron Merithew have highlighted the fundamental role played by women during periods of industrial conflict.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, an engagement with feminist theory by Rossana Barragán Romano and Leda Papastefanaki has unpacked the fundamental role played by women in the often naturalised everyday and generational reproduction of the labour force essential to extraction.<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, quantitative economic historians Jane Humphries and Ryah Thomas have calculated that coalfield women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain spent seventy-two hours per week doing unpaid domestic work that was vital to companies' profits.<sup>39</sup> These theoretically underpinned approaches teach us that women's labour was essential to coal extraction, and that gender was important in the structure of hierarchies.

While understanding that these hierarchies were central to how exploitation and power functioned, the present dissertation seeks to consider hierarchy and solidarity in dialectical relation to each other. Hester Barron's work on the Durham coalfield in 1926 has similarly challenged the notion that 'community' was necessarily based on homogeneity and total consensus. Rather, community was negotiated and constructed, notably in the subsumption and integration of 'other categories of identity'.<sup>40</sup> This non-deterministic perspective is highly valuable because it takes seriously the 'different

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<sup>36</sup> Women's work continued in other parts of the globe. See Urvi Khaitan, 'Women beneath the Surface: Coal and the Colonial State in India during the Second World War' *War and Society* 39.3 (2020), 171-88.

<sup>37</sup> Caroline Waldron Merithew, "'We Were Not Ladies': Gender, Class, and a Women's Auxiliary's Battle for Mining Unionism' *Journal of Women's History* 18.2 (2006), 63-94; Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Ch.3.

<sup>38</sup> Rossana Barragán Romano and Leda Papastefanaki, 'Women and Gender in the Mines: Challenging Masculinity Through History' *International Review of Social History* 65 (2020), 191-230.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Humphries and Ryah Thomas, "'The Best Job in the World': Breadwinning and the Capture of Household Labor in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century British Coalmining' *Feminist Economics* 29.1 (2023), 97-140.

<sup>40</sup> Barron, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout*, 271.

identities’ of coalfield inhabitants while probing ‘how despite such divisions, a sense of community *could* still work’.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the long history in coalfield studies of setting ‘community’ as the scale of analysis, it is not always necessarily the most appropriate framework. Whereas Barron justifies her selection by reference to the fact that a broad range of political actors in Durham in 1926 thought about themselves and their surroundings in such terms, the same cannot be said of *communauté* in interwar France.<sup>42</sup> Analysing the notion in historical perspective, Marion Fontaine explains the suspicion with which French Socialists and Communists often viewed ‘*communauté*’, given their Republican aim for universal ‘emancipation through solidarity’.<sup>43</sup> With this insight, one can make sense of the absence of the category of *communauté* from press coverage, propaganda, and other sources that inform the present dissertation. Instead, in line with Fontaine’s analysis, what we find is a consistent rumination of *solidarité*.

### **Environment, Experience, and the Labour Milieu**

This thesis grapples with the question of coalfield solidarity through an environmentally conscious labour history approach. The goal here is to situate a social history of the experience and politics of migration in an understanding of how the extraction process shaped embodied experiences in and beyond the mining workplace. While not pretending that the place of migrants in the Gard was shaped uniquely by ‘natural’ factors, this thesis folds in the ever-changing extractive environment – as an economic, mechanical, and

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 6. A notable scholarly exception, inspired by British community studies, is Claude Dubar, Gérard Gayot, and Jacques Hedoux, ‘Sociabilité minière et changement social à Sallaumines et à Noyelles-sous-Lens (1900-1980)’ *Revue du Nord* 64.253 (1982), 365-463.

<sup>43</sup> Stefan Berger, Bella Dicks and Marion Fontaine, ‘“Community”: a useful concept in heritage studies?’ *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26.4 (2020), 332-6.

‘natural’ system – into an embodied social history of migrant experience and politics.<sup>44</sup>

This perspective builds upon a growing body of scholarship that integrates environmental sensibilities to the study of labour experiences.<sup>45</sup>

Environmental histories have cast light upon work as an ‘ecological’ process with consequences for social and political history. In an appeal to denaturalise industrial accidents and to instead see them as ‘powerful indicators of maladjustment in the ecology of production’, Arthur McEvoy proposed that historians of technology and labour should consider taking an ‘ecological’ approach to the workplace.<sup>46</sup> Theorising ‘workscape studies’, Thomas Andrews built upon McEvoy’s call to encompass ‘how inequalities of class have been mapped onto lands and bodies’ and to investigate the strategies of subaltern historical actors to ‘mitigate, contest, or evade the environmental dimensions of their subordination’.<sup>47</sup> Ecological experiences of the workplace could also form the basis for contestation. Andrews’ monograph *Killing for Coal* used the category ‘workscape’ to explore how coal extraction in early twentieth-century Colorado threw a diversity of migrants together in relations of solidarity, eventually leading to labour insubordination and its bloody repression in the Ludlow massacre of 1913.<sup>48</sup> This approach demonstrates

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<sup>44</sup> This reflects the appeal presented by the late Linda Nash, calling on historians to ‘show how changing material worlds have altered the very possibilities of being human in particular times and places, to insist on the place of the physical-material world in the (always contingent) shaping of human bodies, societies, and understanding’. See: Linda Nash, ‘Furthering the Environmental Turn’ *The Journal of American History* 100.1 (2013), 135.

<sup>45</sup> Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, ‘De la “part du milieu” à l’histoire de l’environnement’ *Le Mouvement social* 200 (2002), 71; Gunter Peck, ‘The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labour History’ *Environmental History* 11 (2006), 212-38; Janis Baily and Ross Gywther, ‘Red and Green: Towards a Cross-Fertilisation of Labour and Environmental History’ *Labour History* 99 (2010), 1-16.

<sup>46</sup> Arthur McEvoy, ‘Working Environments: An Ecological Approach to Industrial Health and Safety’ *Technology and Culture* 36.2 (1995), 163.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas G. Andrews, ‘Work, Nature, and History: A Single Question, that Once Moved Like Light’ in Andrew Isenberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 445.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

the value of situating working bodies in historicised biophysical environments in order to understand political dynamics.

The French historiography of mining has played an important role in what Renaud Bécot calls this ‘rematerialisation’ of environmental history.<sup>49</sup> Operating at local, national, and global levels, Judith Rainhorn and Paul-André Rosental have built upon the insights of Linda Nash on ecology, bodies, and health to establish a sub-field of study on the various environmental health risks associated with mining.<sup>50</sup> Most recently, Bastien Cabot has presented a theorised narrative of the centrality of the environment to industrial capitalism, identifying the ‘forcing-preservation dialectic’ at the centre of mining. This notion describes the process by which companies in late-nineteenth-century Pas-de-Calais sought to ‘force’ maximum yield from earth and labourer, while working-class organisations concocted strategies of defence and demands for workers’ control of the labour process and natural resources.<sup>51</sup> This work shows that Environmental Labour Studies can have fundamental implications for the conceptualisation of work and exploitation.<sup>52</sup> Any social history now attempting to explain experience, conflict, and

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<sup>49</sup> Renaud Bécot, ‘L’histoire environnementale au travail: Repères pour une histoire environnementale des mondes du travail’ in Stéphane Frioux and Renaud Bécot (eds.), *Écrire l’histoire environnementale au XXIe siècle: Sources, approches, pratiques* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 43.

<sup>50</sup> On environment and health, see Linda Nash, *Inescapable ecologies: a history of environment, disease, and knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). For the French approach, see: Judith Rainhorn (ed.), *Travail et santé à la mine* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2016); Paul-André Rosental, *Silicosis: A World History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Renaud Bécot, Mair Ghis Malfilatre, and Anne Marchand, ‘Pour un décloisonnement scientifique de la santé au travail et de la santé environnementale’ *Sociétés contemporaines* 121.1 (2021), 5-27. This picks up on some earlier work: Rolande Trepépé, ‘Travail à la mine et vieillissement des mineurs au XIXe siècle’, *Le Mouvement social* 124 (1983), 131-152. For an insight into Spanish historiography, see Arón Cohen, *El trabajo y sus riesgos: conocimiento, codificación, intervención y gestión* (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Bastien Cabot, ‘Écopolitiques ouvrières. Enquête socio-environnementale dans les mines du charbon dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais, fin XIXe- début XXe siècle’ (PhD Dissertation, EHESS, 2022). On mining’s impacts on the surface, see Kevin Troch, ‘« Ne pas grever l’avenir au bénéfice du présent »: Une histoire environnementale de l’extraction du charbon de la fin du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle à l’Entre-deux-guerres: un développement non soutenable: L’exemple du Couchant de Mons et du Valenciennois’ (PhD Dissertation Université de Namur and Université de Lille, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Nora Räthzel, Dimitris Stevis, and David Uzzell (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

cooperation in coalmining contexts would seem incomplete without embracing these embodied and environmental dimensions.

A broader ‘ecological’ understanding of the manifold experiences of mining requires investigating socio-environmental processes both in and beyond the pits. Rather than situating our analysis at the level of the mining community or the ‘workscape’, the concept of the ‘labour milieu’ is useful for transcending spatial and ideological delimitations of what is meant by ‘work’.<sup>53</sup> Drawing on ecofeminist and Marxist theory, Stefania Barca identifies the need to study ‘a system of relations between what is used to produce, what is produced, the waste that comes out of production, the bodies that produce, and the environment in which the production, reproduction, and waste are deployed.’<sup>54</sup> This ecological conceptualisation – spanning production, reproduction, and waste – encourages scholars to study the margins of unpaid reproductive work and the unintended noxious consequences of extraction as well as traditional waged labour. Labour history can thus benefit from an expanded spatial and conceptual focus, integrating valuable insights from the history of industrial pollution to arrive at a fuller understanding of experience.<sup>55</sup> Drawing attention to the whole extractive process can unveil the multifaceted ways in which power is mediated through environmental factors.<sup>56</sup> This broader definition is encapsulated in the concept of the ‘labour milieu’. Moreover, in an industry which led single and married men to travel across land and sea to work in

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<sup>53</sup> This expression is adapted from, Stefania Barca, ‘Sur l’écologie de la classe ouvrière: un aperçu historique et transnational’ *Écologie et Politique* 50.1 (2015), 24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> See Michel Letté and Thomas Le Roux, *Débordements industriels: Environnements, territoire et conflit (XVIIIe-XXIe siècle)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013); François Jarrige and Thomas Le Roux, *La Contamination du monde: Une histoire des pollutions à l’âge industriel* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2017); Gérard Chastagnaret, *De fumées et du sang: Pollution minière et massacre de masse, Andalousie, XIXe siècle* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2017); Alexis Zimmer, *Brouillards toxiques: Vallée de la Meuse, 1930, contre-enquête* (Brussels: Zones sensibles, 2017).

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Myrna Santiago, ‘Work, Home, and Natural Environments: Health and Safety in the Mexican Oil Industry, 1900-1938’ in Christopher Sellers and Joseph Melling (eds.), *Dangerous Trade: Histories of Industrial Hazard Across a Global World* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 33-45.

a dangerous and toxic environment, deaths, injury, and diseases often had emphatic transnational repercussions for families and communities, far from France, but enveloped in the Gard's labour milieu.

Central to my approach is an analysis of the convergent and divergent dimensions of people's embodied experiences of the 'labour milieu'. Environmental historians in the USA have drawn upon ideas of 'environmental injustice' to analyse such hierarchies of experience in the contexts of urban spaces and oil extraction.<sup>57</sup> While certainly not their principal focus, some social historians of migration in interwar France have considered, without fully probing, factors of embodied experience that had environmental dimensions.<sup>58</sup> For example, scholars have cited disadvantages related to labour conditions, unhygienic living conditions, and exposure to pollution as examples of the oppressions experienced by North African migrants working in French industry.<sup>59</sup> These fragments suggest that what anthropologist Didier Fassin calls the 'inequality of lives' was deeply intertwined with factors of environment.<sup>60</sup> Albeit fleeting, the allusions of these studies to such experiences hint at what Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker have recently proposed as the 'embodied approach' to the nascent *Environmental History of Modern Migrations*.<sup>61</sup> What was missing from these recognitions of disadvantage was a sustained analysis of how these embodied experiences related to the broader 'labour

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<sup>57</sup> Andrew Hurley, *Environmental inequalities: class, race, and industrial pollution in Gary Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> On embodied experience and labour history, see Ava Baron and Eileen Boris, "'The Body'" as a Useful Category for Working-Class History' *Labor* 4.2 (2007), 23-43.

<sup>59</sup> Ralph Schor, 'Les conditions de vie des immigrés nord-africains dans la Meurthe-et-Moselle entre les deux guerres' *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 14.1 (1977), 46; Noiriél, *Longwy*, 173; Jean-René Genty, *L'immigration algérienne dans le Nord/Pas-de-Calais* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 41-6. Outside of mining, colonial migrants faced higher exposure to accidents, see Annie Moulin-Bourret, *Guerre et industrie: Clermont-Ferrand, 1912-1922, la victoire du pneu*, vol.2 (Clermont-Ferrand: Institut d'études du Massif Central, 1997), 516.

<sup>60</sup> Didier Fassin, *De l'inégalité des vies* (Paris: Collège de France, 2020), 55.

<sup>61</sup> Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker (eds.), *Environmental History of Modern Migrations* (London: Routledge, 2017), 10.

milieu’, subalterns’ responses to these conditions, and how this affected their relationship to employers, the French state, and other coalfield inhabitants.<sup>62</sup> In other words, they lack a sustained engagement with migrants’ ‘historical lived experience’, defined by Rob Boddice and Mark Smith as the ‘mutable product of a situated world-brain-body dynamic’.<sup>63</sup>

This dissertation thus proposes to take seriously the embodied experience of the ‘world’ created by coal extraction in the Gard as a constitutive dimension of migrant labour in interwar France. This means reading experiences of work and the development of relations between working-class coalfield inhabitants as not only happening within but being mediated through the labour milieu: toxic and dangerous workplaces, workplace accident tribunals, funerals, unsanitary housing, fuel access, and polluted rivers. These dimensions of everyday existence interacted with strictly economic exploitation, ethnic hierarchies, and state administration that dominate the existing histories highlighted above. Following histories that have sought to combine sensory and environmental approaches in working-class history, this dissertation teases out the experiential, situated, embodied hierarchies of nationality, race, and gender within the working class, alongside points of convergence.<sup>64</sup> These experiences in turn opened possibilities for the construction of solidarities. In line with this sense of contingency, this thesis is not a story of environmental determinism, but of people’s responses to, negotiation, and challenging of such conditions.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Some of these issues are explored in Daniele Valisena and Marco Armiero, ‘Coal lives: Body, work and memory among Italian miners in Wallonia, Belgium’ in Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker (eds.), *Environmental History of Modern Migrations* (London: Routledge, 2017), 104.

<sup>63</sup> Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Julia C. Frankenbach, ‘Sensing Disorder: Sensory History and Future Directions for Working-Class and Urban Environmental Scholarship’ *Labour/Le Travail* 78 (2016), 281-300.

<sup>65</sup> Determinism is a danger of the neo-materialism of Timothy James LeCain, ‘Environmental history and global mining: Towards a neo-materialist approach’ in Stefan Berger and Peter Alexander (eds.), *Making Sense of Mining History: Themes and Agendas* (London: Routledge, 2019), 283.

### **Solidarity as Analytical Category and as Object of Analysis**

This brings us back to the central focus of the present dissertation: solidarity. Described by Steinar Stjernó as an often ‘nebulous concept’, solidarity is nevertheless a useful category for analysing labour and migration in the interwar Gard.<sup>66</sup> In her doctoral thesis, Leah Hunt-Hendrix counterposes a ‘modern bourgeois republican’ vision of solidarity as a ‘shared commitment to national unity with the state as the representative and guarantor of the common good’ with a Marxist notion ‘based on equality and the transformation of material conditions’ that emerged in the early twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> While a literature exists from a Durkheimian tradition that sees solidarity as a sociological result of the interconnectedness of modern societies, what interests us here is the confrontational rather than the conciliatory.<sup>68</sup> The goal of this thesis is to explain the experience, practice, and development of multiple forms of solidarity in the extractive ‘labour milieu’ of the Gard. Solidarity thus performs two interlinked roles in this thesis. In the opening three chapters, it is used as a category through which to analyse the labour milieu’s composition and the lived experience and actions of subjects therein. Building on this basis, the final three chapters investigate ‘solidarity’ as a political relation developed from a worker-universalist position that discursively emphasised proletarian sameness to a form of sensitive solidarity that recognised the hierarchies of the labour milieu.

In practice, solidarity could take the form of interpersonal everyday interactions of mutual aid in various workplaces, assertions of ‘sensory solidarity’ when supporting colleagues’ claims following workplace injury, or collusion in illicit coal procurement. These interpersonal and often covert interactions drew upon and enacted moral

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<sup>66</sup> Steinar Stjernó, *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea* (Cambridge, 2004), 2.

<sup>67</sup> Leah Hunt-Hendrix, ‘The Ethics of Solidarity: Republican, Marxist and Anarchist Interpretations’ (PhD Dissertation, University of Princeton, 2014), 127.

<sup>68</sup> This distinction is drawn from Diarmaid Kelliher, ‘Historicising geographies of solidarity’ *Geography Compass* 12 (2018), 1.

economies that challenged experiences of exploitation and domination.<sup>69</sup> By the same token, such situations could also provide workers with opportunities for self-betterment through the denial of working-class cooperation in favour of collaboration with employers. Solidarity and agency are necessarily linked.<sup>70</sup> As the period progressed, unions propelled more institutionalised forms of solidarity. These ranged from practical support and programmatic demands to protect migrants against discrimination, and the creation of migrant-specific union sections to elaborate and deliver demands. These advances were not gifted by union figures, but emerged out of confrontational scenarios of dispersed agency between coalfield inhabitants and employers or the state, as well as among members of the working class, especially in the case of advocacy for colonial workers' rights.<sup>71</sup>

This intervention displaces in important ways narratives about solidarity in interwar industrial France. An identifiable trend on the French communist Left during the period was the assertion of internationalist solidarity between people of different origins based on a shared proletarian identity summarised in the recurrent refrain that the PCF acted '*sans distinction de nationalité*'.<sup>72</sup> While this motto sought to counter societal xenophobia, it also reflected a certain reductionist approach to working-class experience. In 1932, Maurin, the PCF official charged with elaborating a position on migration,

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<sup>69</sup> Here, this Thompsonian term is used in a broader sense, following Didier Fassin's definition, 'the production, appropriation, repurposing, and contestation of values and affects are socially constituted realities.' See, Didier Fassin, 'Introduction. Economies morales de la vie et de la mort' in Didier Fassin (ed.), *Vies invisibles, morts indicibles* (Paris: Collège de France, 2022), 9-18.

<sup>70</sup> Walter Johnson, 'On Agency' *Journal of Social History* 37.1 (2003), 118.

<sup>71</sup> Rochelle DuFord, *Solidarity in Conflict: A Democratic Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

<sup>72</sup> See Matt Perry, 'Sans Distinction de Nationalité? The French Communist Party, Immigrants and Unemployment in the 1930s' *European History Quarterly* 34.3 (2004), 337-69. Gay and Perdoncin, 'Français et immigrants', 155-66. This orthodoxy represents a working-class universalism similar to that which Vincent Gay and Anton Perdoncin have argued occupied CGT mentalities from the 1940s through to the 1970s.

theorized that ‘the question of nationality play[ed] no role at all in class relations.’<sup>73</sup> By the latter 1930s this position had gone beyond the PCF, with Henri Levin of the *Ligue internationale contre l’antisémitisme* writing in a 1938 article on migrants and Frenchmen in *Fraternité*, affirmed that ‘in the workplace, with black or calloused hands, a naked chest, or wearing the same clothes, they are all men, without distinction of origin, who struggle, and fulfil a magnificent social role.’<sup>74</sup> The embodied vision presented here by Levin encapsulates a belief in proletarian solidarity transcending boundaries through shared experiences of work. This vision of solidarity – which I term ‘worker-universalism’ for how it emphasises proletarian sameness and seeks to diminish difference through discourse – influenced, but did not dominate, political practice with respect to migrants in the Gard.

Historians have generally considered the worker-universalist orthodoxy a failure, with the exception of the Popular Front moment of 1936. For example, Ralph Schor insists that the ‘exaltation of solidarity remained a desire of the trade union *états-majors*’ who were disconnected from local realities.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, Donald Reid explains a lull in union activity in 1920s Decazeville by reference to migrants sapping unions’ organisational power.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, whereas the historiography of the Popular Front has signalled the disappointment its policies ultimately represented for migrants in France, the strikes that accompanied its arrival to power have often been cast by historians of migration as a moment of ‘integration’ into the French working class.<sup>77</sup> In Ponty’s analysis of the Poles,

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<sup>73</sup> Ralph Schor, *L’Opinion française et les étrangers, 1919-1939* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne), 248.

<sup>74</sup> Henri Levin, ‘Les Hommes au Travail’, *Fraternité*, Mar. 1938.

<sup>75</sup> Schor, *L’Opinion française*, 274.

<sup>76</sup> Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 167.

<sup>77</sup> On the disappointment, see Rahma Harouni, ‘Le débat autour du statut des étrangers dans les années 1930’ *Le Mouvement social* 188 (1999), 64-72. For example, Noiriél, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France: Discours publics, humiliations privées (XIXe-XXe siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), 397; Maire-Claude Blanc-Chaléard, ‘Une intégration dans la durée: Les Italiens en région parisienne (1880-

a transcendental atmosphere explained migrant politicisation, encapsulated in her phrase ‘the joy of other workers seized them’.<sup>78</sup> More broadly in the twentieth century, work on activism in the Fourth and Fifth Republics continues to cast French unions, who had to ‘invent’ the migrants’ cause, as the principal actors.<sup>79</sup> In this view, French institutions were the real agents in the construction of this unidirectional solidarity, and European migrants fell almost automatically into line. Recently, Vigreux and Manassis have posited that the Communist Party saw immigrant participation as fundamental to the project of the ‘*Front Populaire de l’immigration*’.<sup>80</sup> This interpretation recognises greater agency on the part of European migrants, which is a welcome advance. And yet a disconnect still operates between everyday life and politics, and colonial workers are omitted. Without wishing to contest outright the undoubted importance of the Popular Front, I propose to see solidarity as a longer process in which European migrants, colonial subjects, and French citizens participated to provide mutual aid and to develop a more expansive political programme.

Whereas solidarity has generally remained an often-implicit analytical category in social history, labour geographers have made it an object of study. David Featherstone has done a great deal of work in theorising solidarity as a ‘relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression’, emphasising its unguaranteed but generative nature.<sup>81</sup> This is a world away from the interpretation of solidarity as a social fact based on homogeneity. Instead, it is about confrontational action in different material

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1960)’ *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 15.3 (1999), 167; Pietro Pinna, *Migranti italiani*, 344-52; Rainhorn, *Paris, New York: des migrants italiens, années 1880-années 1930* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2005), 147-54.

<sup>78</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, 323.

<sup>79</sup> Laure Blévis and Eric Pezet, ‘CFTC/CFDT Attitudes towards Immigration in the Parisian Region: Making Immigrant Workers’ Condition a Cause’ *Urban Studies* 49.3 (2012), 685-701.

<sup>80</sup> Manassis and Vigreux, *Avec tous tes frères étrangers*, 71.

<sup>81</sup> David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 5.

situations. Taking a similar approach, Diarmaid Kelliher has uncovered what he terms the ‘cultures of solidarity’ that were developed by diverse campaigning groups in support of the British Miners’ Strike in 1984/85.<sup>82</sup> Similarly building on Featherstone, historian Nicolas Delalande’s investigation of international workers’ movement solidarity in the latter nineteenth century takes a methodological approach centred upon practical action.<sup>83</sup> These studies posit solidarity as a contradictory, iterative, and relational political practice with action at its centre, and have great promise for bringing a nuanced, non-deterministic understanding of ‘labour milieu’ relations.<sup>84</sup>

Solidarities exist in realities full of material and ideological fragmentation.<sup>85</sup> It is here that the theorisation of Gary Wilder is useful. Wilder argues that solidarity has two dialectically-related roots – one in the ‘solid bloc of resistance’ of ‘modernity’s dispossessed’, and the other in Léon Bourgeois’ *Solidarisme* as ‘a state ideology in Third Republic France’ based on ‘reciprocity, mutuality, and shared risk’ – that both see it as a ‘political act, not a social fact’. Starting from ‘entanglement’ rather than sameness, solidarity engages with ‘systemic contradictions, acknowledges power differentials, and generates conflicts.’ The crux of Wilder’s theoretical intervention is that solidarity ‘emerges from and creates differential unities’.<sup>86</sup> Throughout this definition, it is the insistence on the constant, uneven, and incomplete process of working-through difference as a direct contention of domination that is most productive for the present dissertation. It guides the historian: to analyse the conditions of exploitation in the Gard coal labour

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<sup>82</sup> Diarmaid Kelliher, *Making Cultures of Solidarity: London and the 1984-5 miners’ strike* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Nicolas Delalande, *La lutte et l’entraide: l’âge des solidarités ouvrières* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

<sup>84</sup> An effective recent example is Emma Copestake, ‘Love, laughter and solidarity on the docks of Liverpool, c.1950s-1990s’ *The Sociological Review Monographs* 71.2 (2023), 441-57.

<sup>85</sup> Linda McDowell, ‘Thinking through work: complex inequalities, constructions of difference and trans-national migrants’ *Progress in Human Geography* 32.4 (2008), 491-507.

<sup>86</sup> Gary Wilder, ‘Solidarity’ in Ann Laura Stoler, Stathis Gourgouris, Jacques Lezra (eds.), *Thinking with Balibar: A Lexicon of Conceptual Practice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 253-273.

milieu; to pay attention to its differentializing dimensions and how these affected social experiences, relations, and political analyses; and to examine the unstable, multi-actor process of creating differential unities throughout the period. Borrowing from the words of Xavier Vigna, it is about the ways in which the working population of the Gard coalfield, in its ‘infinite variegation’, created a ‘*territoire solidaire* [solidaristic territory]’.<sup>87</sup>

### **The Gard Coalfield**

A localised case study is the most useful way of exploring this materially and environmentally rooted, contradictory, and contingent processes by which hierarchies were formed and solidarity was constructed. Although Stefan Berger has warned against ‘local parochialisms’ in mining history, a fine-grained analysis of the manifestation and reconfiguration of experiences of exploitation and strategies of solidarity demands such an approach.<sup>88</sup> This thesis explores these dynamics in the Gard coalfield of southern France. The Gard (or Alès – the two were used interchangeably) coalfield is important in its own right, but it is also indicative of broader dynamics in interwar French history.

Coal was mined from the thirteenth century until 1985 in the north-east of the present-day Gard department, in the foothills of the Cévennes.<sup>89</sup> Mining was already a definitive factor in local migratory patterns, socio-economic development, and political conflict by the time of the French Revolution.<sup>90</sup> The Norman ‘bourgeois capitalist’ Pierre-François Tubeuf was granted the concession to mine in the region by Louis XV on 17

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<sup>87</sup> Xavier Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2012), 117.

<sup>88</sup> Stefan Berger, ‘Mining history. Sub-fields and agendas’ in Stefan Berger and Peter Alexander (eds.), *Making Sense of Mining History* (London: Routledge, 2019), 9.

<sup>89</sup> Hubert Rivelaïne, *Balade en sol mineur: Histoire des mines du bassin houiller d’Alès* (Liouc: Le Plein des sens, 2005), 19.

<sup>90</sup> Gwynne Lewis, *The Advent of Modern Capitalism in France, 1770-1840: The Contribution of Pierre-François Tubeuf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

April 1773, and spent the next decades seeking to modernise extraction by employing experienced German and Dutch staff and developing new techniques of labour discipline.<sup>91</sup> Although these attempts were frustrated and ultimately prevented by local miners and regional seigneurs, Tubeuf's investment brought particular advances in mining at Rochebelle, which would become one of the Gard's three principal mines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>92</sup> Subsequently, the 'Tubeuf concession' was divided up into smaller concessions: Grand-Combe, Trescol, La Levade, and Champclauson at the beginning of the Restoration; Robiac, Meyrannes, Portes, Sénéchas in 1821; Salles de Gagnières, Tréllys, Palmesalade, Lalle, and Le Martinet in 1828.<sup>93</sup>

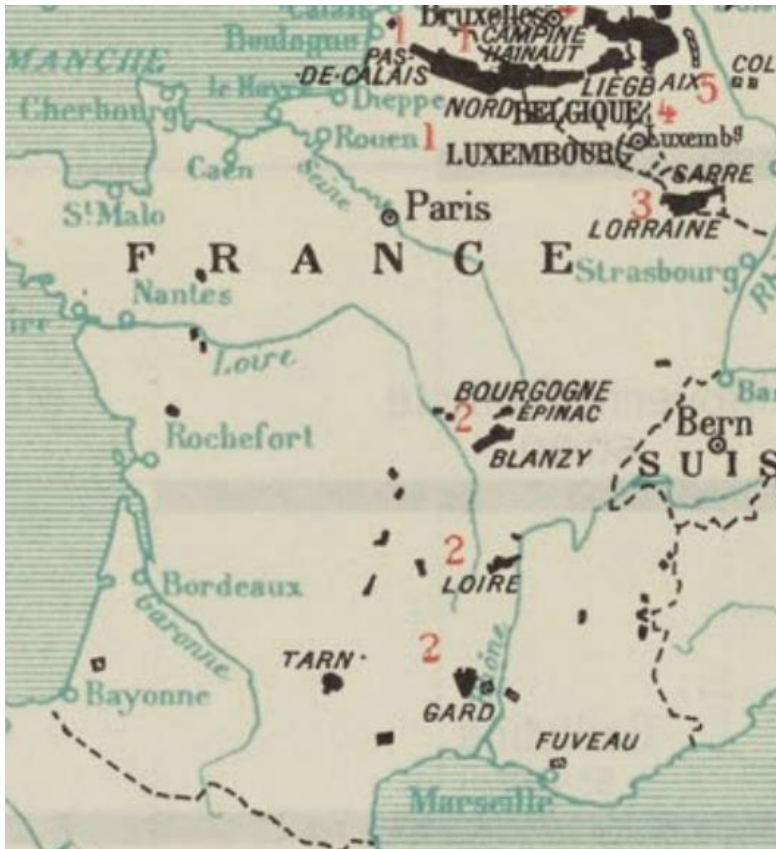


Figure 0-1 Gustave-Frédéric Dollfus, *Les houillères européennes* (Paris: Chatel & Dollfus, 1931).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 26, 33-47.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 34-6. For an environmental perspective on this epoch, see Thomas Le Roux, 'Mines et concessions en France, 1740-1820. Le filon des concessions' *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 399 (2020), 39-67.

<sup>93</sup> Jean-Michel Gaillard, 'Un exemple français de « ville-usine »: la Grand'Combe et sa « compagnie des mines », 1836-1921' (PhD Dissertation, Université Paris X, 1974), 11.

The second half of the long nineteenth century saw the rise of modern paternalist industrialism. External capital investment from Paris and Lyon, the construction of the La Levade-Alais-Nîmes railway – France’s longest on its inauguration in 1840 – and the development of an advanced cast-iron industry propelled the growth of coal extraction.<sup>94</sup> The basin’s largest company, Grand’Combe, gave its name to what would become a ‘French example of the “company-town”’ – the newly-founded municipality of La Grand’Combe – in the words of Jean-Michel Gaillard. His 1974 doctoral dissertation on the coalfield between 1836 and 1921 investigated the development of a paternalist ‘capitalist theocracy’, a ‘Welfare State *avant la lettre*’, in order to attract, select, and retain a workforce mainly drawn from surrounding regions.<sup>95</sup> Gaillard’s analysis of mining work was particularly, and somewhat precociously, attentive to the arduousness of thin coal veins and hotter underground conditions, together with the hookworms, nystagmus, and high accident rates to which workers were exposed.<sup>96</sup> A succession of periods of industrial conflict began at the turn of the twentieth century, when the burgeoning workers’ movement made fissures in the system of employer control.<sup>97</sup> Fabrice Sugier has argued that paternalism effectively ended following the Great War.<sup>98</sup>

During the interwar period, the coalfield was composed essentially of the companies of Grand’Combe, Nord d’Alais, and Rochebelle in the Gardon valley; the smaller company Tréllys to their north in the Auzonnet valley; and Bessèges further north-east in the valley of the Cèze. Along the Gardon, La Grand’Combe had 12,116 inhabitants in 1931 heavily concentrated in the mining industry, whereas Alès’ population of 43,000

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<sup>94</sup> Rivelaine, *Balade en sol mineur*, 26-30.

<sup>95</sup> Gaillard, ‘Un exemple français’, 127.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 167-191.

<sup>97</sup> Jean-Michel Gaillard, ‘Le 1er mai 1890 dans le bassin houiller du Gard’ *Le Mouvement social* 94 (1976), 59-76.

<sup>98</sup> Fabrice Sugier, ‘La Première Guerre mondiale et le déclin du contrôle social dans les mines du Gard (1914-1922)’ *Annales du Midi* 103.194 (1991), 215-230.

in the same year were spread across worked in metallurgy and textiles as well as for the companies of Rochebelle and Nord d'Alais.<sup>99</sup> In the Auzonnet valley, the workers of Tréllys were mainly concentrated in the smaller settlement of Le Martinet (2,512 in 1931).<sup>100</sup> On the banks of the Cèze, people associated with Bessèges lived in Robiac-Rochessadoule (2,762 in 1931) and Molières-sur-Cèze (2,334 in 1931).<sup>101</sup> As demonstrated in the topographical map below, steep peaks exceeding 400m in altitude stood between each valley, leading to their relative separation.

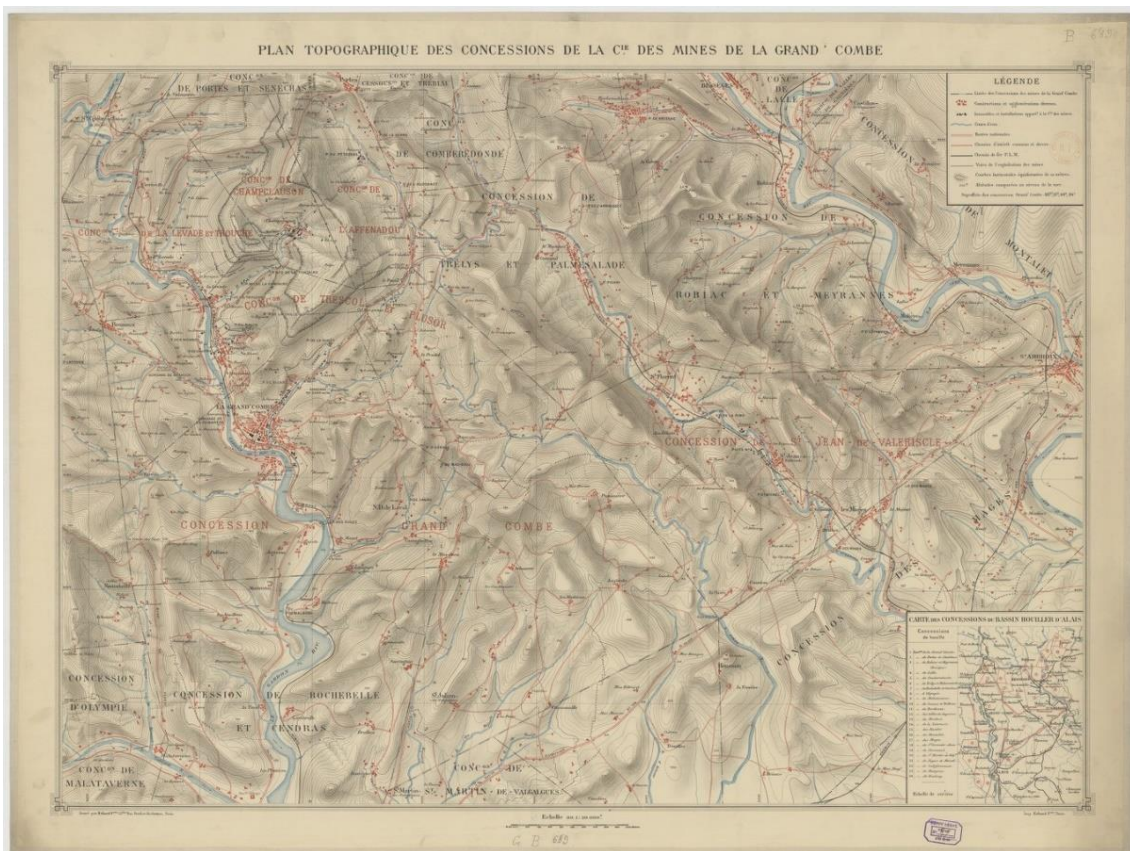


Figure 0-2 Erhard brothers, *Plan topographique des concessions de la Cie des mines de la Grand'Combe* (Paris: Erhard, 1903).

The present dissertation is the first full-length study of labour dynamics during the interwar period in the Gard. A small collection of short articles and by local historians

<sup>99</sup> Robert Barnoyer, *La Grand'Combe (Gard) et sa Compagnie des mines: Démographie historique et économie (1836-1954)* (Brignon: Editions de la Fenestrelle, 2021), 131; J-C Pouzet, 'Un type de gestion communale entre les deux guerres: Alès municipalité communiste (1925-1939)' (Masters thesis, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III, 1978), 13-16.

<sup>100</sup> Archives départementales du Gard 6/M/250, Le Martinet census, 1931.

<sup>101</sup> ADG 6/M/310, Robiac-Rochessadoule census, 1931; ADG 6/M/256 Molières-sur-Cèze census, 1931.

demonstrate its scholarly appeal.<sup>102</sup> But this interest goes beyond local experiences of the Gard, with dynamics at play that have important implications for how we think about French labour history. The first of these is the fact that the Gard mining companies employed workers of a wider range of nationalities than the majority of case studies that have focused on industrial labour in the North and East of the country.<sup>103</sup> Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, Greek, Algerian, and French people worked and lived in close proximity, prompting locals to observe the Gard's growing 'cosmopolitan' character.<sup>104</sup> This diversity of free workers – as opposed to prisoners of war or requisitioned workers who laboured in these mines in the First and Second World Wars – was representative of the majority of extractive contexts in southern France.<sup>105</sup> This multi-ethnic character enables a consideration of hierarchies in a quite different context from the urban centres studied hitherto, outlined in the literature review above. Moreover, this mass presence of migrants was not the only particularity of the interwar period. Coal extraction itself underwent significant shifts, with practices of labour-process rationalisation unfolding from the late 1920s. These policies purported to bring fundamental changes to coalmining, disrupting longstanding work practices and thereby transforming the lived experience of the labour milieu.<sup>106</sup> This double historicisation – of

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<sup>102</sup> Marie-Renée Santucci, 'La Main-d'œuvre étrangère dans les mines de la Grand-Combe jusqu'en 1940' in Fédération historique du Languedoc méditerranéen et du Roussillon (ed.), *Mines et mineurs en Languedoc-Roussillon et régions voisines de l'antiquité à nos jours* (Montpellier: La Fédération, 1977); Fabrice Sugier, 'L'Immigration Européenne dans le Bassin Houiller de la Grand-Combe' *Causses et Cévennes* 17.1 (1992), 266-72.

<sup>103</sup> Philip H. Slaby, 'Dissimilarity Breeds Contempt: Ethnic Paternalism, Foreigners, and the States in Pas-de-Calais Coalmining, France, 1920s' *International Review of Social History* 60 (2015), 227-51; Frey, *Polonais d'Alsace*.

<sup>104</sup> Fabrice Sugier, 'L'Immigration Européenne', 269.

<sup>105</sup> Jacques Tomasi, 'Le migrant dans l'entreprise: de la journée de travail à l'essai à la « carrière » dans une entreprise: le migrant étranger à Decazeville 1920-1930' *Recherches régionales* 79 (1982), 109-23; Hanna Diamond, 'Les mineurs immigrés du bassin de Fuveau dans la tourmente des grèves des années 1930 et 1940' *Diasporas. Histoire et société* 9 (2006), 195-204; Rubén Molina i Campoy, 'La colònia minera de la Pinosa (Vallmanya, Conflent). Història d'una població industrial de muntanya' *Trobades Culturals Pirinenques* 14 (2018), 141.

<sup>106</sup> Aimée Moutet, 'La rationalisation dans les mines du Nord à l'épreuve du Front populaire. Etude d'après les sources imprimées' *Le Mouvement social* 135 (1986), 63-99.

migrant centrality and of rationalisation – will be analysed in the first chapter of this thesis.

Communism was another key element that distinguished the interwar Gard from more well-known coalfields. Whereas nationally 80% of local union sections remained with the socialist-affiliated CGT after its split in 1920, the majority of Gard sections affiliated to the Communist CGTU.<sup>107</sup> This means that the more internationalist and revolutionary union, that promoted solidarity with migrants, was the more influential.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, municipal politics reflected the existence of several ‘little Moscows’.<sup>109</sup> Shortly after its separation from Saint-Florent-sur-Auzonnet, Le Martinet became the first municipality in France to elect a communist mayor on 25 September 1921.<sup>110</sup> Alès municipality became communist with the election of Fernand Valat in 1925, a local teacher who campaigned for affiliation to the Third International and became a significant figure in regional politics.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, the municipality of Bessèges was held by socialist CGT mining-delegate Alphonse Peyric from 1926 until his death in 1967.<sup>112</sup> The town council of La Grand’Combe was traditionally governed by the Company’s candidate until the victory of a socialist in 1925, who was replaced by the company-backed doctor Bernadou in 1929, before socialist Germain Soustelle won the municipality back in 1935.<sup>113</sup> The relative predomination of communism, especially in smaller settlements, promises grounded insights into the movement’s interaction with migrants.

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<sup>107</sup> Fabrice Sugier, *Mineurs des Cévennes*, vol.2 (Montpellier: Espace sud, 1994), 309.

<sup>108</sup> Schor, *L’Opinion française*, 239-56.

<sup>109</sup> Ad Knotter, “‘Little Moscows’ in Western Europe: The Ecology of Small-Place Communism” *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011), 475-510.

<sup>110</sup> *100 ans d’histoire du Martinet* (Méjanne-les-Alès: Commune de Le Martinet, 2021), 11.

<sup>111</sup> Pouzet, ‘Alès municipalité communiste’, 88-91.

<sup>112</sup> Maitron note, ‘Alphonse Peyric, Jean-Michel Gaillard’, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article125992>, accessed 13 Sept. 2024.

<sup>113</sup> Cornelia Eckert, ‘Une Ville Autrefois Minière: La Grand-Combe’ (PhD Dissertation, Université Paris V, 1991), 90-91.

Existing studies of the interwar Gard hint at the local importance of solidarity practices and politics. Relying upon retrospective interviews with coalfield inhabitants, Cornelia Eckert's 1991 anthropological work in the then deindustrialised La Grand'Combe noted that locals often used the term 'solidarity' when discussing the identity and atmosphere of the town, often explicitly rooting this legacy in its mining history.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, in a short article outlining the migrant presence in interwar Alès, Sugier indicated that European migrants were integrated into Left politics during the Popular Front in a narrative reflecting national stories that exceptionalise this moment.<sup>115</sup> Fragmentary though they are, these insights indicate the value of investigating the interwar Gard through the double lens of hierarchy and solidarity.

### Sources

The thesis draws upon a range of novel sources to reconstruct this process of differentiation and solidarity from a plurality of perspectives. In the opening chapters that sketch out the place of different coalfield inhabitants in the 'labour milieu', I use a combination of company recruitment, workforce management, and workplace and community surveillance material. The archives of the Rochebelle, Bessèges, and Nord d'Alais companies inform this reflection, but it is the archives of the largest company, Grand'Combe, preserved at the *Archives nationales du monde du travail* and the *Archives départementales du Gard* (ADG), that provide the majority of the material. These sources give insights into companies' organization of life in the workplace and beyond. In addition, I use contemporary epidemiological studies, doctors' reports, and complaints by communist press regarding working and living conditions to explore the intertwined health and environmental dimensions of coalmining.

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<sup>114</sup> Eckert, 'Une ville autrefois minière', 199-201.

<sup>115</sup> Fabrice Sugier, 'L'Immigration Européenne', 266-72.

Alongside these sources, the most novel insights on the experience of mining labour come from analysis of a sample of 171 workplace accident compensation claim dossiers involving migrants between 1925 and 1939, held in the ADG. These dossiers, which were compiled after either worker or employer contested an initial ruling on compensation, include workplace injury certificates, an accident investigation report undertaken by local justices of the peace (involving reports from victims, witnesses, employers, and lawyers), numerous *rappports d'expertise médicale* [medical expertise reports], and letters from victims, their families, or their representatives. This range of entirely novel sources cast new light upon socio-environmental labour experiences from the perspective of the whole diversity of inhabitants, and uncovers a world of complex interactions, discriminations, and opportunities for solidarities. Moreover, a set of complaints and investigations in the Mines and Energy (8/S) series of the ADG show the ways in which social relations were mediated through and affected by the desired and unintended (but inevitable) consequences of mining extraction: coal and pollution. A selection of industrial postcards, and a set of autobiographical works by local communist activists and the Grand'Combe engineer Étienne Fléchon shed further light on daily experiences and the organisation of work.

The second half of the thesis uses different sources to probe the development of political solidarity. These sources are drawn from state and company surveillance of political activity and episodes of labour insubordination, as well as communist and socialist press ranging from the pit-level pamphlets to the regional newspapers *Cri d'Alès*, *Le Cri du Gard*, *Le Combat Social*, *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, and the national press. Read as components of an iterative process of solidarity construction, these sources trace a multi-actor articulation of a rhetoric and practice of solidarity that worked through the

divergent experiences of working-class inhabitants.<sup>116</sup> Other sources add scale, complexity, and conflict to this construction of solidarity. First, the archives of the *Institut d'histoire sociale* of the CGT (IHS-CGT) contain valuable information about the place of migrants during the unification of the CGT and CGTU in 1935, and the published proceedings of the union's National Congress of 1938 that took place in Alès, give important insights into the role of local relations in the Gard in the formulation of the CGT's policy towards North African workers. Finally, police surveillance reports from the ADG also highlight autonomous activism among the Algerian population of the Gard.

### **Thesis Outline**

The opening chapter explores how the labour milieu was composed and recomposed throughout the interwar period by focusing on two major processes. The first concerns the Gard's particular ethnic diversity, showing it to have been shaped by the interaction of three primary forces – the ethnic preferences of employers, state immigration policy, and colonial relations – as well as the consequences of wider political and social upheavals across Europe. The second arose from changes in the extraction process. Migrants arrived from across Europe and the Mediterranean to work in a rationalising industry. Far from encountering neat production lines and a sanitised working environment, the migrants were thrust into processes of longwall mining which created unsanitary workplaces and facilitated stricter productivist discipline. As a consequence of these disjointed processes of change, the underground labour environment was characterised by considerable interaction between workers of different origins. While far from being devoid of ethnic hierarchies – particularly where colonial workers were concerned – this enabled everyday labour solidarities to emerge and develop.

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<sup>116</sup> This methodological approach was set out in Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 64.

Workplace accidents were an integral element of the work experience. The second chapter explores how migrants were discriminated against during and after accidents by various actors, and examines the contingent forms of mutual aid by which they withstood and contested discrimination. Commencing at the moment of the accident itself, following it through the initial reaction of colleagues and supervisors, to the doctor's clinic, and eventual court proceedings provided for by the 1898 workplace accident law, the chapter explores how companies practised policies of suspicion and denial of justice against migrants. In response, workers could act together, mobilising, for example, 'sensory solidarities' by corroborating colleagues' claims, while unions developed institutional practices and actions that accused companies of exploiting migrants' specifically vulnerable condition. The chapter demonstrates that there was nothing automatic about the relationship between exposure to danger and relations of solidarity. Rather, solidarity flowed through the immediate, mediated, or institutionalised actions of colleagues, unions, and some sympathetic doctors.

The 'labour milieu' involved more than the risks and dangers of the underground. The third chapter explores how certain moral economies emerged in relation to the extractive environment – in its built, mined, and polluted dimensions – beyond the workplace through a range of contested issues, including the discriminatory allocation of housing, failures of hygiene, unjust allocations of coal, and the pollution of air and water. Exploring the power dynamics of housing, heating, and pollution demonstrates the political salience of the environmental dimensions of company control as well as the weight of race, nationality, and gender in shaping experiential inequalities. Drawing upon a range of archives spanning communist press and medical hygienists' reports on Algerian housing, mine-guard surveillance notes, and petitions presented by washerwomen, the chapter demonstrates how socio-environmental disputes around the extraction process

gave shape to a moral economy based around the provision of basic vital minima. Moreover, this analysis exposes a contradiction in the system of company control. While critiques of unhygienic housing and polluted public resources denounced companies' unwillingness to guarantee decent living conditions, spaces of relative autonomy were essential to the emergence of practices of disobedience and resistance.

The second part of the thesis moves from these divergent and convergent experiences of the labour milieu to ask how the practice of labour politics interacted with and reinvented the concept of solidarity throughout the period. Strike mobilisations are the object of Chapter Four, which begins by considering the linguistic challenges implied by such diversity. In January 1929, workers in the Gard held a three-week strike that was distinguished by its radicalism and the heavy involvement of European migrants, women, and colonial subjects. Rather than seeing this as the actions of an unthinking crowd (such as employers' and police's framing), my analysis of the strike shows how radical actions flowed from a critique of the exploitative hierarchies of the labour milieu, *and* how migrant participation catalysed a palpable shift in Communist conceptions of solidarity. During the 1920s and early 1930s, a new form of differential unity thus emerged to contend with the worker-universalist vision of solidarity. January 1929 was an important moment of rupture when migrants and women became active participants in politics, without necessarily marking a clean break in political practice.

Chapter Five studies the local role of migrants in the building of the Popular Front through the sombre years of the Depression through the mobilisations of 1936. At a time of increasing xenophobia in national debates, trade-union and municipal politics were defined by a growing defence of migrants' 'right to life', and the institutionalisation of their participation. At the beginning of 1936, an important strike in Le Martinet inaugurated the Popular Front year. This strike can be seen as the, albeit partial,

culmination of embodied critiques of some dimensions of the labour milieu, through its contestation of the specific exposure of migrants to risk, and that of all workers to forms of pollution. These issues were indicative of the expanding agenda of solidarity, and its echoes were evident throughout the 1936-7 era. Nevertheless, the claims enunciated stopped short of campaigning explicitly on behalf of women and colonial subjects.

The final chapter explores in further detail the practice and meaning of ‘solidarity’ by assessing the place of the campaign for the Spanish Republic from 1936, and of an autonomous Algerian mobilisation that emerged in the coalfield at the same time. The Gard’s solidarity campaign for Republican Spain had distinctive features compared to those which occurred elsewhere in France and Britain. Unsurprisingly, the PCF and the Spanish migrants played a crucial role in organising collections, but local struggles of migrant involvement in politics unpacked in Chapter Five as well as the ideological connections created between anti-fascism and the defence of worker health influenced the consensual nature of the local mobilisation. During the same months, the *Union Fraternelle des Musulmans du Gard*, founded by Algerian miners and canteen-managers to campaign for the rights of the Algerian community in the Gard, demonstrated the potential but also the limits to solidarity in the 1930s. A complex set of encounters between colonial workers and French union structures at various scales saw the forging of solidarities through various protests and strikes, which expanded the frontiers of the emancipatory campaigns. Nonetheless, in this case, colonial workers’ denunciations of their oppression based on racial reasonings were roundly rejected by their French interlocutors, and solidarities between European and North African miners, and their representative, continued to stunt and falter into the beginning of the Second World War.

## Ch.1 Arduous Work: The Making of a Diverse Extractive Environment

Recounting in his memoirs the first morning when he descended the pit at Pontil (Grand'Combe) in 1927, engineer Étienne Fléchon described the workforce for whom he had responsibility. 'The *mineurs* Louis Teyssède, Jean Benoît, Joseph Dutour, Juan Soria, Adiam Polieksy (recently arrived from Carpathia, with bits of old car tyre tied together with string for shoes), and Bouzid Meziane, accompanied by their *manœuvres* François Muret, André Bontemps, José Ricardo, Stanislas Bomcyk and Sarraouï Mohammed, took to their respective workstations.' Once there, this diverse group from the Gard and its surrounding regions, Spain, Czechoslovakia, and Algeria checked that all was safe, before sitting down to eat breakfast together. Management officially prohibited workers from consuming this meal on company time, but the practice continued due to the spatial difficulties that mining in small galleries implied for surveillance. However, noted Fléchon, the spatial configuration of underground mining would soon change dramatically when longwall mining 'imposed its cadence' and rationalisation brought profound changes to disciplinary regimes and the labouring environment, and thus to the experience of work.<sup>1</sup>

The opening chapter of this thesis investigates the making both of the Gard coalfield's diversity, and of this extractive labour milieu. This represents an empirical and interpretive exercise in historicization. Through this, the chapter unpacks the shifting histories of demographical composition and of rationalisation that give this thesis both its specificity and its broader purpose. Setting the tone for the dissertation, the central concern here is for the lived and embodied experiences of diversity and of the work

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<sup>1</sup> Médiathèque municipale d'Alès 622. FLE T(1), Étienne Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, vol. 1 (1988), 68.

environment, with specific attention to the processes by which hierarchies functioned and solidarities were forged.

The working population of the Gard was even more diverse than Fléchon's vignette suggests, and was the product of a combination of processes unique to the coalfield. Labour migration histories of interwar France have tended to homogenise the factors that generated newly forged diversities in local contexts, privileging groups such as the Poles who moved as a consequence of large labour contracts.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the approach here is to consider how a wide range of factors and actors including the ethnic preferences of employers, European political upheaval, colonial relations, the exhaustion of mines in other countries, travel infrastructure, and wars, produced diversity. By insisting upon this demographic variegation, this chapter situates the thesis in a historiographical trend within French migration history that has sought to explore ethnic and social hierarchies in multi-ethnic contexts.<sup>3</sup> Through a range of company and state sources that follow macro, regional, company, and individual level strategies, we arrive at an understanding of the shifts that occurred in these hierarchies throughout the interwar years. In doing so, the chapter emphasises the internal complexity of the Gard, its location within regional, national, colonial, and international historical processes, and the dynamics of class, race, and gender that shaped the Gard's specific migration experience.

The chapter is also about the changing labouring contexts in which this diverse population toiled. While quantitative economic historians Marie-France Conus and Jean-Louis Escudier have characterised the interwar period's rationalisation of coalmining in France as one of '*maîtrise de la nature* [mastery over nature]', other scholars focusing on

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<sup>2</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*; Yves Frey, *Polonais d'Alsace*; Philip Slaby, 'Industry, the State, and immigrant Poles in industrial France, 1919-1939' (PhD Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> This historiography has thus far focused mainly on state-migrant interactions in larger cities. See Lewis, *The Boundaries of Universalism*; Rosenberg, *Policing Paris*; Barton, *Reproductive Citizens*.

union perspectives and workers' experiences suggest that the rhythms of technical change and the demands of discipline created harsh labour environments.<sup>4</sup> As hinted in Fléchon's account, the mass arrival of migrants was accompanied by a process by which companies intensified extraction both from the earth and from those who worked it through a complex of technologies including mechanisation and discipline. Through an inspection of company public relations material, engineer reports, epidemiological studies, and the local communist press, this chapter unveils how these processes shaped labour environments to elucidate the 'world' of the mines of the Gard and their embodied experience.<sup>5</sup>

In its final section, the chapter seeks to go further in understanding the experience of diversity and mine work, by investigating quotidian labour-related interactions. This investigation, based on hitherto unexploited sources in which mineworkers of different origins gave first-hand accounts of the labour process, provides new insights into the complex co-existence of hierarchy and difference on the one hand, and cooperation and solidarity on the other. By taking seriously the daily workplace actions and interactions of workers and the terms in which they described them, this analysis provides new insights into migrant experiences of labour in interwar France. Neither the diversities of language, skill, origin, or race, nor the cooperations and shared perils of mining work deterministically ordained division or solidarity. Instead, they implied and implored constant negotiations and struggles through shared, but often differentially experienced, situations of exploitation. The closely intertwined processes by which diversity developed

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<sup>4</sup> Marie-France Conus and Jean-Louis Escudier, 'Sécurité et transformations du système productif : application à l'industrie française du charbon (1817-1988)' *Entreprises et Histoire* 17 (1997), 70. For the counter-argument see Odette Hardy-Hémery, 'Rationalisation technique et rationalisation du travail à la Compagnie des Mines d'Anzin (1927-1938)' *Le Mouvement social* 72 (1970), 3-48; Aimée Moutet, 'La rationalisation dans les mines du Nord', 63-99.

<sup>5</sup> Boddice and Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*. This means interrogating 'relationships between technology and the bodies of people who work[ed] with it'. See: McEvoy, 'Working Environments', 148.

and rationalisation advanced were constitutive of the interwar Gard's labour milieu, and understanding them is essential for grasping the historical experience of migrants.

### **Mobility Regimes of the Diverse Gard**

Foreign migration became a defining feature of the Gard coalfield in the interwar period. The French nation and its capitalist system stimulated arrivals for productive and reproductive purposes owing to a long-term fall in birth rates and the demographic shock inflicted by the Great War.<sup>6</sup> However, migration of a lesser order of magnitude had been in present in the Gard coalfield since the arrival of Belgian and Italian mining technicians in the 1840s, followed by a growing Spanish working population on the eve of the Great War.<sup>7</sup> Most of the coalfield's nineteenth-century population was drawn from across the Gard, or from the neighbouring Lozère.<sup>8</sup> Yet quantitative and qualitative changes in labour mobility occurred during the 1910s.

War mobilisation in 1914 compelled companies to seek additional labour. After hearing of the closure of the iron mines in Almeria, Grand'Combe agents communicated with the mayor of Cuevas de Vera in early 1915 offering work to 100 'good miners' between 18 and 35.<sup>9</sup> The first contingent sailed from Cartagena to Marseille on 23 April 1915.<sup>10</sup> Here, the Gard company sought to benefit from a downturn owing to the depletion of extractible resources in Spain.<sup>11</sup> Despite their supposed experience, one engineer deplored the reluctance of Spaniards to work underground, and suggested making them

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<sup>6</sup> Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France*.

<sup>7</sup> Sugier, 'Migration européenne', 267.

<sup>8</sup> Gaillard, 'Un exemple français', 207-8.

<sup>9</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe director to Mayor of Cuevas, 15 Mar. 1915. Many Spaniards crossed the Pyrenees for work, see Ángel Calvo, 'International Migrations and Labour Market Regulation. Spanish Workers in France during the First World War' *Journal of Migration History* 8 (2022), 85-121.

<sup>10</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Grand'Combe engineer daily report, 16 Apr. 1915.

<sup>11</sup> Angel Pascual Martínez Soto, Miguel Angel Perez de Perceval Verde, and Jorge Eduardo Martínez Perez, 'Salarios y organización del trabajo en la minería del sureste español, 1850-1936' *Revista de Historia Industrial* 69 (2017), 49-79.

work in ‘homogenous groups like the *Boches*’ – German prisoners of war – as a disciplinary measure.<sup>12</sup> This engineer perhaps drew upon the example of a recently arrived self-contained group of Serbian workers, complete with a Serbian *maître-mineur*, that had been ‘favourably welcomed’ as good workers.<sup>13</sup>

Uncertainties in the labour supply prompted internal enquiries in the largest mining companies before the war ended. In December 1917, the state mining engineer for the Gard wrote to the directors at Grand’Combe indicating that they would soon lose their prisoners of war, and would have to increase their employment of free foreign workers.<sup>14</sup> In response, the company investigated the prospect of employing Chinese workers. Based on a nineteen-page study of the wartime mining experience of La Machine (Nièvre) permeated with racist commentary about the physical capacities of Chinese workers, engineers decided against employing them at Grand’Combe.<sup>15</sup> This choice itself was made somewhat redundant by the French state’s decision to expel colonial workers following the war, highlighted by Tyler Stovall as a crucial turning point of racial differentiation in the social history of twentieth-century France.<sup>16</sup>

However, such physical racial exclusion was not wholly functional in the Gard, with 232 Algerians already being registered as working for the department’s mining companies in January 1921.<sup>17</sup> Despite a lack of recruitment material on this early period, a report composed for Grand’Combe in 1940 suggests that the company drew its colonial workers from Marseille, which retained an important Algerian population throughout the

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<sup>12</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Grand’Combe engineer daily report, 21 Aug. 1916.

<sup>13</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Grand’Combe engineer daily report, 29 Apr. 1916.

<sup>14</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Engineer to Grand’Combe director, 29 Dec. 1917.

<sup>15</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Report by Des Fosseuz on Chinese labour, 9 Jan. 1919.

<sup>16</sup> Tyler Stovall, ‘National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers’, 52-72.

<sup>17</sup> ADG 4/M/450, Report North-African workforce, Alès Sub-Prefect to Gard Prefect, 14 Jan. 1921. (All mentions of Sub-Prefect and Prefect refer to these positions unless stated otherwise.)

interwar period, and through chain migration from specific villages.<sup>18</sup> In a context of wartime labour demand, Le Jean, the company's agent who usually recruited Algerians in Marseille, travelled to Maadid, Akbou, Sidi-Aïch, Lafayette, and Medjana, stating that 'in each village visited, our agents were surrounded by former workers who asked them for news about Grand'Combe and the engineers that had managed them.'<sup>19</sup> The experience of these Algerians who entertained long-term links with mining in the Gard represents an important lens through which to inspect the intersection of race, coloniality, and class within the mining industry.<sup>20</sup>

The years following the end of the war saw a haemorrhaging of French workers away from the mines, deepening the need for foreign recruitment. Fabrice Sugier has shown that at Grand'Combe, one pit's workforce fell from 1,784 in December 1918 to just 1,255 in April 1919. More broadly, the mining workforce of the Gard coalfield fell by 20% between 1918 and 1920.<sup>21</sup> To explain this, Sugier insists that workers looked elsewhere for better conditions after wartime duress had resulted in a 70% loss of savings on the part of workers between 1913 and 1919, and employers demanded ever higher yields. Meanwhile, the legal prohibition of overtime work in the mines in 1919 created a 10% labour deficit overnight.<sup>22</sup> While some of these factors created the conditions for large strikes in 1919 and 1920, they equally pushed many away from the coalfield altogether.<sup>23</sup> While migration scholarship has stressed the centrality of the mass death of French men during the Great War in creating the need for migrant labour, focusing on labour in the Gard suggests that the embodied exigencies of extractive methods also

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<sup>18</sup> See Émile Temime, 'Des Kabyles à Marseille: Une migration précoce et durable' *Confluences Méditerranée* 39 (2001), 122-5.

<sup>19</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Report Grand'Combe recruitment mission in Algeria, 13 Apr. 1940.

<sup>20</sup> Tyler Stovall, 'Travailleurs de couleur dans la France de l'entre-deux-guerres', 261-70.

<sup>21</sup> Sugier, *Mineurs des Cévennes*, vol.2, 330.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 235, 337.

<sup>23</sup> Sugier, 'La Première Guerre mondiale et le déclin du contrôle social', 215-30.

contributed to the departure of French workers from the underground, and thus accelerated an ethnicization of mining labour.<sup>24</sup> By extension, this analysis tempers Jean-Michel Gaillard's assertion that the recourse to migration following the Great War was motivated primarily by a desire to reclaim a 'docile and disciplined' workforce in the face of a French working class that had 'awoken to class consciousness and struggle'.<sup>25</sup>

A combination of material conditions, transport and commercial links, and agents facilitated European migration in these early years. An Italian official named Narciso Pettinelli demonstrates how Italian migration in the early 1920s was an 'affair of state'.<sup>26</sup> After having been responsible for procuring coal in the Gard for the Italian state in 1918, Pettinelli used his new position from 1920 as junior secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to carve out a niche as recruiter of Italian labour for Grand'Combe.<sup>27</sup> Observations made by Pettinelli help to situate Italian migration to the Gard in the broader context of transnational movement and economic depression. Having 'returned from a long voyage across Italy', the official reported to Grand'Combe's directors 'that in certain regions there [was] significant unemployment, and especially among workers who before the war had been abroad (Germany, Belgium, France, America, etc...) who had returned to Italy for military service', many of whom were miners who would be 'very disposed to return abroad'.<sup>28</sup> In this case, Pettinelli drew upon his position and knowledge to offer himself as a recruiter, but in so doing also provides a fine example of how structural dynamics of economic depression interacted with individual human agency and disposition to emigrate. Moreover, this pattern of recruitment was not specific to Italian miners.

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<sup>24</sup> Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*, Ch.2.

<sup>25</sup> Gaillard, 'Un exemple français', 215.

<sup>26</sup> Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe director to Company Board Director (hereafter Board Director), 23 Apr. 1920.

<sup>28</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Pettinelli to Grand'Combe director Bonnevey, 16 Apr. 1920.

According to accounts collected by anthropologist Cornelia Eckert, Gard recruiting agents also operated in Spain in the early 1920s.<sup>29</sup>

Racial assumptions rooted in the specificity of the Gard coloured recruitment policy in the interwar period. When presented with the opportunity to employ Polish workers by the *Comité Central des Houillères de France* (CCHF) in common with other coalfields in 1920, Grand'Combe director Victor Bonnevey was initially reluctant.<sup>30</sup> First, he noted that the Poles were likely to demand high wages, while those in the Gard were among the lowest in France. Second, he evoked the company's recent successful employment of workers of the 'Latin race' and their 'easy adaptation' to the place's 'climate', and 'the customs, the cuisine, the language of our Meridionals'.<sup>31</sup> This attitude chimes with the work of Laure Teulières on south-western France during the interwar period, which has demonstrated the regional bourgeoisie's emphasis on the 'Latinity' of Northern Mediterraneans.<sup>32</sup> Rather than differentiation among their workforce, then, employers invoked a harmonious solidarity rooted in an essentialized and environmental racial vision, if only to avoid workers who might expect higher wages.

Changes in the political outlook in Spain and Italy muted enthusiasm about migrants arriving from these neighbouring countries. As early as 1922, La Grand'Combe's police reported that 60 to 80 of the 100 Spaniards housed in a company barracks were members of the CGTU, and that highly developed anarchist views prevailed.<sup>33</sup> By 1925, the French state's concerns about the rising numbers of communists

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<sup>29</sup> Eckert, 'Une ville autrefois minière', 229.

<sup>30</sup> On the CCHF's role in recruitment see Aurelie Philippe, 'Le comité central des Houillères de France (1887-1940)' (PhD Dissertation, Paris XIII, 2021), 240-49.

<sup>31</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate Engineer, 5 Mar. 1920.

<sup>32</sup> Laure Teulières, *Immigrés d'Italie et paysans de France (1920-1944)* (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Midi, 2012), Ch.2; Michael A. Kozakowski, 'Making "Mediterranean Migrants": Geopolitical Transitions, Migratory Policy, and French Conceptions of the Mediterranean in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 89 (2014), 181-93.

<sup>33</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 30 June 1922.

fleeing the Mussolini and Primo de Rivera regimes began to condition the companies' recruitment approaches and possibilities.<sup>34</sup> A note from the police commissioner of Bessèges demonstrates the kinds of subversive networks that were associated with such immigration. The report identified twenty-nine-year-old Salvatore Mammano as the leader of a twenty-strong Italian communist grouping, all of whom hailed from Campobello di Licata in Sicily and had arrived in Bessèges in the early 1920s.<sup>35</sup> More than half of the group worked at Bessèges mining company, in accordance with a broader trend evident among southern Italian migrants to gravitate towards mining contexts.<sup>36</sup> Such fears were compounded by interactions between politically 'undesirable' foreigners and local communists. FAI militant turned CGTU activist Francisco Barulio, originally from Loscos in Aragon, attracted police attention in 1927 when working under a false name at Tréllys company and addressing his post to a café managed by Isidore Michel, communist mayor of Le Martinet.<sup>37</sup>

These cases of subversiveness were of course not representative of the whole population. Nevertheless, they shaped local administrators views to significant degrees. In 1932, the Alès Sub-Prefect noted that many Spaniards had come to the Gard to flee military service under Primo de Rivera.<sup>38</sup> This constituted a less explicit form of subversion, but one that fit with the general mood of political suspicion. In this way, an aversion to communism and anarchism on the part of state officials troubled the ethnic preferences of employers.

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<sup>34</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe to Board Director, 1 Feb. 1925. This mirrored the national context, see Rosenberg, *Policing Paris*, 67-72.

<sup>35</sup> AN 19940462/67, Dossier Mammano, Report Bessèges police commissioner, 6 Jan. 1925.

<sup>36</sup> Pietro Pinna, 'I migranti meridionali in Francia tra la due guerre mondiali' *Meridiana* 92 (2018), 51-73. Far more Italian migrants worked in Meurthe-et-Moselle, see Noiriel, *Longwy*.

<sup>37</sup> AN 19940434/588, Dossier Braulio, Report Sète police commissioner, 2 Feb. 1935.

<sup>38</sup> ADG 4/M/611, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 7 Jan. 1932.

In the face of such departures, an initial reluctance to employ Polish workers soon ceded to an increasing reliance on the CCHF and its links to Polish employment sources. Employment statistics – presented below in Figure 1-2 – indicate that Poles soon became a very significant group. Many initially came from the mines of Westphalia, where Poles had worked in German mines and formed diasporic communities for several decades.<sup>39</sup> Such was the case for an anonymous Pole who would go on to write memoirs about his migration experiences in the late 1930s. Having worked in Wattenscheid in Westphalia since 1903, he began at Grand’Combe on 26 October 1921 along with twenty-five other skilled miners, before his family followed eight months later to live in Saint-Jean-de-Valériscle.<sup>40</sup> While not all were experienced miners, Grand’Combe engineers came to value Poles highly as labourers – adjudging their output to be 90% of that of the French.<sup>41</sup>

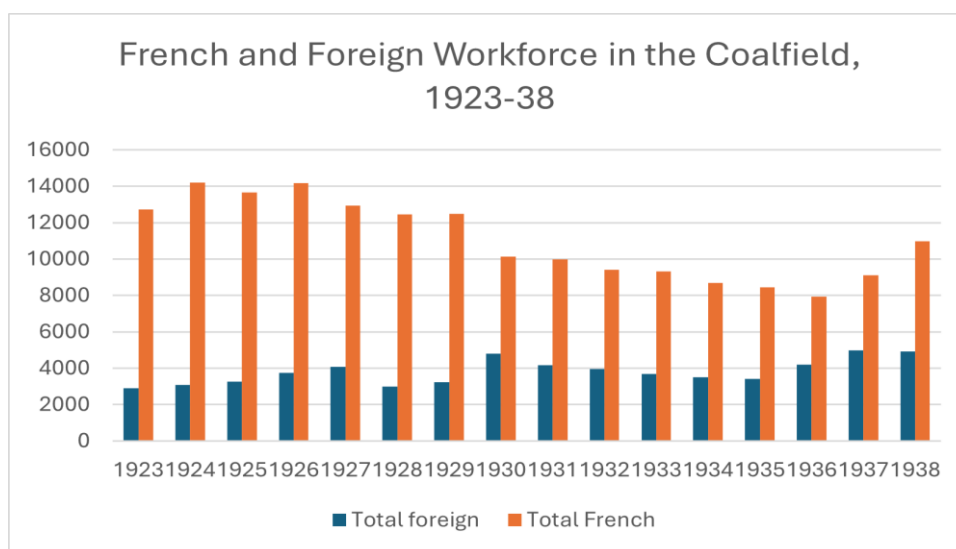


Figure 1-1 French and Foreign Workforce, 1923-1938

<sup>39</sup> See Anne Friedrichs, ‘Tracer les limites des sociétés dans une perspective transeuropéenne. Les « Polonais de la Ruhr » à la fin du XIXe siècle au début du XXe siècle’, *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* 76.3 (2021), 489-529.

<sup>40</sup> Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, ‘Pamiętnik Nr.31’, *Pamiętniki emigrantów: Francja: nr.1-37* (Warsaw: IGS, Ruknia Ekonomiczna J. Kubiak, 1939), 558-66.

<sup>41</sup> Santucci, ‘La main-d’œuvre étrangère’, 298.

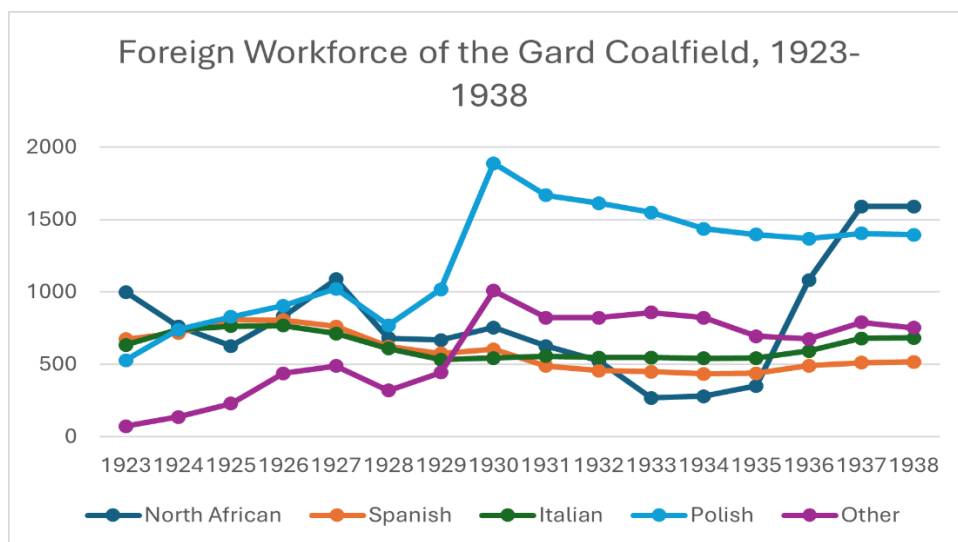


Figure 1-2 Foreign Workforce of the Gard, 1923-1938

The principal trends of the coalfield workforce during the interwar period are shown in Figures 1-1 and 1-2.<sup>42</sup> During the 1920s, the Gard coalfield's French-national working population fell from 13,649 in 1925 to 10,134 in 1930. During the same period, the migrant working population – including Algerians – grew from 3,249 in 1925 to 4,792 in 1930. Both populations fell between 1930 and 1935, to 8,419 and 3,416 respectively, before rising sharply again to 10,964 and 4,932 in 1938. The overall proportion of the foreign population rose from 19% in 1923 to 36% in 1940, meaning that French workers continued to turn away from the mines to be replaced by foreign labour. Within this population, Figure 1-2 breaks down by nationality and reveals significant group trends. First, the percentage of Italian and Spanish workers remained stable throughout the period, until Spanish Republican refugees arrived from concentration camps, bringing their number to 1,143. Initially equal in proportion, the Polish workforce sharply increased in 1927, becoming the most important (at 13% of the workforce in 1930). A

<sup>42</sup> Except where specified, statistics for these tables are from Henri Chambon, 'Matériaux pour l'histoire sociale du bassin minier d'Alès: la main-d'œuvre immigrée étrangère et nord-africaine de 1922 à 1952' in Fédération historique du Languedoc méditerranéen et du Roussillon, *Mines et mineurs en Languedoc-Roussillon et régions voisines de l'antiquité à nos jours* (Montpellier: La Fédération, 1977), 306-318.

similar increase of Czechoslovaks (listed as ‘Other’) can be observed following 1929. The population qualified as ‘North African’, in fact almost exclusively Algerian, experienced the least stability in employment: 998 were present in 1923, rising to 1,087 in 1927, before being reduced to 268 by 1934, and then rising rapidly over the subsequent years to become the largest single category of foreign labour in 1937. Evidently, colonial status was central in determining stability in employment.

While representing the overall shifts within the population, these coalfield figures obscure the diversity of workforce configurations between companies (shown in Figures 1-3 to 1-7). Bessèges, for example, had a long-term preference for Polish workers, who represented approximately half of its foreign labourers. By contrast, Grand’Combe was somewhat more flexible. It employed relatively stable numbers of Italians, Spaniards, and Poles, while Czechoslovak nationals arrived *en masse* at the turn of the 1930s. Algerians represented at points the largest foreign labour force, but also experienced the sharpest decline. The other large company, Rochebelle, preferred Poles, followed by Spaniards, and Italians, employing few Algerians until 1936 when a great many entered (from 3 in 1934 to 423 in 1937). Of the other two principal companies, Poles composed the overwhelming majority of foreign workers at Trélys, while Spanish miners dominated Nord d’Alais’s foreign workforce, until the Polish contingent increased from 1934, followed by the Algerian from 1936. Each company thus had its own configuration of nationalities. These configurations both affected and were affected by the composition of the towns close to the pits. For example, Le Martinet, the town closest to Trélys, and Rochessadoules, the town supplying labour to Bessèges, were both home to relatively stable populations of Polish families.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, the memoirs of Aimé Giraud who notes the significant presence of Poles, *Ma vie, mes luttes* (Paris: Alma, 1995), 33.

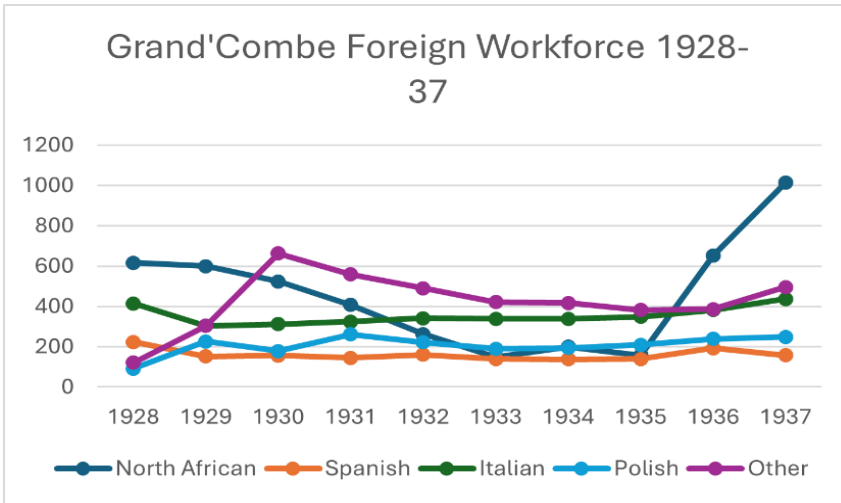


Figure 1-3 Grand'Combe workforce 1928-1937. From Chambon, except figures for 1928 and 1929, drawn from ADG 18/J/114, Workforce reports compiled by engineers on 27 Mar. 1928 and 31 Dec. 1929.

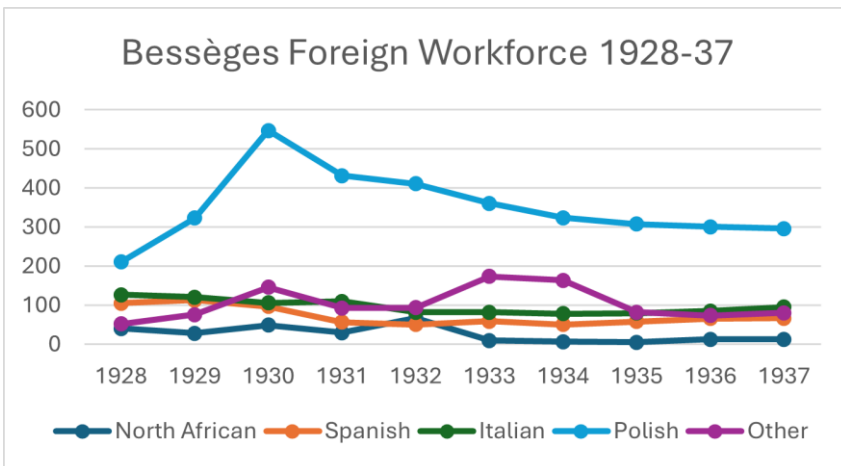


Figure 1-4 Bessèges Foreign Workforce

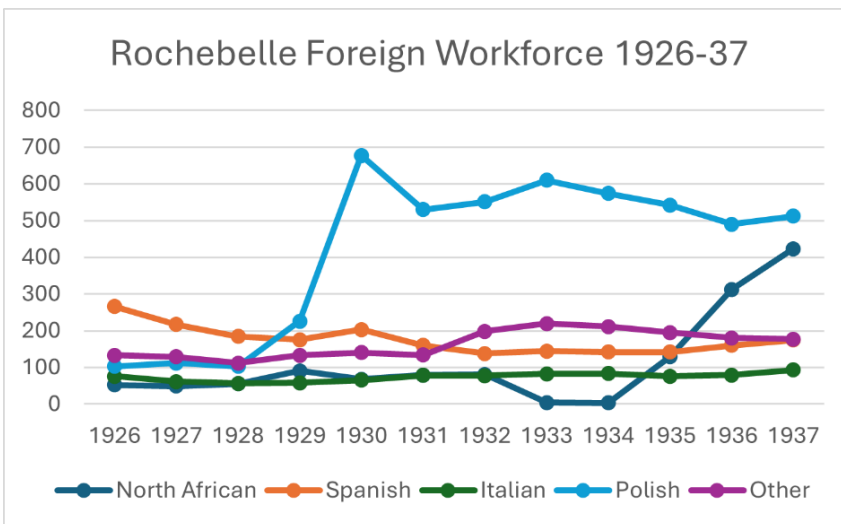


Figure 1-5 Rochebelle Foreign Workforce

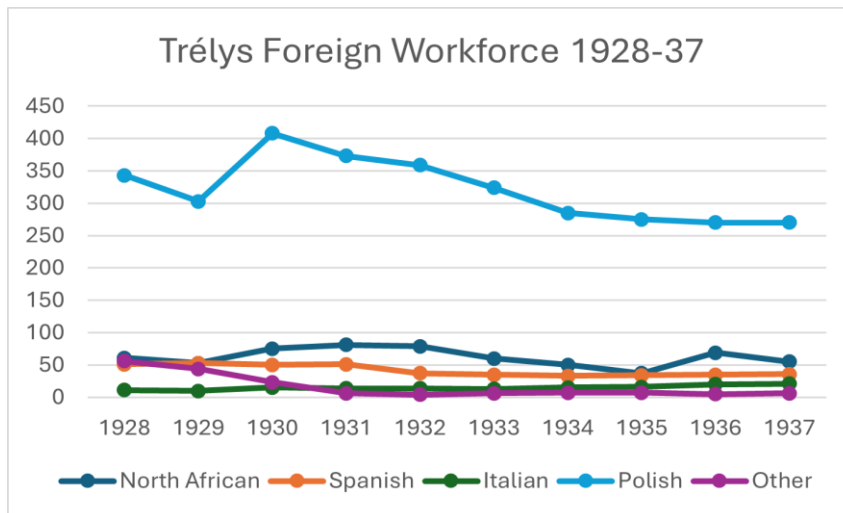


Figure 1-6 Trélys Foreign Workforce

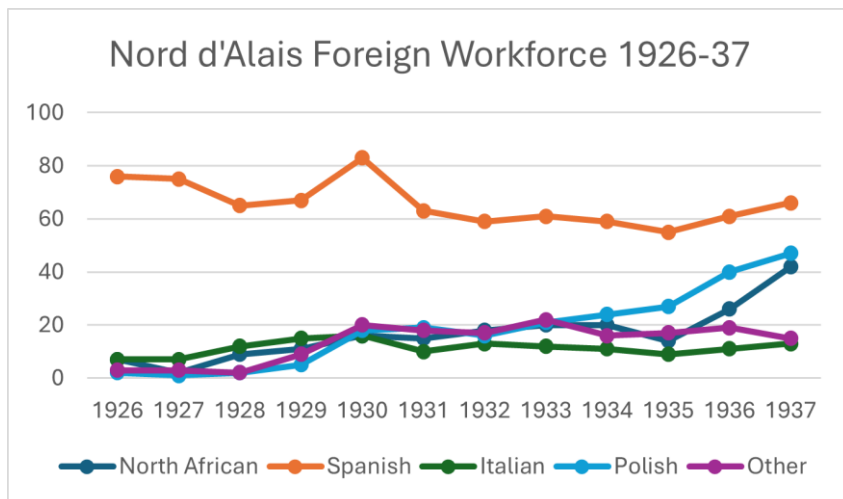


Figure 1-7 Nord d'Alais Foreign Workforce

Companies also varied in the proportions of foreign and French workers they employed. Bessèges had the lowest proportion of foreign workers, standing at 13% in 1928, climbing to a high of 25% in 1930, before stabilising around 20% for the remainder of the decade.<sup>44</sup> As for the larger Grand'Combe, the figure reached 35.5% in 1930 before falling to 23% in 1933, and climbing again to 37% in 1937. Rochebelle began at 21% in 1928, before rising sharply to 45% in 1930 and remaining at this high level throughout the crisis years, reaching just over 50% in 1936. Unlike the other two large companies, Rochebelle saw a rise in its migrant working population from 1930 to 1935. The smaller

<sup>44</sup> These statistics again come from Chambon, 'Matériaux pour l'histoire sociale du bassin minier d'Alès', 313.

companies also exhibited similar rhythms of proportional change. Nord d'Alais went from 18% in 1927 to 31% in 1930, and remained at a relatively high level, and rising to 39% in 1937. At Tréllys, the ratio hit a high of 43% in 1930, before settling in the high 30% during the 1930s. This diversity of numbers demonstrates that the coalfield was a complex constellation of specific companies, each with their own employment practices, who responded to economic changes and shifts in labour demand in different ways. Most importantly for this thesis, it shows the sheer diversity of circumstances in which people lived, worked, and related to each other.

This complexity was compounded by the challenge of labour-force instability. An analysis of employment statistics alone would suggest that this was only an issue for North African workers, while the European population remained largely stable. Evidence suggests that Algerian turnover owed in part to chain migration. In September 1925, Grand'Combe possessed work requests from 62 Algerians who had already worked for the company, 258 who had fathers working there, and 61 who had non-familial affinity links.<sup>45</sup> However, the relative statistical stability of European workers masks a reality marked by various mobilities. According to Sugier, the migrant 'instability rate' at Bessèges in 1921-22 was 64%, with 5.8% of new arrivals opting to work in agriculture in the Bas Gard, 28.3% returning to their country of origin, while 26% were sacked. In this early period, Spaniards and Italians were more likely either to return to their place of origin or to move to a different sector of labour in the same region, whereas Poles were more likely to leave for the Nord.<sup>46</sup> Employment records at Bessèges noting the

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<sup>45</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Grand'Combe report on recruitment of North African workforce, 4 Sept. 1925.

<sup>46</sup> Sugier, *Mineurs des Cévennes*, vol.2, 391.

incomings and outgoings of Italian and Spanish workers show that instability remained high through the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, Algerians sat at the bottom of the labour hierarchy, victim to racist stereotypes and with ultimately little autonomy over their own movement. When economic crisis struck the coal industry in 1927, Grand'Combe directors made the decision to dismiss 500 of its 'Arab' workers between November and January 1928.<sup>48</sup> In 1936, in contrast, companies turned to Algerian labour to fill the labour deficit left by new restrictions on working hours.<sup>49</sup> A 1937 productivity investigation conducted by the *Comité régional des houillères de l'arrondissement minéralogique d'Alès* reported that aside from 'a few professional miners' who secured outputs comparable to their European colleagues, the great majority were of rural origin with no mining experience, attaining only 60% of the average output, and thus could only be employed as *manœuvres*. Describing Algerian workers, the engineers compiling the report echoed the racist prejudices of contemporary immigration expert Georges Mauco, citing the 'clumsiness of their movements, or the slowness of their reflexes'.<sup>50</sup> The report also suggested that their 'instability' was down to the fact that Algerian migrants struggled to adapt to minework, 'or that they simply like change.'<sup>51</sup> Between June and December 1938, the Rochebelle company registered 149 new recruits from Algeria, while it lost 168, out of a total of 434 Algerian workers.<sup>52</sup> Initially hailing largely from Constantine, and Kabylia more broadly, and later in the 1930s from other parts of Algeria, it is important to

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<sup>47</sup> ADG 29/J/1, Bessèges register of Spanish and Italian Workers, 1930s.

<sup>48</sup> ADG 1/M/831, Unemployment report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 3 Nov. 1927.

<sup>49</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/154, Grand'Combe regional output questionnaire, Oct. 1937. Rolande Treppe puts this mass recourse to Algerians down to the 1932 laws restricting European migration to France, but in the Gard it appears to be part of a longer history, closely tied with the proximity of the coalfield to Marseille. See Treppe, *Les trois batailles du charbon (1936-1947)* (Paris: La Découverte, 1989), 110.

<sup>50</sup> ANMT 40/AS/48, Report on North African workforce Grand'Combe to CCHF, 30 Nov. 1937. On the racial science of Georges Mauco, see his own work, *Les Etrangers en France*, 268-73.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> ADG 25/J/72, Rochebelle Algerian workers log, 1938.

recognise that many of those who came to work in Alès were practising the *noria*, a process by which men worked temporarily in France in order to support their families and villages, who faced economic hardships in the 1920s.<sup>53</sup> Despite the structural function of their migration to France, it is clear that the Algerians occupied a subordinate position in terms of prestige, precarity, and autonomy.

Probing an individual biography helps to grasp the sporadic mobility that marked many European migrants' experiences of France. Attilio Francini, who in the 1970s would become general secretary of the International Union of Miners' Trade Unions in Prague, arrived in Trescol on 21 November 1923 at the age of three, along with his mother and two-year-old sister, to join his father who had fled Fascism in Italy. Between 1927 and 1930, the family moved to Vaulx-en-Velin on the outskirts of Lyon. In February 1930, the family returned to La Grand'Combe, before Attilio left again for three years of schooling in Avignon. In June 1936, he returned more definitively to the coalfield, and began work as a miner at Trescol.<sup>54</sup> This life account suggests the types of regional networks of movement established by Italian migrants, that earned them a local notoriety for '*la bougeotte* [fidgiting]'.<sup>55</sup> While official restrictions existed sought to confine migrants to a specific industry or even a specific department in February 1935, they still had ultimately more control over their movement than colonial workers.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, this mobility was not necessarily antithetical to the development of local links – Attilio Francini's trajectory from Italian rural life, through French cities to the Gard coalfield

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<sup>53</sup> Neil MacMaster, *Colonial Migrants and Racism: Algerians in France, 1900-62* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 38-74.

<sup>54</sup> Attilio Francini, 'Presentation of the author', *Le février '52 des mineurs en Cévennes* (Uzès: Imprimerie H. Peladan, 1982).

<sup>55</sup> Eckert, 'Une ville autrefois minière', 235.

<sup>56</sup> Jeanne Singer-Kérel, 'Foreign workers in France, 1891-1936' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 14.3 (1991), 286-9.

where he went on to become engaged in international communist trade unionism before returning to write about the region's industrial struggles demonstrates this.<sup>57</sup>

Companies sought to attract families to ensure the immediate and long-term social reproduction, alongside stability, of the workforce. In 1922, Grand'Combe advanced money to recently arrived 'good workers' from Spain and Italy so that they could bring their families to the coalfield.<sup>58</sup> Between 1928 and 1931, Rochebelle helped Polish miners to benefit from CCHF-organised and state-sponsored family reunification programmes.<sup>59</sup> By 1934, 60.2% of European adult migrants lived with families – around 75% of North Mediterraneans, and 50% for Poles and Czechoslovaks. Aside from a very select few, North Africans lived without families in the metropole.<sup>60</sup> In this way, companies assured the short-term and long-term social reproduction of the labour force, that is the quotidian tasks of cooking, cleaning, fire-maintenance, education, and reproduction.<sup>61</sup>

Natalist policies were key to this process. The Grand'Combe, Tréllys, and Nord d'Alais companies all granted family allowances for children living in France long before these were legislated in 1932.<sup>62</sup> Payments in the pay packets of the fathers of children under fourteen residing in France in 1933 at Nord d'Alais rose from 1fr20 per day for the first child, to an additional 1fr60 for the second, and 1fr90 more for any further offspring, resulting in the company spending 3.85% of its total wage bill on family allowances in

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<sup>57</sup> Maitron notice, Attilio Francini, by Jean-Pierre Besse, 2 Apr. 2009, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article49695>, accessed 13 Sept. 2024.

<sup>58</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe director to engineer des Fosseuz, 9 Mar. 1922.

<sup>59</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, Ch.10. ADG 25/J/70, Letter Rochebelle Directors requesting family reunification forms, 19 May 1931; Letter Rochebelle Directors to CCHF Foreign Personnel Service, 11 June 1931. There were also efforts to introduce the families of recently arrived Czech workers, such as Piotr Hodura and Michal Gzyczka, ADG 25/J/70, Letter Rochebelle Director to Prefect, 9 May 1931.

<sup>60</sup> Sugier, 'Immigration Européenne', 270.

<sup>61</sup> See Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentring oppression* (London: Pluto, 2017).

<sup>62</sup> At Grand'Combe they began in 1910. See Archives nationales (hereafter AN) F/22/1568, Letter Grand'Combe request for private family allowance service, 19 July 1933. At Nord d'Alais they began in 1915, see AN F/22/1568, Nord d'Alais Company Family Allowances Report, 3 May 1933.

1934.<sup>63</sup> The increases in allowances for additional children demonstrates its natalist purpose to incentivise generational reproduction, while its inclusion in the pay packet of the working man reinforced male domination. Its insistence upon residence in France also indicates an attempt to create a ‘pull’ factor towards the coalfield that de facto included those European families who could migrate to France while excluding Algerian families who despite living in ‘France’ were not entitled to the payment.<sup>64</sup>

While it is difficult to ascertain precise figures, it is clear that many migrant women engaged in waged labour alongside their unpaid domestic work. The 1874 prohibition of women from underground mining work significantly restricted women’s opportunities for employment and exacerbated their dependency on men.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, it was customary for unmarried young women and widows to work for the companies as *placières*, cleaning and sorting coal on the surface.<sup>66</sup> Interviewed by local historian Jacky Nicolas, an Italian woman named Therèse whose family had come from the sulphur mines of Sicily, did this work that she recalled as ‘exhausting’ from the age of fourteen until she married.<sup>67</sup> This role has been described by historian Francesca Sanna as ‘point zero of the hierarchy’ of the mine, with a woman’s presence there indicating the ‘economic malaise’ of their family.<sup>68</sup> At Grand’Combe in March 1928, foreigners made up 5% of the female surface workforce, a figure that rose to 10% in December 1929, reflecting the

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<sup>63</sup> AN F/22/1568, Nord d’Alais Company Family Allowances Report, 3 May 1933; AN F/22/1568, Nord d’Alais Family Allowances Report, 6 Aug. 1934.

<sup>64</sup> Caroline Izambert, ‘La régularité du séjour des étrangers en France: frontière du projet d’universalisation de la protection sociale?’ *Revue française des affaires sociales* 4 (2018), 23; Hugo Mulonnière, ‘Protéger les «Nord-Africains» en métropole’, 104.

<sup>65</sup> Marnix Dressen, ‘La femme, le mineur et la compagnie’ *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 14/15 (1986), 117-28.

<sup>66</sup> This was the case for Élie Duguet’s aunt, for example, see *Le Chemin de l’Arbousset, les luttes des gueules noires en Cévennes* (Nîmes: Colporteur, 1991), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Médiathèque municipale d’Alès 331.7/NIC, Jacky Nicolas, *Il était une fois... des placières* (2013), 240-1.

<sup>68</sup> Francesca Sanna, ‘La famille et l’OST: effets divergents de la rationalisation dans l’industrie minière de l’Europe du Sud pendant l’entre-deux-guerres’ *The Historical Review* 15 (2018), 77-80.

comparatively lower rates of working-age migrant women.<sup>69</sup> Elsewhere, some women took employment in other industries, such as textiles in Bessèges.<sup>70</sup> Harder still to capture in the archives is the common practice of women – including, one might surmise, migrant women – leaving the coalfield during the summer to harvest grapes in the ‘low countries’ of the Gard and Provence.<sup>71</sup>

Some women also took on their own commercial ventures.<sup>72</sup> Licensing records reveal for example that thirty-eight-year-old Polish mother of four Maria Sojka, who had lived in various areas of France (Calvados, Drocourt, Béthune, Liévin, then Saint-Étienne for six years), took over the café *La Poste* in Gagnières from Denise Durand in November 1938.<sup>73</sup> That same month, recently married sixteen-year-old Héléne Adamczyk who had arrived in France at the age of three applied to run a *débit de boissons* previously managed by Giovanni Tomasi in Molières-sur-Cèze.<sup>74</sup> While regrettably fragmentary – only license requests from 1938 survive in the archives – these transfers reveal how a small minority migrant women exercised a certain degree of economic autonomy by managing businesses tied to the habits of coalfield consumption.

Prostitution is another form of labour faintly perceptible in administrative archives. In a coalfield with high rates of single men, it appears that women of different origins sold sex. In July 1927, the Polish consul in Marseille wrote to the Gard Prefect requesting information on where Poles could access free sexual health screening.<sup>75</sup> Despite very fragmentary evidence, it appears that migrants were not only customers. In

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<sup>69</sup> ADG 18/J/114, Grand’Combe engineer workforce reports: 27 Mar. 1928; 31 Dec. 1929.

<sup>70</sup> ADG 1/M/827, Report on textile strike Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 18 Mar. 1931.

<sup>71</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 52.

<sup>72</sup> On foreign commerce, see Claire Zalc, *Melting shops: Une histoire des commerçants étrangers en France* (Paris: Perrin, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> ADG 7/U/7/91, Report Bessèges gendarmes on transfer of cafe from Duand to Sojka, 21 Nov. 1938.

<sup>74</sup> ADG 7/U/7/91, Report Molières-sur-Cèze gendarmes report on licence, 22 Nov. 1938.

<sup>75</sup> ADG 5/M/153, Letter Polish consul to Prefect, 5 July 1927.

1934, the Alès Sub-Prefect wrote to the local police commissioner insisting that the employment in sex work of ‘foreign national women or minors must be strictly forbidden.’<sup>76</sup> Throughout the interwar period, migrant men continued to encounter women in brothels. In November 1937, La Grand’Combe mayor Soustelle wrote to the local police to report that three Algerian men had been infected with a venereal disease after having sex with a nineteen-year-old sex worker from the Bas-Rhin at the establishment *Au lapin mort*.<sup>77</sup> Sex, whether directly or indirectly remunerated, was fundamental to women’s experiences of labour.

The interwar Gard coalfield thus employed a diverse, variegated, and constantly changing population. The labour milieu consisted of companies with their own different and changing workforces, each marked by differences of experience. Levels of stability, mobility, precarity, and the work available to inhabitants were determined by mining experience, national status, race, and gender.

### **Rationalising the Extraction Process**

The period during which migrants arrived en masse in the Gard coincided with significant changes to the extraction process. In the case of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Philip Slaby has sought to establish that the presence of Polish migrants did not impede mechanisation.<sup>78</sup> But rather than a concern for causality, what interests us is an empirical understanding of how rationalisation was experienced by the diverse population of the Gard. Examining different perspectives on rationalisation and its effects on the organisation of the labour process and on the working environment enables us to explore the material implications

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<sup>76</sup> ADG 1/Z/61, Letter Sub-Prefect to police commissioner, 26 Apr. 1934. On freedom of movement and prostitution, see Elisa Camiscioli, *Selling French sex: prostitution, trafficking, and global migrations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 33-39.

<sup>77</sup> ADG 1/Z/106, Letter Soustelle to Sub-Prefect, 3 Nov. 1937.

<sup>78</sup> Slaby, ‘Industry, the state, and immigrant Poles’, 86-120.

of ‘mastery over nature’ for the workers most intimately involved in the labour process.<sup>79</sup>

In this way, our analysis contributes to the migration history of interwar France through an insistence on the materiality and experience of the changing workplace.

For much of the 1920s extraction was essentially executed by small teams using small amounts of explosives and pick axes in restricted galleries who enjoyed considerable autonomy, with the mining labour process was divided into specialist roles.<sup>80</sup> Étienne Fléchon – an Occitan-speaking social Catholic from Provence who saw himself as culturally closer to the workers than other supervisors who largely hailed from northern France – noted that mining had changed little since the late nineteenth century when he arrived at Grand’Combe in 1927.<sup>81</sup> By December, however, Fléchon was made aware of the intensification of competition at the coalfield (from Rochebelle in particular), national, and international levels that demanded higher productivity. At Grand’Combe, the goal was to achieve output levels of 1,000kg per worker per day without raising wages, in order to ‘pay out dividends to the shareholders’.<sup>82</sup> To achieve this, Gard companies joined enterprises elsewhere in France in mechanising, deploying stronger explosions underground to create longwall galleries, and developing new means of disciplining their workforces.<sup>83</sup> Modernisation was thus about finding new ways to push the earth and workers, with competition and profit pushing forward the ‘forcing’ tendency of extractive capitalism outlined by Cabot.<sup>84</sup> These methods created a more toxic,

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<sup>79</sup> On labour environments, see Nicolas Hatzfeld, ‘Travailleurs, cadre de vie, sante et progrès. La formation à l’*Humanité* d’une perspective socialiste (1909-1914)’ *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d’histoire intellectuelle* 41.1 (2023), 122-5; Lorenzo Feltrin and Devi Saccheto, ‘The work-technology nexus and working-class environmentalism: workerism versus capitalist noxiousness in Italy’s Long 1968’ *Theory and Society* 50 (2021), 815-35. On mastering nature, Conus and Escudier, ‘Sécurité et transformations du système productif’, 70.

<sup>80</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/132, Letter Grand’Combe Levade engineer to Delegate Engineer, 5 June 1920.

<sup>81</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 29.

<sup>82</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 39.

<sup>83</sup> Odette Hardy-Hémery, ‘Rationalisation technique et rationalisation du travail’, 63-99.

<sup>84</sup> Cabot, ‘Écopolitiques ouvrières’ 19-21.

dangerous, and physically onerous working environment, with marked differences of experience depending on job role and origin.

Companies portrayed mechanisation as the primary driver of rationalisation. Spurred by the technological optimism garnered in the *Revue de l'Industrie Minérale*, Grand'Combe electrified surface transport at one of its pits and modestly introduced some longwall faces following the Great War, and Bessèges's Molières pit went from sixteen pneumatic drills in 1918 to fifty-two in 1922.<sup>85</sup> In the *livre d'or* that celebrated the company's centenary in 1936, Grand'Combe vaunted its pioneering of block caving by which explosions intentionally collapsed empty parts of the gallery in order to reach more faces, longwall galleries, the 'generalised' presence of pneumatic drills, the mechanisation of transport, and the ventilation of galleries.<sup>86</sup> This public-relations document – distributed to shareholders and clients – gave the impression of a sanitised, modern, rational underground, where machines extracted coal and produced value. Internal engineering reports nuance however this public image, registering large increases in machinery only from 1936 (particularly a 50% increase in the number of pneumatic drills from 1936 to mid-1937 for just a 5% increase in personnel).<sup>87</sup> These statistics and their representation suggest that Conus and Escudier were correct to identify the interwar period as one of heightened mechanisation, from which they argue flowed an improvement in working conditions.<sup>88</sup> But this claim requires careful attention as to how rationalisation sought to increase productivity from earth and worker.

The principal change during the period was the shift from small gallery mining with small-scale explosives to longwall extraction. This move from autonomous work

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<sup>85</sup> Sugier, *Mineurs des Cévennes*, vol.2, 348-9.

<sup>86</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/185, La Compagnie de la Grand'Combe, *Livre d'Or de La Compagnie des mines de la Grand'Combe, 1836-1936* (Étampes, 1936), 27.

<sup>87</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/154, Grand'Combe Regional output inquiry, 27 Oct. 1937.

<sup>88</sup> Conus and Escudier, 'Sécurité et transformations du système productif', 65-70.

groups to a more easily surveilled mass system refashioned the work environment to achieve heightened productivity, while also increasing levels of toxicity and danger. Of course, workers, companies, and public authorities had long been aware of the toxicity of mining.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the specificities of the interwar rationalisation push. Miners working *au rocher* – in the detonation of explosions to carve out new areas for extraction – were essential to rationalisation, and suffered direct embodied consequences. Prior to longwall exploitation, these experienced workers' explosives were restricted to specific galleries where the high presence of coal was noted. What changed during the late 1920s was that their explosions increasingly targeted areas with lower concentrations of coal.<sup>90</sup> While speeding up extraction, this refashioning of the working environment increased workers' exposure to a range of dust and gases, prompting concern from some medical professionals. Two such doctors, Policard and Garin, visited Bessèges in 1932 to test the lungs of miners who had worked *au rocher*, advocating for their removal to surface roles to avoid the development of grave lung problems.<sup>91</sup>

Experienced mineworkers from eastern Europe were often involved in this refashioning of the working environment. Living in the Gard with his wife Marianne and their two children, Stanislas Janas had worked first at Rochebelle for three years and the Nord d'Alais mines for another four when he began to experience 'feelings of suffocation' and lost appetite in late 1933. In an attempt to win compensation, he declared before the *juge de la paix* [justice of the peace] in east Alès, 'I attribute this to the dusty atmosphere

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<sup>89</sup> Cabot, 'Écopolitiques ouvrières', Ch.2.

<sup>90</sup> Flechon, *Trente ans de fond*, 65. This was a move common to mining contexts in advanced capitalist economies, see Logan Hovis and Jeremy Mouat, 'Mines, Engineers, and the Transformation of Work in the Western Mining Industry, 1880-1930' *Technology and Culture* 37.3 (1996), 435-41.

<sup>91</sup> Archives municipales d'Alès 45/L/1, Report Dr Magnin on visit of Poincard and Garin to Bessèges, 24 Jan. 1932.

and the acid of the site in which I worked.’<sup>92</sup> While his demand for reparations did not fall under the procedure for workplace accident claims (which forms the object of Chapter Two of this thesis), Janas pronounced a clear understanding of how his labour environment had degraded his health. This represents a concrete historical example of what Stefania Barca has entitled ‘working class ecology’, with workers intimately aware of being at the interface between the geological, the physiological, and the social.<sup>93</sup> This claim was corroborated by Dr Naud, who declared that he had ‘seen on many occasions that workers “*ayant fait le rocher*” contracted tuberculosis’.<sup>94</sup> The Janas-Naud claim was not an isolated case. In 1935, the Polish miner Francois Ostrazeck, who had worked in various southern French mines since 1925, made a similar complaint to the same *juge de la paix*. Another local doctor, Astier, diagnosed him with silicosis, and declared him unfit for underground work.<sup>95</sup> This evinces the toxicity of new methods, and demonstrates that workers, including experienced migrants, intimately experienced the dangers they posed. As Rosental and Devinck have examined, the mid-1930s saw an intensification of interest in silicosis in France, with employers seeking to ‘sow doubt’ about its relation to minework.<sup>96</sup> The links drawn by the two Poles between their working environments and bodily harm intervened in these debates from the margins, and blamed new extraction methods.

Rationalisation created noxious environments for all who worked underground. Grand’Combe engineer Fléchon evoked in his memoirs a picture of a working environment unrecognisable from the sanitised image conveyed by his employer.

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<sup>92</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Janas, Procès-verbal d’enquête sur l’accident (hereafter PVEA), 22 Nov. 1934.

<sup>93</sup> Barca, ‘Sur l’écologie de la classe ouvrière’, 24.

<sup>94</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Janas, Letter from Dr Naud, 30 May 1934.

<sup>95</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Ostrazeck, PVEA, 28 Nov. 1935.

<sup>96</sup> Jean-Claude Devinck and Paul-André Rosental, ‘« Une maladie sociale avec des aspects médicaux »: difficile reconnaissance de la silicose comme maladie professionnelle dans la France du premier XXe siècle’ *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 56.1 (2009), 109-117.

Describing the work process that comprised skilled miners at the coalface with pneumatic drills and their *manœuvres* loading coal and backfill into different wagons and transporting them, he wrote of how the machines' through their releasing of dust created an 'atmosphere so thickened' that it posed 'new and grave risk' to those working the galleries.<sup>97</sup> The insufficient ventilation of galleries exacerbated this state of affairs. At Fontanes pit (Rochebelle), the co-presence of dust and carbonic acid prompted the local communist publication *L'Emancipateur* to charge that *manœuvres* struggled to load their wagons due to difficulties breathing.<sup>98</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* had signalled earlier in the decade that this atmospheric noxiousness was particularly notable at a workstation occupied uniquely by Poles, where temperatures were 'unbearable'.<sup>99</sup> Rudimentary protection against dust in the form of a wet sponge to be held in workers' mouths were quickly jettisoned in practice given that they 'suffocated' them.<sup>100</sup> Thus, Fléchon's reflections and the communist press held the modernisation process' techniques, that purposefully destabilised at greater rates the dust and rock held in the walls of the galleries in order to accelerate extraction, as responsible for increasing workplace noxiousness.<sup>101</sup>

As well as the direct consequence of rationalisation techniques, the unsanitary working environment was driven by the prioritization of profit over hygiene measures. An epidemic in the mid-1930s at migrant-majority Rochebelle provides an insight into such working conditions. Back in 1907, doctors Weinberg and Leger had discovered that 73.8% of the company's workers were infected with hookworms during an epidemic that

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<sup>97</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 137.

<sup>98</sup> *L'Emancipateur*, Jan. 1936.

<sup>99</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 15 Aug. 1931. Gaillard notes in his thesis comments by company directors that the mines of the Gard rose to particularly high temperatures. See Gaillard, 'Un exemple français', 178-9.

<sup>100</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 113-33.

saw 12% of mineworkers in the Gard suffer from the illness.<sup>102</sup> Rochebelle's communist press material denounced the 'insalubrious' conditions that persisted over the subsequent decades. In 1930, underground workers were 'obliged to work up to their knees' in water, 'drenched all day', with 'no single measure taken to isolate them from water', giving way to 'rheumatisms, bronchitis', while 'capitalist rationalisation' demanded more output.<sup>103</sup> Denunciations became demands the following year, with *La Tribune des Mineurs* calling for thigh-high rubber boots for workers in concerned galleries to avoid the contraction of 'all sorts of illnesses'.<sup>104</sup> In 1937, Dr. Maurice Quet led an epidemiological study into an outbreak of Weil's disease, of which Fontanes pit (Rochebelle) was the epicentre. As well as noting the 'poorly drained' status of the pit, Quet's inquest unveiled two other health risks related to the management of underground space that led to 11% of Fontanes workers being diagnosed with Weil's.<sup>105</sup> First, a majority of those interviewed declared that they regularly drank water from the mine, in the absence of safe drinking water. Second, due to eight-hour shift patterns, miners were obliged to bring their food underground with them in baskets that often did not fully close.<sup>106</sup> By consequence, 90% of those interviewed had had their food sullied by rats, putting them at direct risk of the contraction of Weil's. The lack of measures to mitigate this insalubrious working environment thus had direct physical consequences for the disproportionately foreign underground workers of Rochebelle.

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<sup>102</sup> Gaillard, 'Un exemple français', 180. On the management of this epidemic at the European level, see Cabot, 'Écopolitiques ouvrières', Ch.3.

<sup>103</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 29 July 1930.

<sup>104</sup> *La Tribune des Mineurs du Gard*, Aug. 1930.

<sup>105</sup> Maurice Quet, *Une épidémie minière de spirochétose ictéro-hémorragique à Alès* (Montpellier: Imprimerie Mari-Lavit, 1937), 12. For a history of Weil's, see: Yuzuru Kobayashi, 'Discovery of the causative organism of Weil's disease: historical view' *Journal of Infection and Chemotherapy* 7.1 (2001), 10-15.

<sup>106</sup> Quet, *Une épidémie minière*, 84-5.

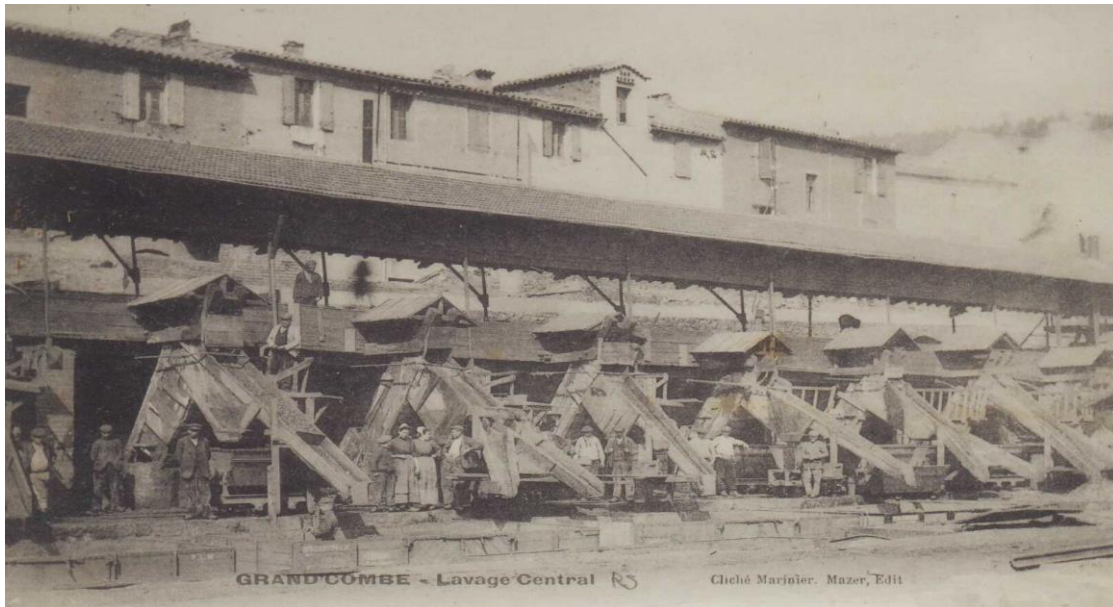


Figure 1-8 AMA 5/Fi/GC26, Women and men at the cleaning stations of Grand'Combe, undated

The ills of rationalisation were not confined to the underground working environment. Surface tasks including transporting coal wagons brought up from below, of sorting coal, and washing it had their own disadvantages. Communist publications denounced ‘abuses’, such as the fact that the *placière* women, generally under the age of twenty, carried bags of pit props weighing up to eighty kilograms.<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, the migrant workers who toiled alongside these women were – according to Grand'Combe's directors – confined to the most physically taxing roles: ‘removal of ash from the boilers, cleaning silt basins, carrying heavy weights, unloading waste rock’.<sup>108</sup> All of these tasks suggest that rationalisation did little to alleviate exposure to dirt and physical strain for those at the bottom of the mining hierarchy. Similarly, there was little protection for surface workers from intemperate weather both in winter and summer. While certain areas for surface work were covered, many were exposed to the elements. Both Trélys and Rochebelle's local communist newspapers complained of the lack of shelter for the ‘sans-

<sup>107</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 10 Nov. 1928.

<sup>108</sup> ADG 4/M/611, Letter Grand'Combe director Bonnevey to Prefect, 13 Dec. 1931.

*abris*' surface workers in the cold rain of January.<sup>109</sup> Physical toil and hostile conditions resulted from an interaction of the social and the environmental on the surface, too.

The atmosphere of rationalisation was also constituted by keener attempts to control worker output and effort. In a response to a questionnaire from state engineers in August 1928, engineers from Grand'Combe reported on the 'reestablishment of *ardeur* [effort] at work', setting out how 'management [had] treated the stimulation of hard work as an object of constant concern' with the employment of new surveillance techniques.<sup>110</sup> Francesca Sanna has detailed the complex psycho-physiological sciences of productivity that constituted the 'scientific management of labour' practiced by the Peñarroya company in southern European mines.<sup>111</sup> While the surviving archives of the Gard companies, including the well-conserved ones of Grand'Combe, reveal no such precision in efforts to boost productivity, their underlying ambition was the same.

New workers arriving in this dangerous labour milieu were not supplied with official training before beginning work to aid with their output.<sup>112</sup> While some migrants may have had prior mining experience, this was far from universal. Whereas local recruits typically learned on the job from the age of fourteen and began in less exigent posts such as lamp-carrying, employers expected migrants to be productive from the outset.<sup>113</sup> It is true that new recruits signed a health and safety document on arrival at Grand'Combe, but migrants often claimed they had not understood what they were signing when later

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<sup>109</sup> *Le Marteau-Piqueur*, 1930; *La Gueule Noire*, 25 Jan. 1930.

<sup>110</sup> ADG 18/J/114, Grand'Combe engineers' response to questionnaire, 30 Aug. 1928.

<sup>111</sup> William Schneider, 'The Scientific Study of Labor in Interwar France' *French Historical Studies* 17.2 (1991), 410-46; Francesca Sanna, 'Rationaliser le corps au travail en milieu minier: le cas de la Compagnie Minière et Métallurgique de Peñarroya pendant l'entre-deux-guerres' in Thierry Arnal, Corine Maitte, Thierry Pillon, Didier Terrier (eds.), *Le corps au travail. Performance, discipline, fatigue* (Palermo: New Digital Frontiers, 2021), 193-210.

<sup>112</sup> This again contradicts the image conveyed in Conus and Escudier, 'Sécurité et transformations du système productif', 68.

<sup>113</sup> Élie Duguet, *Le chemin de l'Arbousset: Les luttes des « gueules noires » en Cévennes* (Nîmes: Colporteur, 1991), 48.

caught infringing rules.<sup>114</sup> It was not until the nationalisation of the mines in 1946 that systematic training was implemented, focusing on ‘working conditions, tool usage, and the essential principles of security.’<sup>115</sup>

Companies sought to force greater effort from their workers through a new pay regime, strict timekeeping, and the surveillance of output. At Fontanes (Rochebelle), ‘the rise in production is constant and ceaseless, it is not only through *machinisme* [mechanism, or mechanisation] that this result is obtained’, claimed communist pit paper *La Gueule Noire* in 1930.<sup>116</sup> Rather, ‘the principal cause of increased production [was] the payment of three francs per wagon’.<sup>117</sup> Since 1919, a collective bargaining agreement had fixed a minimum wage in mining, the introduction of individualised piece-rates on top of this base rate represented an employer reaction in favour of incentivising extraction.<sup>118</sup> Grand’Combe subscribed to the Bedaux system that pretended a more scientific and objective approach to inciting productivity, but its goals and experience by workers broadly differed little from the approach at Rochebelle.<sup>119</sup> While Grand’Combe’s engineers saw the system as a fair way to ‘incite the most able and strongest workers to their full potential yield’, *La Gueule Noire* saw it as unfairly advantaging workers working galleries that would shed coal more easily.<sup>120</sup> This individualisation of pay was a typical rationalisation measure of the interwar period, critiqued by the communists at Rochebelle as extracting from the workers ‘overproduction beyond their strength’.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> See for example the cases of Karol Kapciak (8 May 1930) and Mohamed Metja (2 Sept. 1930) who were caught smoking underground. The latter claimed not to have understood a health and safety statement he signed on his day of recruitment. ADG 18/J/144, Engineers’ reports, 1930.

<sup>115</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 193.

<sup>116</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 25 Jan. 1930.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> On the fixed minimum wage set-up, see Conus and Escudier, ‘Sécurité et transformations’, 68.

<sup>119</sup> Trempé, *Les trois batailles*, 159.

<sup>120</sup> ADG 18/J/114, Grand’Combe engineers’ response to questionnaire, 30 Aug. 1928; *La Gueule Noire*, 25 Jan. 1930.

<sup>121</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 29 July 1930.

Critique about the bodily impact of pay scales was not confined to the communist press. In a 1942 investigation into silicosis in the Gard, Dr. Roger Chabot made the link between this system and the toxic atmosphere in which effort was demanded, recording that piece-rate workers breathed ‘even more violently because they want[ed] to work quickly in order to earn more’, thereby increasing their risk of lung disease.<sup>122</sup> Forcing more effort out of workers through a pay-scale regime thus had marked, physical consequences for workers’ bodies and increased their level of environmental exposure.

Piece-rates were established at the beginning of work in a gallery, and could represent a site of struggle. At Grand’Combe, the amount of coal extracted during the first shifts on a new gallery determined the piece-rate, leaving the possibility of worker collusion to ‘moderate their effort’ – in the words of Fléchon – in order to secure a better price.<sup>123</sup> Yet, piece-rates were not necessarily always respected by employers. During a shift early in Élie Duguet’s underground career, he and another young colleague enthusiastically extracted a considerable amount of coal but were met with refusal from their *maître-mineur* to pay the initially agreed rate. In his memoirs, he recalled how his father had told him, in Occitan, ‘we must work, but not work ourselves to death’.<sup>124</sup> Through covert practice, some workers mitigated these pay-conditioned demands on their bodies.

The surveillance of workers sought to eliminate such moderation by forcing constant effort and setting precedents of exemplary shifts. Whereas prior to longwall mining surveillance had been difficult, the new configuration of underground space – with extraction now occurring in galleries of 60-100m – meant that surveillance personnel

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<sup>122</sup> Roger Chabot, ‘Contribution à l’Étude de la Silicose dans le Bassin Houiller du Gard’ (PhD Dissertation Université de Montpellier, 1942), 56.

<sup>123</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 139.

<sup>124</sup> Duguet, *Le chemin de l’Arbousset*, 61.

could monitor the output of more workers at once.<sup>125</sup> Evidence from Rochebelle indicates that migrants faced discriminatory suspicion from engineers regarding their willingness to work. On 27 April 1931, regional communist newspaper *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* reported, an engineer in the third section at Fontanes followed three Polish workers and one Spaniard for an entire shift, ‘pushing them in their tasks, this prison master (*garde-chiourme*) succeeded in making them extract 45 wagons-worth of coal’. Surveillance of this kind suggests a suspicion on the part of management that foreign workers were not giving the full effort that rationalisation required of them. *Le Travailleur* qualified this strategy as a form of disciplinarian scientific management with repercussions for the entire workforce: ‘[this] little experiment will enable the exploiters to demand the same from all miners, with the threat of a fine or suspension.’<sup>126</sup> Supervisory discipline was thus a fundamental feature of rationalisation’s exigencies.

Control over worktime represented an equally important feature of rationalisation, with material and symbolic significance. At Bessèges in 1931, the communist press accused supervisory staff of inventing a ‘new trick’ of time discipline that kept workers in the toxic and dangerous underground as long as possible. At the end of the shift, they would have work teams walk ‘baby steps’ behind them, ‘with a watch in their hand, controlling the pace so as to avoid arriving too early’ at the exit.<sup>127</sup> *La Tribune des Mineurs* denounced new means of ensuring that miners kept extracting until the end of their shift as encapsulating ‘rationalisation in a capitalist regime: all the struggles, overwork, and working conditions that only worsen.’<sup>128</sup> This strategy of *chronométrage* was a cornerstone of rationalisation, and was one of the most frequent sources of complaint by

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<sup>125</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 135.

<sup>126</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 9 May 1931.

<sup>127</sup> *La Tribune des Mineurs du Gard*, Oct. 1931.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

workers about the managerial discipline of industrial capitalism in twentieth-century France and elsewhere.<sup>129</sup>

The push for production encouraged a deployment of discipline that particularly targeted migrants. At Broussous (Trélys) in early April 1930, supervisors punished an Algerian miner and his French colleague for failing to chain a recently filled wagon to the rest that were ready to go to the surface. According to the local pit publication *Le Marteau Piqueur*, the latter was demoted, while the former was sacked on the spot.<sup>130</sup> The fact that the colonial worker received harsher punishment than the Frenchman is indicative of how discipline interacted with a broader system of labour racialisation.

The supervisors at Rochebelle's Fontanes pit – already infamous for its toxic environment and poor working conditions – earned further notoriety for their violent discipline. There, the communist press denounced an engineer in May 1931 for physically attacking a Polish worker and firing another who had criticised the labour conditions.<sup>131</sup> On 7 August 1931, one Polish man at Fontanes vociferously expressed his discontent at his working environment and conditions. The following day, the company guard evicted him from their accommodation, his wife, and their six-week-old baby, even moving their furniture into the street.<sup>132</sup> Later in the decade, the foreman Bazalgette was fined 800fr by a court for having strangled Spanish worker Tonio and subsequently found himself accused of striking another Polish worker, an action that won him the epithet of exercising 'Hitlerian authority' in the communist press.<sup>133</sup> Alongside the effects of new extraction

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<sup>129</sup> Francesca Sanna, 'La famille et l'OST', 59; Eric Geerkens, René Leboutte, and Arnaud Peters, 'Le travail des ouvriers mineurs en Belgique (ca.1830-1930)' *Revue du Nord* 435 (2020), 302-3; Stéphane Sirot, *La grève en France. Une histoire sociale* (Paris: O. Jacob, 2002), 77; Antoine Prost, 'Les grèves de mai-juin revisitées' *Le Mouvement social* 200 (2002), 44; Rolande Trempé, *Les Trois Batailles du charbon*, 145.

<sup>130</sup> *Le Marteau Piqueur*, Apr. 1930.

<sup>131</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 30 May 1931.

<sup>132</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 15 Aug. 1931.

<sup>133</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 25 Apr. 1934; *Le Cri du Gard*, 17 Apr. 1937. On supervisor discipline, see Bart Delbroek, 'Porions and Conducteurs: Supervisory Functions in the Belgian Limburg Coal-Mining

methods producing toxic work environments and the organisation of work pushing workers to exert greater effort, labour discipline represented an important feature of the experience of rationalisation, especially for migrants.

### **Hierarchy and Cooperation in the Mining Workplace**

In interviews with Gard coalfield inhabitants during the 1980s, anthropologist Cornelia Eckert recorded an overarching sense of solidarity in these working environments, where dust meant that ‘everyone was black’ and hard work meant that newcomers ‘easily integrated’.<sup>134</sup> As exposed in the Introduction, this interpretation reflects assumptions about mining that have since been problematised. To begin to grapple with this important qualitative question, a set of smaller empirical interrogations are necessary. Namely, who worked with whom, where, and under what forms of relational conditions?

The experience of the Great War and its immediate aftermath would suggest that the Gard experienced segregation in the same vein as the Nord-Pas-de-Calais.<sup>135</sup> Fabrice Sugier notes that ‘separation existed in the workplace’, with Grand’Combe and other companies seeking to maintain self-contained ethnic teams in the early 1920s.<sup>136</sup> No company records on the quantitative configuration of working teams appear to have survived. Even the fact that Bessèges employed a mixture of French, Polish, and Czechoslovaks underground and French and Algerians overground in 1927 reveals little about how work teams actually functioned.<sup>137</sup> In December 1931, Bonnevey of Grand’Combe reported that 39% of the company’s underground workforce was foreign or North African, and would be ‘impossible to replace’ given their low-status underground

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Industry (1917-1939)’ in Patricia Van den Eeckhout (ed.), *Supervision and Authority in Industry: Western European Experiences, 1830-1939* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 202.

<sup>134</sup> Eckert, ‘Une ville autrefois minière’, 233.

<sup>135</sup> Slaby, ‘Industry, the state and immigrant Poles’, 119-20.

<sup>136</sup> Sugier, *Mineurs des Cévennes*, vol.2, 387.

<sup>137</sup> ADG 1/M/830, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 7 Sept. 1927.

*manœuvre* roles, given that ‘French workers [were] increasingly losing affection for the mine’.<sup>138</sup> This resulted in migrants constituting over 55% of the underground workforce at Rochebelle and 45% of that at Tréllys (but only 26% of that at Bessèges) in September 1932.<sup>139</sup> The revelation that French citizens turned away from the dangerous underground during the period of rationalisation suggests that this labour market change had socio-environmental drivers. On the surface, foreign and North African workers completed the tasks that ‘repulsed’ French workers, who instead in their majority occupied specialised roles (with just thirteen ‘foreigners’ and two North Africans occupying these roles alongside 1298 French in 1932).<sup>140</sup> These fragmentary statistics suggest an environmentally mediated differences in experiences of work, but leave open the questions of work teams and qualitative relations within them.

Workers’ testimonies before the *juge de la paix* of their commune regarding workplace accidents provide novel insights into the experience of work. In cases relating to four of the mines of the region – those at Grand’Combe, Rochebelle, Nord d’Alais, and Bessèges – work teams, deduced from the combinations of witnesses and victims called to court, were in their vast majority inter-ethnic.<sup>141</sup> This, taken alongside a lack of any indication of ethnic segregation in employer archives, indicates regular workplace interaction between people of different origins during the period of rationalisation.

In terms of labour hierarchy, a three-tiered system essentially operated in the distribution of roles within the mines. The essential division was between *manœuvre*, *mineur*, and *chef de poste* or other denominations of supervisor. In the workplace accidents sample, 14% of French workers were *manœuvres*, with all but one being under

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<sup>138</sup> ADG 4/M/611, Letter Grand’Combe director Bonnevey to Prefect, 13 Dec. 1931.

<sup>139</sup> AMA 21/L/1, Questionnaire Comité Régional des Houillères de l’Arrondissement minéralogique d’Alès to CCHF, Sept. 1932.

<sup>140</sup> AMA 21/L/1, Personnel table Comité Régional, undated.

<sup>141</sup> Sample 1925-39, taken from ADG 7/U/8/2-ADG 7/U/8/19.

the age of 21. Such rates were significantly higher for the European migrant groups. 70% of Spaniards, 60% of Italians, and 56% of Poles were listed as *manœuvres* by the *juge de la paix*, the differential indicating the relatively higher levels of experience possessed by Polish migrants. Algerians were far more likely to be found in this position, with fewer than 20% of workers recorded of this origin being named as *mineur*.<sup>142</sup> While prudence should be maintained given that *manœuvres* might be more exposed to accidents and therefore overrepresented, a 1937 report suggests that the figure of 20% is in fact inflated, recording that just 10% of Algerians held positions above *manœuvre*.<sup>143</sup> This distribution is testament to a tiered hierarchy within the labour force, only slightly less strictly defined by colonial status than that operating in the mines of colonised Algeria.<sup>144</sup> This situates the ethnic organisation of labour within a broader twentieth-century history of mining and coloniality.<sup>145</sup> At the same time, given that *manœuvres* worked with *mineurs*, Algerians and other migrants were not segregated into separate teams, but rather were involved in daily interactions with Europeans and French citizens. If Stovall has suggested that Algerians remained ‘at the margins’ of the French working class, the mines of the Gard were nevertheless a site of daily contact.<sup>146</sup>

In theory, the determining element in the *mineur-manœuvre* relationship was that the former hewed coal from the face while the latter hauled (sorted and transported) it, while also aiding the former in any required task. In reality, underground work during the 1930s involved far more cooperation and blurred lines. Often, *manœuvres* would manage double workloads by completing their own work and helping their *mineur* simultaneously.

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> ANMT 40/AS/48, Report on North African workforce Grand’Combe to CCHF, 30 Nov. 1937.

<sup>144</sup> Annick Lacroix, ‘L’Etat social en question dans l’Algérie colonisée. Fonctionnaires des mines et salariés accidentés (années 1900-années 1930)’ *Le Mouvement social* 282 (2023), 89-91.

<sup>145</sup> See for example the recent article comparing Central Africa and Japan: Money and The, ‘Race at Work’, 1-18.

<sup>146</sup> Stovall, ‘Travailleurs de couleur’, 270.

This was the case for José Guzman at Nord d'Alais, who was instructed by a *chef de poste* to help his *mineur* Louis Cerpedes install a ventilator while attempting to hold a wagon steady.<sup>147</sup> But *mineurs* would also regularly aid their *manœuvres* in their tasks of filling wagons, as Gombar did for his French colleague's *manœuvre* at Rochebelle, or Miquel Sicilia did for his own *manœuvre* Celedonio Garzon at Nord d'Alais.<sup>148</sup> These cases undermine any notion of rigidly divided tasks within a team. Moreover, there was frequent cooperation between *manœuvres* working for different miners, who would often aid each other when transportation technology faltered. It appears that this was particularly the case for foreign *manœuvres*, who often aided their younger French counterparts with the physically demanding tasks of pushing or re-railing wagons – both Mohand Boukhezar and Alfred Proska reported having done so in court.<sup>149</sup> This is particularly striking given that pay was tied to individual output. These everyday instances of mutual support were part of underground life, and demonstrate how hierarchies of skill were often disrupted by the realities of extraction work.

The different practices adopted by companies concerning work-team stability conditioned relations. At Rochebelle, it appears that *mineur-manœuvre* relationships were fleeting. In 1932, French timberman Joseph Mathieu explained that 'I am often given *manœuvres* for one or two days, and they are very often changed', with the consequence that he was not even aware as to whether he had worked with the injured Waclaw Sobotka.<sup>150</sup> His rather dismissive statement indicated how rationalisation displaced the stability of fixed teams. In their place came a depersonalization of relations between workers; underground hierarchies were reinforced at a time when *manœuvre* positions

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<sup>147</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Guzman, PVEA, 15 Nov. 1934.

<sup>148</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Gombar, PVEA, 28 Mar. 1933; ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Sicilia, PVEA, 28 Mar. 1934.

<sup>149</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Boukhezar, PVEA, 28 Feb. 1936; ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Proska, PVEA, 27 Aug. 1936.

<sup>150</sup> ADG 7/U/8/8, Accident Sobotka, PVEA, 26 Jan. 1932.

were increasingly filled by foreign workers. Moreover, foreign *manœuvres*, according to Fléchon, were supposed to be promoted to *mineur* positions ‘within months’, with the *manœuvre* period one of informal apprenticeship.<sup>151</sup> But this rapid ascension was not available to all. At Grand’Combe in 1930, twenty-four-year-old French miner Adrien Alin described forty-year-old Algerian *manœuvre* Mohamed Belayadi, with whom he worked at pit Fontaine 2, as ‘my *manœuvre*’.<sup>152</sup> This possessional term indicates a sustained relationship. One might argue that the higher turnover rate of Algerians explains why European *manœuvres* may have risen more habitually while companies tended to keep colonial workers as *manœuvres*. Yet even those who had been in the coalfield for extended periods rarely advanced on the professional scale. Fléchon, for example, cited the case of an Algerian *manœuvre* who had worked with the same French *mineur* for six years.<sup>153</sup> Such constancy in the relationship between French *mineurs* and Algerian *manœuvres* may have made for more advanced interpersonal relations, but the lack of professional progression indicates an articulation of broader colonial relationships of power in the labour process.

Engineers and surveillance personnel attached great importance to labour hierarchy. On 10 October 1933, an engineer at Grand’Combe noted in his daily report that ‘a Czechoslovak *mineur* and his Algerian *manœuvre* had been caught in a collapsed mine’ in the longwall exploitation at Ricard – the former had been extracted from the rubble without serious injuries, but ‘the ~~*mineur*~~ *manœuvre* was dead’.<sup>154</sup> This crossing out may appear a spurious detail, perhaps for the purpose of administrative accuracy. However, viewed in the broader context of colonialism and hierarchy, it jumps out as an instance of

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<sup>151</sup> Fléchon *Trente ans de fond*, 91-2.

<sup>152</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Belayadi, PVEA, 6 Aug. 1930.

<sup>153</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 204.

<sup>154</sup> ADG 18/J/177, Grand’Combe engineer daily mine report, 10 Oct. 1933.

policing of labour hierarchy to ensure that the dead Algerian was not assigned a status above his worth. In the eyes of the engineers, *manœuvres* were not *mineurs*, but something quite separate and inferior. In his memoirs, engineer Fléchon wrote of how *manœuvres* Vasil Leonard and Cherif Meziane were ‘attentive to the movements’ of their skilled *mineur* Henri Cloué, and were ‘ready to obey him’, as willing subordinates.<sup>155</sup> This suggests that in the eyes of this engineer the mining hierarchy stemmed from a respect for skill rather than racial or ethnic structures of power.

As well as insights into physical task-sharing and material interactions, workers’ descriptions of the labour process shed some light on the mental worlds of the men underground. As Arlette Farge points out, legal testimonies can be read, with care, as ‘fragments of ethics’ – that can reflect ‘an ethos’ and ‘the personal link that connected the individual to the community’ – or, in this case, how workers related to their colleagues.<sup>156</sup> As such, they can shed light on workers’ contemporary perspectives on workplace relations. While engineer Fléchon romanticized an underground solidarity between engineers, supervisors, miners, and *manœuvres*, a rather rigid hierarchy commanded the labour process.<sup>157</sup> When Italian *manœuvre* Fausto Bartocetti was toiling at filling wagons on 13 December 1934 it was not because of some deep feeling of mutual responsibility between colleagues, but because he was ‘commanded by a *chef*’.<sup>158</sup> Similarly, Bessèges *manœuvre* Mohand Taleb was met with the response ‘the *chef* gave the order’ when he questioned his colleague about the detonation of a mine explosion while Taleb was still in the gallery on 28 May 1938.<sup>159</sup> In this case, obeying a superior in the hierarchy had taken precedence over care for the safety of colleagues. When describing the labour

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<sup>155</sup> Flechon, *Trente ans de fond*, 76.

<sup>156</sup> Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 86-91.

<sup>157</sup> Flechon, *Trente ans de fond*, preface.

<sup>158</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Bartocetti, PVEA, 27 Dec. 1934.

<sup>159</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Taleb, Letter Taleb to *jugé de la paix*, undated.

process, supervisors and *mineurs* often qualified *manœuvres* as being ‘*sous mes ordres*’.<sup>160</sup> While reading mentalities through utterances in court comes with its perils, the language used here suggests a common assumption between workers, supervisors, and legal personnel that rigid hierarchies commanded obedience.

Counterposed to this language of hierarchy, expressions of comradeship between specific sets of underground workers were commonplace. The word ‘*camarade*’ was uttered frequently in descriptions of the labour process before justices of the peace. While this may seem a banal denomination given the fact that *camarade* during this epoch could simply refer to a colleague, a close reading of who assigned the label to whom is fruitful for what it reveals about the dynamics between categorisation and belonging, micro-hierarchies, race, and ethnicity in the labour process.<sup>161</sup> First, the ascription could express the imbrication of colonial and labour hierarchies. When French *mineur* Georges Peyronnel described how the injured Mouloud Benchabane received aid from ‘*ses camarades*’, the men he assigned to this comradeship group were all Algerian *manœuvres*, and Peyronnel – above them in professional rank and a French citizen – was careful not to include himself in it.<sup>162</sup> As well as from above, such distancing could also manifest through self-identification from below. Benlefki Seghir, an Algerian *manœuvre* working at Grand’Combe in 1931 recounted receiving help from ‘*les camarades*’ under the surveillance of the *chef de poste* and *maître-mineur*.<sup>163</sup> In the absence of comment on origins, this case reinforces an affective division between the lowest class of worker and management. Moreover, this division was not limited to colonial workers. A young Yugoslavian surface *manœuvre* at Rochebelle, detailed being helped by ‘the *camarade*

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<sup>160</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Saaoui, PVEA, 1 June 1932; ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Rodriguez, PVEA, 28 Mar. 1931; ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Diaz, PVEA, 12 July 1932.

<sup>161</sup> Martina Avanza and Gilles Laferté, ‘Dépasser la « construction des identités » ? Identification, image sociale, appartenance’ *Genèses* 61.4 (2005), 134-52.

<sup>162</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Benchabane, PVEA, 8 Mar. 1939.

<sup>163</sup> ADG 7/U/8/8, Accident Seghir, PVEA, 24 Dec. 1931.

who worked with [him] and the *chef*. Where the adolescent Yugoslav demarcated the divide between supervisory staff and *manœuvres*, Louis Pujol, the *chef* in question, described himself as doing ‘my surveillance work’.<sup>164</sup> While it is important not to impose normative understandings regarding the naming of comrades, workers occupying all positions of the labour hierarchy evidently understood the term to refer to workplace equals. In turn, this collective attention to the language of comradeship indicates how hierarchy determined understandings of belonging and affinity among diverse workers.

While a line of professional demarcation clearly existed, the declaration of comradeship could emphasise other affinities. In the Alès companies Nord d’Alais and Rochebelle, Spanish *mineur-manœuvre* teams referred to each other as *camarade*. In one case, Santiago Martinez described having ‘*camarade*’ Francisco Lopez ‘with [him] as [his] aide’, and in another José Ventura stated that he was ‘working as *manœuvre* for [his] *camarade* Sierra Maximiao’.<sup>165</sup> These examples point towards shared national origins as the basis for affective ascription of solidarity between workers of different professional ranks. This ascription of *camarade* can be found in the doctors’ report on Algerian Haffar Boudjemaa, who was living with ‘*camarades*’ while unable to work following a mining accident.<sup>166</sup> This mutual-aid dimension of solidarity between mineworkers of the same origin can also be found in the consistent description of informal interpreters before justices of the peace or medical panels as ‘*camarades*’.<sup>167</sup> This demonstrates how shared origins or support networks beyond the workplace could generate feelings and relations of belonging underground.

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<sup>164</sup> ADG 7/U/8/17, Accident Mahmic, PVEA, 2 Nov. 1937.

<sup>165</sup> ADG 7/U/8/6, Accident Lopez, PVEA, 4 Feb. 1930; ADG 7/U/8/4, Dossier Martiniano, PVEA, 12 Feb. 1925.

<sup>166</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Haffar, REM, 21 Dec. 1937.

<sup>167</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident ben Mohamed, PVEA, 10 July 1935.

Hierarchies were compounded and relations complicated by the very material question of communication in a diverse setting. Companies sought to address the linguistic diversity of their labour forces through various channels. In the early 1920s, the Grand'Combe company ordered 2,000 rulebooks for Italian workers and 1,000 for Spaniards.<sup>168</sup> In 1921, the same company received copies of a Polish-French bilingual manual with set phrases intended for use by coalmining migrants, covering topics such as sending money, travel, and mining expressions.<sup>169</sup> It is unclear how many copies were received or distributed, or how much time newly arrived migrants would have for such studying. Italian, Spanish, and Polish were the early predominant tongues, but the linguistic realities of the labour forces were more complex than these official nation-state languages. When Dimitri Panzyssyn was under psychological examination, doctors in Alès had to resort to a specialist interpreter from Marseille, 'Madame Popoff', to conclude that he was not a standard Polish speaker, and 'understood neither Russian, nor German, nor classic Ukrainian', with Popoff finally arriving at an understanding with him 'in Polesian dialect' spoken in rural Galicia.<sup>170</sup> This somewhat extreme example that demonstrates the sheer linguistic diversity of the workplace. At Rochebelle in 1931, a Spanish miner recounted asking his Polish *manœuvre* Basily Szwajko to fetch him some wood for timbering: 'as Basily is Polish and did not understand, I went myself.'<sup>171</sup> Such an exchange clearly establishes how the absence of a common language could complicate the labour process. If this direct invocation of linguistic difficulty is relatively rare, the presence of multiple interpreters and frequent mentions that certain workers spoke little or no French in court proceedings suggest communication gaps.<sup>172</sup> Although Adrien

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<sup>168</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe to State Mining Engineer, 8 Sept. 1920.

<sup>169</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, CCHF Conversation manual for Polish miners, Mar. 1921.

<sup>170</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Panzyssyn, REM, 22 June 1932.

<sup>171</sup> ADG 7/U/8/8, Accident Szwajko, PVEA, 16 Apr. 1931.

<sup>172</sup> See: ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Kanoune, PVEA, 29 Aug. 1932; ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Karzak, REM, 27 May 1933; ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Cisquella, PVEA, 31 Jan. 1933.

Quièvre has shown that rationalisation rendered underground communication more difficult with its cacophony of new machines, these linguistic differences remained a factor that mediated interactions.<sup>173</sup>

The Alès coalfield is found in historic Occitania, and Occitan was widely spoken in the interwar years. In her anthropological study of the coalfield, Eckert quoted an examiner at Nord d'Alais Wiénin, who claimed that 'when Polish or Czechoslovak miners mixed with the local workers, they learned the common language, Occitan', citing his migrant father as an example.<sup>174</sup> In part due to linguistic centralism and in part due to the fact that much of the upper management came from northern France, Occitan is in effect absent from French state and company sources. However, life writing from engineers and French workers record the prevalence of the language. Hailing from Provence, Grand'Combe's engineer Fléchon was an exception, commenting in his memoirs on his capacity to engage with workers in the commonly spoken 'langue d'oc'.<sup>175</sup> Future communist militant Élie Duguet's first day at work on 16 August 1925 at the Tréllys company in Le Martinet confirms that Occitan was the language spoken between miners underground.<sup>176</sup> With the broad range of foreign languages, official French, and Occitan co-existing, the mediation of work relations through language was anything but devoid of complexity.

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<sup>173</sup> Adrien Quièvre, 'Entendre le travail à la mine aux XIXe et XXe siècles' *Revue du Nord* 435.2 (2020), 321-3.

<sup>174</sup> Eckert, 'Une ville autrefois minière', 233.

<sup>175</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 32.

<sup>176</sup> Élie Duguet, *Le chemin de l'Arbousset*, 45.

The interwar period was thus characterised by dynamics of constant change in the process of demographic composition, and the transformation of the mining labour environment. Diversity and difference characterised the specific configuration of inhabitants that the Gard labour milieu amassed, with factors of nationality, language, gender, political persuasion, and colonial status driving the fluctuations and defining the contours of coalfield experience. The analysis here has shown how the dynamics of capitalist competition drove a process of rationalisation that created a specific type of hostile labour environment, posing challenges to worker autonomy, health, and security. The tentative arrival of machines at different rhythms depending on the company was synonymous with noxiousness and surveillance. As French workers departed from these environments, a complex triple-tiered hierarchical system of labour organisation emerged. At the top, were those French workers who remained and European workers of skill; in the middle, newly arrived and less experienced European men; and at the bottom, the many Algerian men experiencing the often most physically gruelling conditions. Above ground, the coalfield's most disadvantaged women of all nationalities, toiled in the coal cleaning facilities, and in tasks of social reproduction that kept them in constant interaction with the processes of extraction and exploitation.

Within all this, people with various backgrounds, languages, nationalities, experiences, were thrown into everyday situations in which they were compelled to produce and through which they strove to survive. This chapter has shown the complexity of the sub-hierarchies within the extraction system and the diversities that affected everyday interactions. By the same token, though, it has demonstrated that cooperation and solidarity based on necessity and affinity were possible, through the voices of those who practiced them. This coexistence of hierarchy and division on the one hand and

solidarity and cooperation on the other in the context of rationalisation and diversity is the dynamic at the centre of this thesis.

During the nightshift at Nord d'Alais in March 1938, surveillance agent Ducros and *maître-mineur* Jallat found 'five workers, Gasque, Repiquet, Malavieille, Said Mourath, Issaias Carceller, sitting or laying down on the wagons', and observed them 'not working for an hour and a half', finding 'two other workers, Vedel and Llorens, asleep on the floor.'<sup>177</sup> This group, composed of French, Spanish, Catalan, and Algerian mineworkers, was caught disobeying the rationalising rules of coal extraction, and faced suspensions of between four and eight days. While the engineer who reported on the episode to the company's directors showed no interest in the workers' motivations, the context in which they worked analysed in this chapter suggests that this was an act of collective mitigation of a harsh working environment. It is impossible to know from this source the process by which the group came to disobey. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that this was an example of covert complicity in mitigating the exigencies of rationalisation, and by extension, a degree of practical inter-ethnic solidarity. The remainder of this thesis will expand on the analysis of the dynamics of danger and diversity in which such a form of inter-ethnic collusion against extraction could occur and make sense.

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<sup>177</sup> ADG 26/J/13, Report Nord d'Alais director to Chief Mining Engineer Gard, 25 Mar. 1938.

## Ch.2. ‘A cry of pain’: Workplace Accidents, Discrimination, and Strategies of Self-Defence

On 29 March 1939, French *mineur* Marceau Derieux testified in an Alès court during Algerian *manœuvre* Abderamane Kerdouche’s workplace accident investigation. After finding Kerdouche sprawled on the ground next to a derailed wagon in a Rochebelle gallery, Derieux had physically supported the twenty-one-year-old *manœuvre*, taking over an hour to walk 500m to get Kerdouche medical attention. In response, Rochebelle’s lawyer cited a report by company doctor Peyre that denied Derieux’s evocations of pain and care, instead arguing that Kerdouche’s purported hernia had no relation to the reported injury.<sup>1</sup> By June, Kerdouche had enlisted the aid of the local CGT legal counsel to aid him in his battle against his employer’s denials.<sup>2</sup> While each injury bore its own singularities and individual suffering, this scene is representative of the dynamics of conflict and cooperation that developed around workplace accidents during the interwar period. This chapter analyses workplace injury as an essential feature of the dangers of the mining labour milieu, exploring the complex dynamics between discriminations proper to the migrant experience and the various forms of solidarities and self-defence that could be practiced to overcome them.

These interactions took place within the framework of the 1898 workplace accidents law that regulated labour-related risk. Under this law, when an accident struck, an injured worker should receive a *bon de blessure* [injury token] from a supervisor allowing them to leave work for medical consultation.<sup>3</sup> If the doctor adjudged injury to

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<sup>1</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Kerdouche, PVEA, 28 Mar. 1939.

<sup>2</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Kerdouche, Bon de pouvoir, 21 June 1939.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Loi concernant les responsabilités des accidents dont les ouvriers sont victimes dans leur travail’ *Journal officiel de la République française. Lois et décrets* 30.99, 10 Apr. 1898, 2209-12 (hereafter ‘Loi accidents ouvriers’, (1898)).

have permanent consequences, an investigation was conducted by a local *juge de la paix*, who would interview engineers, employer representatives, doctors, witnesses, and the victim. The investigation would establish a ‘permanent and partial incapacity rate’, which would determine the damages to be paid. If victim or employer contested the rate, further investigations were undertaken and decided by the local *tribunal de première instance* [tribunal of first instance]. For three years, either party could request to revise the damage rate.<sup>4</sup> To ensure neutrality, the 1898 law rested on a system of mandatory insurance for employers. This system promised more just outcomes for workers compared to a previous system in which they had to prove employer responsibility to obtain compensation. According to François Ewald, this system ‘allowed the economy to regulate itself by avoiding recourse to morality’, and thus removing notions of responsibility, thereby instituting ‘an end to the antagonism between labour and capital’ and the rise of ‘social solidarity’ in the realm of workplace accidents.<sup>5</sup> But Peyre’s actions and the involvement of the local CGT in Kerdouche’s case indicate that this legal mechanism did not eliminate antagonism.

This chapter is thus concerned with the place of workplace accidents in the developing dynamics of discrimination and solidarity in the interwar Gard. Studies of migration and mining have tended towards static and deterministic views on occupational risk. Social histories of migration to France most usually cite differential accident rates for migrants as evidence of their subordinate status in the economic structure.<sup>6</sup> While it may seem unsurprising that migrants face higher exposure to the health and safety risks

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<sup>4</sup> This system left a certain amount of power in the courtroom, in comparison to the US system: Nate Holdren, *Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> François Ewald, *The Birth of Solidarity: The History of the French Welfare State*, trans. Timothy Scott Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 190-6.

<sup>6</sup> Moulin-Bourret, *Guerre et industrie*, 516. In Germany, see John Kulczycki, ‘“Scapegoating” the Foreign Worker: Job Turnover, Accidents, and Diseases among Polish Coal Miners in the German Ruhr’ *Polish American Studies* 46.1 (1989), 49-51.

of the labour milieu, there has been a lack of interest in how this functioned and was experienced.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, given that the material and symbolic importance of occupational risk in mining is well-established, it is also surprising that no studies have analysed in depth how these affected relations between migrants and French citizens.<sup>8</sup> In the US context, scholars have relied upon oral histories to evince the assertion that shared underground dangers bred ‘inter-ethnic consciousness’ between all underground workers, regardless of role.<sup>9</sup> However, Annick Lacroix has recently explored how accidents were a vector of colonial domination in Algeria, with engineers blaming indigenous workers for their injuries.<sup>10</sup> Aside from Lacroix, studies of workplace accidents have broadly lacked dynamism or risk teleology and have had little regard for experience or agency in the everyday conflictual social interactions as they occurred.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, this chapter proposes a dynamic reading of workplace accidents by situating itself at the level of the broad range of actors involved as they experienced, responded to, negotiated, and contested injury and its aftermaths.

The novel insights into this process afforded by the workplace accident investigation dossiers, compiled by the Alès *tribunal de première instance*, structure this chapter. First, I investigate the new light that they shed upon the immediate experience of accidents from the perspective of workers – French and migrant – who suffered and witnessed them. This analysis exposes the ways in which company supervisors and engineers ‘forced’ workers into injury and blocked their access to aid, while mineworkers

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<sup>7</sup> Where they do consider this, scholars tend simply to point to the division of labour to explain the differential. It is a symptom of discrimination rather than a mechanism in its own right. See, for example, Noiriél, *Longwy*, 152-3. A notable exception is Julia Moses’ analysis of the German and Italian states’ treatment of migrants and colonial subjects. See Moses, *The First Modern Risk: Workplace Accidents and the Origins of European Social States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 181-91.

<sup>8</sup> On occupational risk and mining, see: Rainhorn, *La santé et la mine XIX-XXIe siècles*.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Waldron Merithew, “‘The Great Spirit of Solidarity’: The Illinois Valley Mining Communities and the Formation of Interethnic Consciousness, 1889-1917” (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois, 2000), 79-137; Thomas G. Andrew, *Killing for Coal*, 162-9.

<sup>10</sup> Lacroix, ‘L’Etat social en question’, 79-97.

<sup>11</sup> Another fine exception in the US context is Holdren, *Injury Impoverished*.

of different origins could practice caring solidarities to advance collective self-preservation. This provides an infra-political insight into the everyday dynamics around worker health in light of Bastien Cabot's analysis of the institutional 'sanitarisation [healthisation] of the class struggle'.<sup>12</sup> Second, the chapter examines interactions in the courtroom between victims, witnesses, justices of the peace, doctors, and company representatives to demonstrate the importance of embodied experience to the legal process.<sup>13</sup> Here, sensory strategies were employed by workers and witnesses as well as by employers to enhance or to reduce the chances of payouts. In the face of employer denials of cause-effect relationships between accidents and injuries, witnesses could, but did not always, mobilise their underground experience, describing the pain of their colleagues to conjure a form of what I call 'sensory solidarity'.<sup>14</sup> Third, the chapter explores struggles over responsibility and expertise when workers or employers challenged incapacity rulings. This analysis unpacks the state and union structures of support through which migrants made claims for reassessment, and reveals the conflictual world of medical expertise, all shedding light on differing moral economies and visions of responsibility. Finally, the chapter concludes by exploring the symbolic power and agency of migrant families in the dynamics of conflict and solidarity surrounding workplace death.

Overall, accidents were a key vector of everyday labour milieu interactions which created opportunities for, rather than automatically engendered solidarity. Due to the

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<sup>12</sup> On infra-politics, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), Ch.7. On 'forcing' and class struggle, see Cabot, *Écopolitiques ouvrières*, 18-19 and Ch.5.

<sup>13</sup> In turn, this responds to recent questions posed about migrant inclusion and the French social state, see Judith Rainhorn and Federico Del Giudice, 'Introduction. Migrants et protection sociale au XXe siècle' *Revue d'histoire de la protection sociale* 16 (2023), 10-22.

<sup>14</sup> This approach to pain as a battleground leans upon recent work by Rob Boddice, see: Rob Boddice, *Knowing Pain: A History of Sensation, Emotion, and Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 36-74. On the senses, see: David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Matt Perry, *Mutinous memories: A Subjective History of French Military Protest in 1919* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

organisation of labour, linguistic and knowledge-access issues, and divergent relationships with states, discrimination was part and parcel of the migrant experience of accidents. This chapter thus places the migrant's suffering body – as examined by Abdelmalek Sayad – at the centre of understandings of the labour milieu.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the accident process, instances of underground care, expressions of sensory solidarities in court, support in contesting decisions, and collections for widows were characterised by a sense of opportunity for collective preservation, which also came with an inherent instability. Injuries and accident law were not just about suffering, but about solidarity too. This chapter's focus on the bodily experience of injury and on the class-contentious dynamics that often ensued thus sheds new light upon mining solidarities and upon migrant interactions with the French social state.

### **Extraction Techniques, Forcing Migrants, and Subterranean Preservation**

The mines of the Gard fit Joël Michel's epithet of being a 'devourer of men'.<sup>16</sup> Over half of the 6812-strong workforce at La Grand'Combe suffered an injury that required at least four days rest in 1927.<sup>17</sup> It is evident from this statistic alone that the Gard workforce was subjected to great occupational health and safety hazards. But it was not 'the mine' as abstract, natural, inanimate entity that devoured the men. Instead, a combination of geological instability, extractive techniques, and disciplinary pressures subjected mineworkers to risk, with the logical consequence being accident and injury: this was a process characterised by 'maladjustment'.<sup>18</sup> To these conditions of multidimensional forcing, workers of different origins could, but did not always, respond through mutual support and care.

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<sup>15</sup> Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), Ch.9.

<sup>16</sup> Joël Michel, *La mine dévoreuse d'hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> ADG 18/J/114, Grand'Combe response to accident questionnaire, 30 Aug. 1928.

<sup>18</sup> McEvoy, 'Working Environments', 163.

As outlined in Chapter One, the mines of the Gard were places of peril. While accidents could result from many different situations, it is necessary here to outline three of the most common factors of workplace risk, and their roots in extraction practices. Since the nineteenth century, the use of dynamite violently disturbed the earth and exposed workers to injury. In January 1925, a report by mining engineers Nicolet and Duby revealed that Spaniard Sierra Martiniano was propelled across a gallery while preparing explosives, after accidentally hitting dynamite that had not successfully exploded the previous day.<sup>19</sup> The explosion caused him to lose his left eye. Similar experiences were undergone by Maitzen, a Yugoslavian worker who suffered internal wounds at Nord d'Alais in 1929, and by Italian Bruscoli who sustained a range of spinal injuries after being 'propelled six or seven meters in the air' after attending to a defective explosive device that malfunctioned in 1931.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the reports on these accidents, defective materiel and inconsistent supervision of a gallery from one day to the next resulted in these men joining what Nate Holdren calls the 'injury impoverished' of the mine.<sup>21</sup> But danger was part of the extractive system, rather than simply rooted in error. In a serialised special investigation into working conditions in the Gard's mines in 1936 communist publication *La Vie Ouvrière* highlighted the practice of block caving – an increasingly common practice that brought larger explosions and greater instability – as responsible for an overall increase in injuries.<sup>22</sup> The appeal of this method to employers was evident for its speed in clearing zones for longwall exploitation, but this came with immediate and longer-term risks to the bodies of those involved.

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<sup>19</sup> ADG 7/U/8/4, Accident Martiniano, Report by engineers Nicolet and Duby, undated 1925.

<sup>20</sup> ADG 7/U/8/4, Accident Maitzen, PVEA, 14 June 1929; ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Bruscoli, PVEA, 23 Oct. 1931.

<sup>21</sup> Holdren, *Injury Impoverished*.

<sup>22</sup> *La Vie Ouvrière*, 14 Feb. 1936. On the increased likelihood of mine collapses, see Troch, 'Ne pas grever l'avenir', 392.

It was not only company-induced explosions that posed the risk of collapse. Thomas G. Andrews has described how miners' creation of galleries – effectively empty spaces in the earth – meant that the 'immense potential energy of the earth above their heads threatened to become kinetic at any moment.'<sup>23</sup> Mining thus heightened the potential of geological structural dislocation that could result in accidents. In response to this danger, miners relied upon wooden pit propping to hold up the roofs of the galleries in which they worked. While an imperfect solution, the practise staved off risk. Supervisors, however, were not always wholly concerned with safety. On 19 January 1932, Antonin Walotka arrived for the night shift at 10.30pm at Rochebelle. He indicated to his supervisor his intention to reinforce the pit props in his gallery, but Walotka's superior disregarded the safety measure and ordered him to extract coal straight away. Not more than a few minutes later, the roof collapsed from above onto the Pole's legs, breaking them both.<sup>24</sup> That same month, an Italian worker had his leg broken by a fallen pit prop at Laval. Communist newspaper *La Tribune des Mineurs du Gard* charged that in previous times, the company had employed a *manœuvre* specifically to collect defunct pit-props; however, the position had been cut to increase the number of workers transporting coal to the surface. This led the newspaper to state that 'this accident is due to rationalisation that forces overproduction.'<sup>25</sup> Geological precarity was compounded by a muted regard for safety from some supervisors and a generalised pressure to extract that endangered workers' health.

Once coal was removed from the face, the *manœuvres* collected it and transported it to the surface in wagons. The productive imperatives of rationalisation rendered haulage

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<sup>23</sup> Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Walotka, PVEA, 2 Feb. 1932.

<sup>25</sup> *La Tribune des Mineurs du Gard*, Feb. 1932.

increasingly risky throughout the interwar period.<sup>26</sup> In 1929, Algerian Abderahme Ourahmoure, a *manœuvre* who slipped while pushing a heavy wagon of coal in the mines of Nord d'Alais, indicated that his pay was determined by his capacity to fill and to transport wagons: his 29fr per day wage was raised by 2-4fr per wagon after he had already filled five.<sup>27</sup> This piece-rate work incentivised *manœuvres* – who were disproportionately low-paid migrants – to shift more coal. At Rochebelle in early 1930, *manœuvres* were similarly paid 3fr per wagon.<sup>28</sup> That decade, the speed in extraction that this demanded was compounded by a demand for more brute strength. On 7 November 1934 in *Le Cri d'Alès*, communist mining-delegate Emmanuel Layre wrote that rationalisation had brought bigger mining wagons that carried more weight upon the same tracks.<sup>29</sup> By consequence, coal wagons became more unruly, making derailment a consistent problem. The increased demand upon this infrastructure thus tested *manœuvres*' physical limits, who were often tasked with re-railing the wagons. This mode of exploitation intended to raise productivity increased rates of what Alain Cottereau has qualified as '*usure au travail*': labour methods that caused bodily degradation.<sup>30</sup>

When Grand'Combe investigated an uptick in workdays lost to injury in 1927, they did not consider extraction methods to be the problem. Instead, Esteve, the engineer charged with the inquiry, concluded that the 'mentality of the workers, and especially of the foreigners' was to blame.<sup>31</sup> This hypothesis, rooted in class and racial bias, was 'confirmed' by further investigations in 1929 that showed foreign workers, and especially

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<sup>26</sup> Increases in accident rates in the Italian mines of Peñarroya are attributed to the same dynamics of rationalisation: Francesca Sanna, 'Managing miners' health: occupational diseases, scientific management and workers' life in the Italian mines of Peñarroya (1920-1950)' *AREAS Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales* 43 (2022), 56.

<sup>27</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Ourahmoure, PVEA, 29 May 1929.

<sup>28</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 25 Jan. 1930.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 7 Nov. 1934.

<sup>30</sup> Alain Cottereau, 'L'usure au travail: interrogations et refoulements' *Le Mouvement social* 124 (1983), 3-9.

<sup>31</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/133, Minutes from meeting of doctors and engineers at director's office, 19 Dec. 1927.

North Africans, to miss more workdays due to accidents.<sup>32</sup> In one pit, North Africans represented 19% of the workforce but 30% of the accidents, while French represented 74% and 61% respectively.<sup>33</sup> The company failed to entertain the idea that their extractive techniques and the division of labour might explain the rise and its distribution. In fact, Fléchon's memoirs reveal that this investigation was concomitant with the company's broader initiative to raise production without increasing wages discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation.<sup>34</sup> This context reveals that capitalist competition drove discrimination.

The accident investigation dossiers demonstrate that this employer perspective bore out in underground supervision practices. In late June 1932, twenty-year-old Fernando Diaz of Cuevas, Spain was pushing an empty wagon at Grand'Combe which derailed, causing him to slip. To break his fall, he grabbed onto a ventilator with his left hand, which was then mutilated by the machine. Diaz used a mixture of basic French and sign language to explain what had happened to the supervisor, who did not believe his account. Instead, the supervisors present decided – in terms reflecting Esteve's diagnosis about migrant malfeasance – that Diaz had acted out of 'ignorance or curiosity', and should therefore not qualify for accident payments.<sup>35</sup> In other cases, such attitudes among supervisors could force the injured to continue working, worsening their physical condition. This was so for Spaniard Carlos Moreno who injured himself whilst shovelling waste stone into a wagon on 5 May 1930. He was met with scepticism from his superior Ernest Augaibrat, who later reported that he 'did not see much wrong' and denied him a

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<sup>32</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/133, Esteve report on accidents to Delegate Administrator, 17 May 1929.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 37.

<sup>35</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Diaz, PVEA, 23 July 1929.

*bon de blessure*.<sup>36</sup> By consequence, Moreno continued to work for a full week before eventually asserting that he ‘still suffered from his wound’ and required leave.<sup>37</sup>

This practice of refusing the *bon de blessure* was common, with an article on 29 July 1930 in Rochebelle communist pit publication *La Gueule Noire* denouncing this employer strategy intended to ‘skimp on payouts’.<sup>38</sup> In 1933, the ‘principal demand’ of a labour dispute on the part of the CGT of Bessèges charged that engineers Charvolin and Lhospital actively practiced a policy of denying the injuries of workers underground.<sup>39</sup> In his report on the conflict, engineer Damian justified his colleagues’ behaviour, arguing that they were merely redressing an excess of ‘kindness’ that Bessèges had previously displayed towards its workers.<sup>40</sup> What this reveals is a self-conscious practice by engineers and supervisors, to which workers were privy.

Extraction imperatives could be explicitly invoked to force injured migrants to continue working. In June 1935 at Bessèges, Sicilian *mineur* Pasquale Petix was filling wagons with coal along with his team Apostol Dimitrov, Siblik, and Petro Balme. While pushing the wagon and talking with Dimitrov, Petix fell on his back. After being helped by his colleagues, Petix went to see his superior for a *bon de blessure*, but was met with the response ‘complete the day, because we have a lot of orders.’<sup>41</sup> Initial initiatives to care for Petix by his immediate colleagues were trumped by the supervisor-enforced compulsion to meet production targets. These examples indicate that company attitudes elaborated by Esteve had material consequences, and went beyond the Grand’Combe. This provides a valuable empirical demonstration of the supervisor-worker dynamic,

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<sup>36</sup> ADG 7/U/8/6, Accident Moreno, PVEA, 21 June 1930.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 29 July 1930.

<sup>39</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report on Demands at Bessèges Engineer Damian, 12 Dec. 1933.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Petix, PVEA, 26 Nov. 1935.

which firmly challenges the notion of an apolitical underground solidarity based on the sharing of space.

Unfamiliarity with the 1898 law underpinned many of the disadvantages faced by injured migrants. For example, Polish worker at Trélys Jan Liska contracted a hernia while re-railing a derailed wagon on 1 December 1930. Following the incident, he stopped work for two weeks of his own accord before returning to the pit, despite not yet being physically fit. Writing in 1933 on the subject to the first instance tribunal in Alès, he stated that his ‘complete ignorance of French legislation’ prevented him from claiming the rights and medical care guaranteed by the 1898 law.<sup>42</sup> A lack of knowledge about French social legislation could thus heighten the exposure of migrants to sustained bodily harm.

With legal knowledge representing a potential barrier to justice for injured migrants, worker testimonies in the accident dossiers demonstrate the importance of informal exchanges of information. This was the case for Francisco Aien of Badalona, Catalonia, who injured his arm on 11 June 1929 while pushing an empty coal wagon. In court, Aien described what happened next:

I went for the lunch break, there were two miners there whom I told that I had hurt my arm; I then went to the boss’s quarters; he was not there. So I went on until nine in the evening; finally the boss came and gave me a *bon* in order to leave.<sup>43</sup>

This case unveils the complex interaction between structural features and individual agency in the practice of solidarity after an accident. Though he did not state it explicitly, it seems that the two miners whom Aien told about his injury informed him about the accident process according to the 1898 law. It may be that the proximity between Catalan and Occitan facilitated this information exchange. Furthermore, it was

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<sup>42</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Liska, Letter Liska to Alès civil tribunal, 19 May 1933.

<sup>43</sup> ADG 7/U/8/6, Accident Aien, PVEA, 14 June 1929.

a break from work, during which miners were assuring the sustenance of their lives by eating and resting and when the sounds of the mine were muted, that provided the space in which Aien's colleagues could aid him. This case thus illustrates the linguistic, legal, and sonic context in which mutual-aid knowledge-exchange could operate.

In conditions of multidimensional forcing, colleagues of diverse origins provided essential support to ensure the preservation of their workmates' lives. On 29 April 1933, Pedro Miras heard a loud bang and then shouts from a nearby gallery at Rochebelle. As he drew closer, he saw a head, belonging to Polish miner Francisek Dechnik, protruding from a pile of rubble.

I hastened to get rid of the blocks of stone that had fallen on him, and I got him out of the pile. Straight away I wanted to get him to drink water but I couldn't because his mouth was full of blood.<sup>44</sup>

In court, Miras indicated that he then 'ran' to the *chef du chantier* to request a stretcher, before four other men carried Dechnik to the surface while supervisors ordered Miras back to work. In this episode, a clear example of a desire to preserve the life of a colleague of different origins emerges. Far from a masculine eschewal of fear, Piras's account was characterised by desperation and urgency, and his insistence on verbs of speed – hastening, running – reveal a visceral concern for life-giving and care that was followed by the desire to give water. While the danger of the workplace created the conditions in which Dechnik needed help and the diverse nature of Rochebelle's pits meant that a Spaniard was closest to the scene, Piras's account indicates that it was his initiative and desire to provide care that *enacted* solidarity.

Similarly, on 31 October 1930, Italian *manœuvre* Antonio Filipi pulled his Spanish colleague Ignacio Rodriguez out from beneath a derailed wagon, taking Rodriguez 'on

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<sup>44</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Dechnik, PVEA, 22 Nov. 1933.

[his] back' to safety to the showers where he washed him, before taking him to the infirmary.<sup>45</sup> In this case, Filipi's solidarity was expressed through the carrying and washing his injured Spanish colleague. This sequence of acts implied Filipi touching Rodriguez first with great physical exertion and then with intimate care.<sup>46</sup> Both forms of touch ensured the preservation of Rodriguez's life, showing a real attentiveness to pain and the material significance of caring solidarity. Rather than simply reinforcing the hard masculine image of the miner in the face of danger, these workers' accounts of underground support provided to injured colleagues reveal considerable intimacy and care in the face of shared danger.<sup>47</sup> Mineworkers engaged in mutual aid to help colleagues of different origins, with the choices that they made suggesting a shared spirit of care and collective preservation.

But underground solidarities could also stem from and reinforce hierarchies. At Rochebelle in November 1932, Czech miner Ladyslas Kubani heard screams from a gallery. When investigating the scene, he passed an injured Algerian *manœuvre* on the ground before approaching fellow Czech worker Carlos Fagos, who was 'covered in blood'. Following this, Kubani 'took Fagos in [his] arms' and carried him fifteen meters before requiring help to take him to the surface.<sup>48</sup> The evocative image of an intimate form of aid reinforces the notion that care and life-preservation were a common response to danger. However, this care was reserved for Kubani's fellow countryman – in his report he consciously noted having passed the Algerian who had 'injured his legs and head'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Rodriguez, PVEA, 28 Mar. 1931.

<sup>46</sup> On the politically productive capacity of touch, see Erin Manning, *The Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' lung: a history of dust disease in British coal mining* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 49. This also speaks to Tim Strangleman's appeal to take seriously the care-giving dimension of industrial masculinity, see: Tim Strangleman, 'The World We Have Lost: Reflections on Varieties of Masculinity at Work' *International Labor and Working-Class History* 105 (2024), 9-25.

<sup>48</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Fagos, PVEA, 10 Dec. 1932.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

While it is possible that the differing levels of injury between the two motivated Kubani's choice, other considerations may have spurred his action: either greater capacity to communicate through Czech, an affinity felt for a compatriot, or indeed an anti-Algerian attitude.<sup>50</sup> Whichever was the case, his explicit and conscious passing of the Algerian suggests potentially racialised limits to underground solidarities.

Even when migrants knew their rights, the doctor's office was also a site at which discrimination could occur. Often, company medical personnel greeted them with doubt on presentation of their injuries. Throughout the 1930s, this was particularly the case at Rochebelle. Dr. Peyre was a force for continuing difficulty in the life of the Algerian Launis Douar in the summer of 1935. On 7 June, a pit prop fell from the ceiling of a gallery and struck Douar to the ground. After being helped to his feet by the *mineur* with whom he worked, he went to the company infirmary to be treated by Peyre, who declared him fully cured after two weeks. On his return to work, he continued to be troubled by the injury, and returned multiple times to Peyre. On each occasion, Peyre sent him back to work.<sup>51</sup> Peyre's rulings meant that Douar continued to work for three months before finally having the injury recognised in September. As well as implementing company policy, Peyre likely acted on his own ideological beliefs. An investigation ordered by the Ministry of the Interior in 1929 identified notorious Rochebelle doctor Peyre as one of the 'most active members' of the Alès section of the Action française.<sup>52</sup> While a doctor's membership of an extreme-right organisation is perhaps not an extraordinary fact alone, little research has hitherto been undertaken on

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<sup>50</sup> This is a fitting reminder that solidarities could also reinforce or reproduce hierarchies, as we are reminded in Kelliher, 'Historicising geographies of solidarity', 3.

<sup>51</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Douar, PVEA, 6 Sept. 1935.

<sup>52</sup> ADG 1/M/714, Report Prefect to Interior, 9 Feb. 1929.

how such views might influence practice.<sup>53</sup> These xenophobic political views were at least not incongruous with medical practice that denied migrants aid.

Local communist activists were aware of Peyre's strategies, and sought to challenge him directly. On 28 January 1931 at Rochebelle, a minor mine collapse prompted rocks to fall onto Waclaw Sobotka's shoulders and head. Dr. Peyre refused to treat him.<sup>54</sup> It was only on the intervention of the communist mayor of Alès that the Pole was eventually hospitalised.<sup>55</sup> While the sources are silent on the social mechanism by which the mayor became involved, this episode reveals an institutional instance of support from an actor not directly implicated in the labour process in the face of unfavourable medical expertise. Migrants' access to social rights was often prevented by company doctors and campaigned for by local elected representatives.

### **Discriminatory Doubt and Sensory Solidarity in the Courtroom**

The courtroom could also be a site of conflict between employers who sought to deny responsibility for injuries and workers who contradicted them. Local justices of the peace heard victims, witnesses, employer representatives, and doctors in the investigations that followed accidents. The reports drawn up after these proceedings reveal hitherto unstudied perspectives on the conflicts at the heart of accident investigation processes. These sources reveal that employers often contested either the 'materiality' or the 'consequences' of an accident – in an attempt to reduce absence from work and their own insurance payments – and thus question Ewald's suggestion that the 1898 law nullified conflict. It is important to recognise the centrality of the sensory dimension of this strategy

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<sup>53</sup> See Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon, 'Les milieux médicaux et l'Action française' in Michel Leymarie and Jacques Prévotat (eds.), *L'Action française. Culture, politique, société* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2008), 113-9.

<sup>54</sup> ADG 7/U/8/8, Accident Sobotka, PVEA, 26 Jan. 1932.

<sup>55</sup> ADG 7/U/8/8, Accident Sobotka, Letter Polish consul in Marseille to Alès civil tribunal, 9 Dec. 1931.

of denial, negating the link between accident, pain, and injury. In response, witnesses were provided with an opportunity to employ strategies of sensory solidarity. The forms of discrimination and solidarity that emerge through these documents attest to Joanna Bourke's portrayal of pain as necessarily political, and rooted in social practices of communication.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the courtroom was a site at which class struggle was waged through workers sensing and experiencing bodies.

Internal, rather than external, injuries formed the basis of many disputes. Hernias were a frequent problem for workers engaged in haulage activities, but employers often questioned them. At Nord d'Alais on 24 April 1931, Spaniard José Perez let out a cry while re-railing a derailed wagon. With Perez continuing to work and saying nothing more of the matter to his colleagues, company lawyer Guy Bigot de Permeneau successfully accused a '*hernie de faiblesse* [weakness hernia]', during the accident investigation.<sup>57</sup> Rather than being the fault of strenuous work, the fault for Perez's pain was inherent to his own body. This policy can be located transnationally, with Spanish companies already drawing the difference between work hernias and weakness hernias at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> A similar manufacturing of doubt by Grand'Combe doctors contributed to Algerian Mohand Boukhezar's misfortune who in February 1936 'felt a sharp pain in the stomach' while hauling coal.<sup>59</sup> Company doctor Artières put him back to work after a week in hospital despite claims from the Algerian that he still felt pain, before company representative Raujoux declared that there was

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<sup>56</sup> Joanna Bourke, 'What is Pain? A History, The Prothero Lecture' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 23 (2013), 70.

<sup>57</sup> ADG 7/U/8/7, Accident Perez, PVEA, 24 Apr. 1931.

<sup>58</sup> Ángel Pascual Martínez Soto, Miguel A Pérez de Perceval and Andrés Sánchez Picón, 'Entre miseria y dolor. Trabajo y salud en la minería del Sureste (segunda mitad del siglo XIX-primer tercio del XX)' in Cohen (ed.), *El trabajo y sus riesgos*, 226.

<sup>59</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Boukhezar, PVEA, 28 Feb. 1936.

no cause-effect relationship between injury and accident.<sup>60</sup> Playing to racializing narratives about the inferior physical constitution of foreign workers often enabled companies to avoid paying damages.

Such medical claims could be bolstered by implicit accusations of malpractice. This was what occurred when Émile Rustan, principal engineer at Rochebelle, contested Italian *manœuvre* Fausto Bartocetti's hernia, contracted after re-railing a derailed wagon in December 1934. In addition to Dr. Peyre's medical certificate that indicated a '*hernie de faiblesse*', the engineer provided further technical detail, adding that rerailing a derailed wagon was a standard procedure that did not require the 'brisk, sudden, violent effort' that might be expected to bring about a '*hernie de force* [traumatic hernia].'<sup>61</sup> The Italian worker was thus either lying about the cause of his hernia, or was neglectful of proper mining practice – both hypotheses made sense within the set of stereotypes commonly held among the French bourgeoisie about the 'character' of Italian workers.<sup>62</sup> Company agents thus deployed a combination of technical expertise and xenophobic discourses to insulate themselves against paying damages.

Migrants were at particular risk of employers questioning the cause-effect relationship between their reported accidents and purported injuries. In 1929, the CGTU legal counsel Emmanuel Layre accused employers of discriminatory practices in the realm of workplace accidents in the regional communist weekly *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*. In cases involving 'internal or non-apparent wounds, back injuries,

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* Here, objective rulings and subjective expressions of pain emerge as a key feature of labour relations. See Rob Boddice, *Knowing Pain*, 36-74.

<sup>61</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Bartocetti, PVEA, 27 Dec. 1934.

<sup>62</sup> This rings true with early immigration expert William Oualid's comments on the capacities of migrant workers in metallurgy, in which he ruled that Italians were lacking in 'discipline and character': William Oualid, 'The Occupational Distribution and Status of Foreign Workers in France', *International Labor Review* 20.2 (1929), 182. On Oualid's influence, see Noiriél, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France*, 295-326.

abdominal exertion, hernias’, employers took advantage of foreign workers who knew ‘nothing of their rights’.<sup>63</sup> According to Layre, employers seized upon potential ambiguities surrounding internal injuries and migrants’ lack of knowledge of the 1898 law to keep them in work. This charge reveals an acute awareness of the ways in which the embodied experience of class relations was different for newcomers, and its publication sought to inform activists of recent trends in employer accident strategy with a view to combating it. This strategy continued. In June 1935, communist newspaper *Le Cri du Gard* accused Rochebelle of casting doubt over the accidents of ‘immigrant and colonial comrades in particular’, personifying ‘the most cynical combative employer class’.<sup>64</sup> For the communists, these denials represented a form of class domination targeted specifically at foreigners.

This was not the invention of communist rhetoric. Confidential internal documents concerning protocols over lost workdays lend credence to Layre’s claims. Grand’Combe engineer Esteve’s 1927 inquest into accidents proposed that companies could argue that ‘most hernias’ or back injuries did not fall under the category of accident, and could thus represent an opportunity to cut down on lost workdays and insurance payments.<sup>65</sup> Such a revelation puts beyond doubt the idea that the denial of cause-and-effect relationships in cases involving internal injuries was a purposeful strategy of sowing doubt that mobilised scientific knowledge against workers’ sensory complaints. That other companies, such as Rochebelle and Nord d’Alais in the hernia cases, used the same argument in court demonstrates the widespread nature of this strategy across the coalfield.

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<sup>63</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 30 Mar. 1929.

<sup>64</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 17 June 1935.

<sup>65</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/133, Grand’Combe minutes from meeting of doctors and engineers, 19 Dec. 1927.

In the face of such doubt, the legal process accorded a certain amount of power to witnesses. After the injury of a young Italian *manœuvre* named Cisquella in January 1933, a French *chef de poste* and *mineur* offered lengthy descriptions of the mine collapse in court. A third testimonial from the Polish miner Roman Budnik was supposed to accompany these two comprehensive reports. However, because the Pole could neither understand nor speak French, and because Rochebelle's representative did not contest any element of the accident, this witness's report was 'not indispensable'.<sup>66</sup> Witness statements were about more than simply descriptive detail, or 'literary embellishment'.<sup>67</sup>

When employers did contest the materiality or consequences of an accident, particular weight was placed on witness testimony. The ways in which this turned the courtroom into a potential, but unguaranteed, site of solidarity between workers are perceptible where witnesses either provided or denied such corroboration. On 8 January 1936, Larbi Ouhnia from Akbou Algeria fell while carrying a large rock across the gallery at Bessèges. According to Ouhnia's version of events, his colleague Beza Haimi went to fetch the *chef de poste*, the also Algerian Salah Quartelli. Ouhnia explained to the Saint-Ambroix *juge de la paix* that he had cried out after having 'felt a lively pain', but that Quartelli retorted 'it is nothing'.<sup>68</sup> Having arrived in the coalfield in November and knowing limited French, Ouhnia was unaware of the procedure for the declaration of accidents. The next day, he returned to work, 'fearing punishment' for absence. Possibly learning the procedure through a network at the *cantine* La Loubière in Rochebelle where he lived and perhaps from his roommate Rabah Tahakourt who was off work injured himself, Ouhnia later visited the company doctor Fabrègue who

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<sup>66</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Cisquella, PVEA, 31 Jan. 1933.

<sup>67</sup> Perry, *Mutinous memories*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Ouhnia, PVEA, 12 May 1936.

transferred him to the civil hospital in Alès. On arrival, Dr. Soulier initially refused to operate on what appeared to be a hernia, informing Ouhnia that ‘it would be better if [he] went back to Algeria’. The injured Algerian refused, and remained in hospital for three months. In the early days of his injury, therefore, Ouhnia suffered from a series of discriminations which related to linguistic and legal-knowledge issues faced by those newly arrived in the coalfield, while he was denied care by fellow Algerian Quartelli, his superior in the labour hierarchy. With the reported injury being a hernia and the employer contesting Ouhnia’s version of events, Dr. René Vismard who treated Ouhnia in Alès ruled that:

If the investigation can establish that the injured worker did indeed, as he declares, feel a violent pain in this place during his work, on 5 January 1936, the cause-effect relationship between the work (the effort of picking up a heavy load) and the existent hernia can be maintained.<sup>69</sup>

Vismard’s ruling introduced the vital importance of proving that the injured subject had experienced pain. In a context where migrants were broadly suspected of simulating injuries, their colleagues, as witnesses, were endowed with heightened relevance.

Neither Haimi nor Quartelli were present in the coalfield by the time of the investigation. Both had temporarily returned to work on the land in Algeria. By consequence, the colonial authorities called them to testify in Akbou, the closest administrative centre to their home village, Bouhitem. First, Haimi denied both having heard Ouhnia let out a ‘cry of pain’ and having involved Quartelli. Quartelli then categorically refuted all elements of the story, stating: ‘what Ouhnia Larbi states is false, I did not go to see him in the gallery after the so-called accident, and I did not say to him “it is nothing”.’<sup>70</sup> Despite spending three months in hospital, Ouhnia received no long-

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<sup>69</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Ouhnia, Report by Dr. Vismard, 18 Jan. 1936.

<sup>70</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Ouhnia, Commission rogatoire Akbou, 26 June 1936.

term compensation for his injury. Here, fellow colonial workers' senses were invested with legal weight, which they used to *deny* Ouhnia's experience of pain.

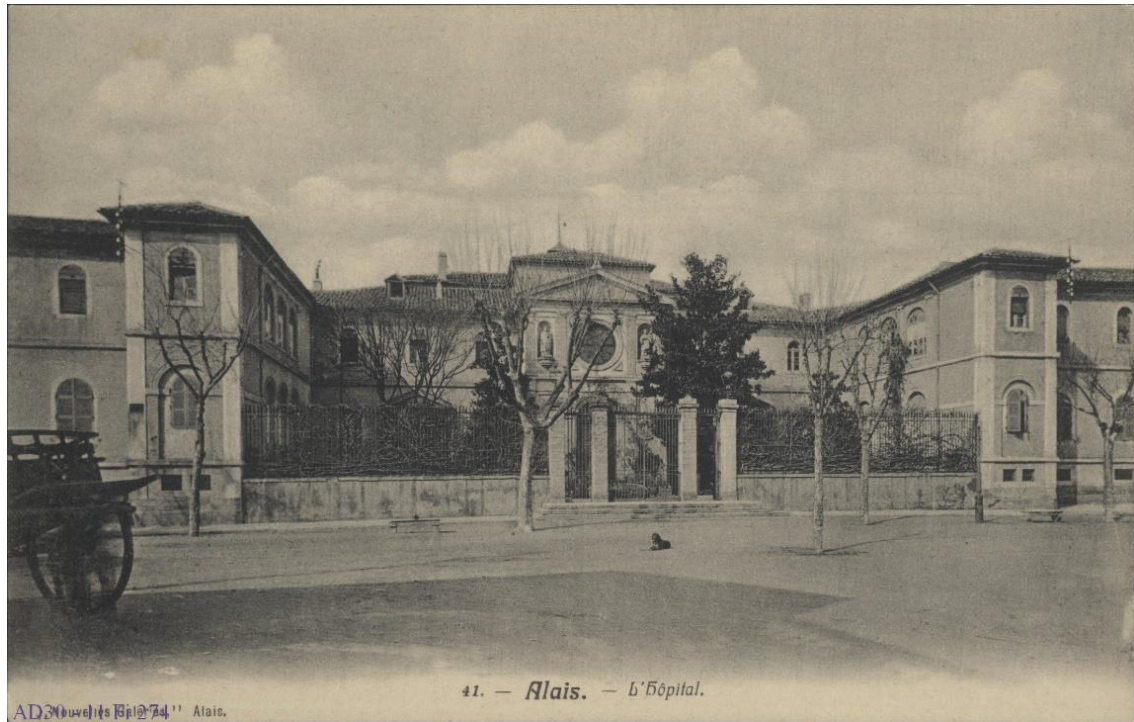


Figure 2-1 ADG 11Fi00274, Postcard of Alès civil hospital, early twentieth century.

And why such denials? It is possible that Haimi and Quartelli were merely telling the truth. However, Quartelli established for himself an infamy in the following years that teases at a different interpretation. On 4 February 1938, the local CGT at Molières-sur-Cèze complained that Quartelli took advantage of Algerians by soliciting 200 francs payment from them in return for employment at Bessèges.<sup>71</sup> Upon investigation, a special police commissioner confirmed the reports to the Alès Sub-Prefect, alongside details on Quartelli's running of an 'Arab *café-buvette*' as well as significant land holdings in Akbou.<sup>72</sup> This investigation portrayed Quartelli as possessing powers of patronage owing to his proximity to the Bessèges recruitment office and his property in Algeria. In this context, the denials by Quartelli and by Haimi – who was from his village, and whose

<sup>71</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Letter from Molières CGT to Prefect, 5 Feb. 1938.

<sup>72</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Report by special commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 22 Feb. 1938.

employment was potentially arranged by Quartelli – begin to resemble a cultivation of positive relations with the employer, who would have undoubtedly appreciated the intervention of the witnesses for its role in reinforcing discipline and reducing insurance bills. In this way, and through this extraordinary case, the dynamics of power in courtroom accident investigations take on a class-conflictual character. Witnesses could seize upon the agency provided to them to pursue individual goals quite in contradiction with worker, or indeed colonial, solidarity.<sup>73</sup>

But just as witnesses could use their relative power to cement relationships with their employers, they more often corroborated their colleagues. During their testimonies, witnesses often elaborated descriptions of events that emphasised the sensorial experience of witnessing pain. In this way, testimonies were central to creating, or stunting, feelings of solidarity around the shared dangers and accidents of coalmining.

Communicating pain with sensory detail to a *juge de la paix* was an act of solidarity when companies employed tactics of denial. During an accident investigation on 23 July 1934, French *mineur* Jean-Baptiste Dupin's Algerian *manœuvre* Mohamed Abdelkader complained of serious damage to his shoulder after being trapped between two wagons. With Rochebelle's representative contesting Abdelkader's story with the claim that the injuries he described did not fit what one would usually expect from such an incident, Dupin affirmed his Algerian colleague's pain through a statement thick with inter-sensorial description.<sup>74</sup> First, Dupin *heard* Abdelkader: 'telling [him] that he was hurt'. Second, Dupin *saw* the injury on Abdelkader's body, a swelling 'approximately the

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<sup>73</sup> Within the structurally determined conditions of the mining accident, agency could be used to deny and to stunt solidarity. This responds to Katrina Navickas, 'A return to materialism? Putting social history back into place' in Sasha Handley, Rohan McWilliam and Lucy Noakes (eds.), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 98.

<sup>74</sup> This has to do with the experience and articulation of different senses together. See Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 9.

size of a walnut'. Third, Dupin engaged *touch*, describing that Abdelkader 'could not stand it being touched', before adding the further aural detail that 'he cried out in pain'.<sup>75</sup> The intimate scene that Dupin evoked is significant, for it attests to underground care across colonial and labour-hierarchy boundaries. Focusing on the senses here is not merely about evoking an underground interaction, though. It was through a sensory description that Dupin opposed the discriminatory strategizing of employers, and ensured that his colleague received indemnity payments. This episode demonstrates how mining solidarity could be articulated between different spaces, with the underground scene of care reinforced by sensory affirmation in the courtroom.

Witness statements were not always as inter-sensorial as Dupin's. Linguistic expressions of pain could have varying results in courtroom attempts to obtain indemnity payments. After a wayward wagon struck Francisco Lopez at Nord d'Alais on 22 January 1930, Dr. Alexandrowicz diagnosed him with a '*hernie de faiblesse*'.<sup>76</sup> When describing the incident in court, his colleague Santiago Martinez engaged touch to evoke Lopez's pain, insisting that Lopez 'wouldn't let anyone touch' his body, because he 'suffered too much'. To corroborate this sensation, Martinez described the 'slow, painful' walk that the pair made to the showers.<sup>77</sup> In this instance, the tribunal accorded Lopez a 5% incapacity rating, perhaps testament to the efficacy of combining bodily feeling and an explicit mention of pain. But this was not always the case. Before the *juge de la paix* of Saint-Martin-de-Valgagues in 1931, Spanish Nord d'Alais worker Jacinto Cabanillas attested that his Spanish colleague José Perez had 'fallen to the floor, letting out a cry, *aié!*' in the moment that he reported contracting a hernia. Despite this onomatopoeic evocation of pain – testament to the non-linguistic dimension of pain

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<sup>75</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Abdelkader, PVEA, 23 July 1934.

<sup>76</sup> ADG 7/U/8/6, Accident Lopez, PVEA, 4 Feb. 1930.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

expression – the employer’s accusation of a *hernie de faiblesse* was upheld.<sup>78</sup> Equally unsuccessful was the linguistic reporting of pain, without additional sensory evocation. Such was the unfortunate fate of Algerian *manœuvre* Mouloud Benchabane of Rochebelle, who declared to have vomited on contracting a suspected hernia in early 1939. In court, his French supervisor stated only that Benchabane had complained ‘I am hurt’ and clutched his side.<sup>79</sup> The employer’s legal staff used counter-witnesses – including ‘the office staff, the ambulance driver, the hospital personnel’ – who all denied having seen Benchabane vomit.<sup>80</sup> In this instance, the combination of the weak value of reported pain against the absence of sight of vomit by various witnesses amassed against the Algerian to deny him a payout. Taken together, these court interactions demonstrate the nuanced varieties of sensorial affirmation that could be deployed, and suggest the value of *involuntary* expressions of pain.

Exclamations of pain could transcend linguistic difference. After suffering a shoulder injury from a partial mine collapse, Spanish Antonio Sobrevia appeared before the *juge de la paix* in Alès on 8 August 1936. While Rochebelle representative Rustan did not contest the accident on this occasion, the witness’s intervention offers an insight into how workers communicated pain and accidents across language barriers, and, crucially, that this was brought above ground into the legal sphere. Sobrevia’s French colleague Jean Ducellier reported having heard the Spaniard scream in pain, before the latter offered a visual description of the accident by picking up a rock and gesturing to his shoulder.<sup>81</sup> This exchange hints at an underground ‘improvised language of solidarity’

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<sup>78</sup> ADG 7/U/8/7, Accident Perez, PVEA, 12 May 1931.

<sup>79</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Benchabane, PVEA, 8 Mar. 1939.

<sup>80</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Benchabane, Letter Rochebelle to Alès *juge de la paix*, 7 Mar. 1939.

<sup>81</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Sobrevia, PVEA, 8 Aug. 1936.

that went beyond formal speech.<sup>82</sup> More importantly, its reporting by Ducellier to the *juge de la paix* reveals how this improvised means of communication could be translated and mobilised beyond the workplace to strengthen the position of injured workers. All this demonstrates how the reactions of colleagues in the immediate aftermath and in court could either aid and support or destabilise and undermine an injured worker. These cases could form, build, strengthen, or deconstruct bonds between workers of different origins.

Victims could engage their own interoceptive feelings during investigations to build upon witnesses' sensory affirmation. At an investigation on 16 April 1931, Spanish miner Manuel Banda, while acknowledging a language barrier between himself and his Polish *manœuvre* Basily Swajko, reported that the Pole, on 11 March of the same year, had cried out in pain during a mine collapse, that left him with shoulder injuries.<sup>83</sup> During his interrogation, the victim recounted through an interpreter that he felt intense internal pain when executing quotidian tasks, including 'drinking a glass of beer'. In the face of contestation from his employer for these largely internal injuries, the Pole was deemed to suffer from an incapacity rate of 25% after having given this interoceptive description of daily difficulty. Although not the only factor – a medical report was also formulated – this combination of sensory, relatable descriptions of discomfort both by an observer and by the victim himself appear to have enhanced Swajko's case. In this way, the actions of workers in the legal wake of accidents contributed to forging bonds of support between people who could not communicate extensively through regular verbal conversations, relying instead upon other bodily feelings and forms of expression.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Gabriella Cioce, Marek Korczynski, Davide Però, 'The improvised language of solidarity: Linguistic practices in the participatory labour-organizing processes of multi-ethnic migrant workers' *Human Relations* 76.12 (2023), 1855-80.

<sup>83</sup> ADG 7/U/8/8, Accident Swajko, PVEA, 16 Apr. 1931.

<sup>84</sup> This, again, shows that Cioce's 'improvised language of solidarity' that comprised non-verbal communication was a tool of preservation in the coalfield.

The illustrative examples highlighted hitherto are indicative of a broader trend in the workplace accident investigation archive. Out of the 171 accident investigations in the sample covering cases between 1925 and 1939, twenty-eight witnesses reported having *seen* either the accident occur or the injury of their colleague immediately after. In the dark underground world and in the context of proving involuntary pain in the cases of internal injuries more likely to be disputed, *hearing* colleagues crying out was essential.<sup>85</sup> Twenty-two of the witnesses called to investigation reported having *heard* in some capacity the victim express their pain. This frequency is significant enough to indicate a relatively generalised understanding of the importance of sensory affirmation. By the same token, such affirmations do not appear to be responding to a question in court about sight or sound.

In turn, this raises the complex question of describing such practices as a strategy, rather than simply illustrative detail. Here, an August 1931 article from regional communist monthly *La Tribune des Mineurs* is suggestive. Giving advice to militants and readers on ‘essential precautions in the moment of an accident’, *La Tribune* stated that the injured worker’s ‘first’ action, should be to ‘make other people present aware of the accident’.<sup>86</sup> Despite not containing any specific recommendations about the senses, it seems logical to suggest that making others aware implied a need to emphasise the pain experienced in the moment. This article thus casts informing colleagues on the details of an accident as a first step in the process of obtaining indemnities, that would then be followed by witnesses doing what Joanna Bourke has termed the ‘ideological work’ of pain corroboration in the face of documented company strategies of doubt.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Quièvre, ‘Entendre le travail à la mine’, 317-22.

<sup>86</sup> *La Tribune des Mineurs*, Aug. 1931.

<sup>87</sup> Bourke, ‘What is Pain?’, 162.

If the working environment of the mine was full of dangers, and specificities of the migrant left them more exposed to harm and injustice, it was in the space of the courtroom that underground affinities and modes of care were consciously transformed into effective acts of collaborative preservation. By consequence, they must be seen as an integral feature of everyday class relations, in which migrants and French participated and strengthened bonds between each other. Both in the immediate aftermath of an accident and in the courtroom, injured migrant workers and their colleagues were far from mere ‘speculators of the self’ interacting individually with the nascent welfare state, and the 1898 law had evidently not eliminated conflict.<sup>88</sup> Instead, class relations, mediated by race and nationality, were waged upon and through workers’ sensing and experiencing bodies, and the role of fellow workers was essential.

### **Institutions, Medical Authority, and Moral Economy in the Contestation Process**

Article 19 of the 1898 law enabled injured workers and employers to challenge the initially agreed incapacity rating. A successful *révision* [appeal] required that one party demonstrate that the injury had either ‘aggravated’ or ‘attenuated’.<sup>89</sup> When the Alès civil tribunal agreed to investigate an appeal, a new *rapport d’expertise médicale* was ordered. Investigating these interactions involves a shift in scale and in actors, with larger state and labour institutions becoming involved in affairs. In so doing, it elucidates further the conflictual and unequal reality of the 1898 law, revealing difference of experience between different migrants and divergent conceptions of justice and authority.

An injured migrant’s capacity to have their appeal case heard was significantly conditioned by their relationship to the state. Some Europeans could call upon the institutions of their nation-state of origin for legal help. While the 1898 law reduced

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<sup>88</sup> This directly contests Ewald’s analysis of the law: Ewald, *The Birth of Solidarity*, 191.

<sup>89</sup> Article 19, ‘Loi accidents ouvriers’ (1898).

migrants' access to damages to a one-off payment if they left France, those from Poland benefited from a reciprocity agreement that ensured their access to regular accident payments equal to French workers, even if they returned to Poland.<sup>90</sup> Following an accident at Bessèges in May 1933, Pawel Wapniarz attempted to increase his incapacity rating from Poland. In a letter on 8 May 1934, the Polish consul of Marseille wrote to Wapniarz, who had returned to Międzychód, advising him on precise phrases that his doctor should use in their medical certificate including: 'Wapniarz's permanent and partial work incapacity must be evaluated at 100%'.<sup>91</sup> This would then require signature by local officials in Poland as well as by the French consulate. That the consular official was able to supply such precise information owed to his legal experience in protecting the social rights of foreign citizens in France. This case illustrates how the authority of state institutions could provide support to some injured migrants, especially when they had left France.

Workers from other European nation-states with less favourable legal statuses could nonetheless also benefit from diplomatic advocacy. This was the case for Vasil Homonaj who following an injury on 20 October 1930 returned to Czechoslovakia on 20 February 1931, after being 'partially cured' in Alès. In a letter addressed to the Alès courts marked with the flourish of reference to 'article 19 of the 9 April 1898 law', an official *chargée d'assistance* of the Czechoslovak consular mission described Homonaj's worsening state, backed up with a certificate from the 'official doctor' in Mukačevo, ruling that the former Grand'Combe worker's incapacity rating was 35%.<sup>92</sup> This direct intervention by a formal transnational actor displays how diplomatic channels were an active site for the claiming of social rights, and consular agents played an active role in

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<sup>90</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, Ch.5.

<sup>91</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Wapniarz, Letter Polish consul of Marseille to Wapniarz, 8 May 1934.

<sup>92</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Homonaj, Letter Czech consulate to Alès civil tribunal, 29 Sept. 1933.

aiding their citizens to access these rights. Moreover, the combination of legal reference and medical expertise – key to Homonaj’s success – reinforced the legitimacy of the 1898 law. More broadly, this occurred in an early 1930s context which saw, as Paul-André Rosental has demonstrated, the Czech state engage a campaign to establish a more favourable situation in terms of social rights for their citizens in France.<sup>93</sup> In this context, Homonaj exhibited what Rosental terms a transnational ‘microstrategy’, manipulating broader conflicts between states to his own advantage.<sup>94</sup>

As French ‘subjects’, Algerians had no such recourse to legal or medical support from a home state. By consequence, their appeals were less bound up in legal linguistic formulae and perhaps offer more insights into conceptions of justice from below.<sup>95</sup> After spending three months in hospital following an accident that broke his right leg in July 1929, Grand’Combe *manœuvre* Aziz Guernach wrote to the *tribunal de première instance* in Alès. The company’s doctor ruled him a 12% incapacity, leaving him with 485fr per year, which was not enough for him to survive and support his wife and five children in Algeria. Due to his ‘misery’ and ‘deficiency’, Guernach could not ‘struggle’ for a better lot, and it was for this reason that he called upon the tribunal.<sup>96</sup> Two weeks later followed another letter from Guernach in which he explained that another local doctor had awarded him a more favourable incapacity rating. In response to his tenacity, the company threatened him with eviction from his residence if he pursued the case. Again, Guernach implored the tribunal’s support in the face of this ‘abuse’.<sup>97</sup> Guernach’s epistolary

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<sup>93</sup> Paul-André Rosental, ‘Migrations, souveraineté, droits sociaux: Protéger et expulser les étrangers en Europe du XIXe siècle à nos jours’ *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 66.2 (2011), 357-64.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 364. On the limits of these strategies, see: Nancy L. Green, *The Limits of Transnationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 139.

<sup>95</sup> This indicates workplace accidents to be a constitutive feature of the process described by Mary Lewis according to which European foreigners were ‘increasingly invited to take part in France’s social citizenship’ while North Africans were ‘progressively excluded’: Lewis, *Boundaries of the Republic*, 206.

<sup>96</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Guernach, Letter Guernach to president of tribunal, 24 Nov. 1929.

<sup>97</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Guernach, Letter Guernach to president of tribunal, 6 Dec. 1929.

persistence won him a *révision*, which eventually resulted in a 30% ruling in November 1933.<sup>98</sup> His complaints revealed a knowledge of the social rights around accidents, and an assertive mobilisation of languages of deference to the state and justice in the face of unfair treatment by the employer to improve his chances of a positive hearing.<sup>99</sup>

Injured Algerians in other cases articulated alternative views of justice that challenged the logics of the 1898 law. After an injury suffered on 22 December 1931 at Grand'Combe, Algerian *manœuvre* Abdalha Messaoud addressed a letter of complaint to the Alès court in January 1933. His original incapacity rating amounted to a payment of one franc per day, which on its own was 'insufficient to buy even a morsel of bread'.<sup>100</sup> This situation was particularly deplorable because Messaoud declared himself 'incapable of doing any kind of work'. In March, a second *rapport d'expertise médicale* revised up the Algerian's incapacity rate to 6%, which remained low.<sup>101</sup> Like Guernach, Messaoud's appeal challenged the logic of the 1898 law. While he contested the medical expertise that found him almost entirely fit to work, the rhetorical emphasis of Messaoud's appeal rested on a moral-economic understanding of preservation that insisted on social context and opposed the assigning of value to distinct parts of the body. Any payment should provide basic minima for survival.

Such a case was equally made by Ziane Dlimi who on 16 September 1932 had his left foot crushed by the wheels of a wagon, for which he accepted an incapacity rate of 10% in November 1933. In April 1935, he wrote to the Alès civil tribunal from M'Sila, Algeria. Instead of denouncing an injustice either in the ruling or in employer behaviour,

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<sup>98</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Guernach, Medical expertise report (*Rapport d'expertise médicale*, hereafter REM) Saffar, Paras, Aayali, 29 Nov. 1933.

<sup>99</sup> This pertains to a more assertive form of demand by Algerians in France that developed during the interwar period, observed in: Emmanuel Blanchard, *Des colonisés ingouvernables: Adresses d'Algériens aux autorités françaises (Akbou, Paris, 1919-1940)* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2024).

<sup>100</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Messaoud, Letter Messaoud to Alès court, 16 Jan. 1933.

<sup>101</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Messaoud, REM, 20 Mar. 1933.

Dlimi expressed instead a social understanding of injury damages. In the letter, Dlimi informed the Alès legal system that his accident had rendered him ‘incapable’ of ‘support[ing] the needs’ of his ‘three young children’.<sup>102</sup> His appeal to the legal system demanded that his former employer support his children, implying a situated, social understanding of responsibility and a right to life that should be guaranteed by the state. Later in the twentieth century, Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad – born in the same Kabylia as many of the colonial workers of the Gard – would capture this ‘discord’ in the conception of accidents between medical practitioners and state on the one hand, and migrants on the other. For the former, the body of the migrant worker was merely ‘a hierarchical set of tools in which each individual tool (that is, every organ or every part of the body) has its own function as well as a place and an economic value determined by its involvement and role in the production cycle’; for the latter, the body was ‘lived as a way of being present in the world’, inseparable from existence itself.<sup>103</sup> Pre-empting Sayad’s sociological intervention, these letters represented a fundamental challenge to the conception of indemnity codified in 1898.

The images of justice conveyed in the letters were expressed by more than isolated, injured individuals. Both Messaoud and Dlimi had required interpreters in court, with the former’s French being described as ‘imperfect’.<sup>104</sup> It thus follows that his letter of January 1933 from Alès and Dlimi’s of April 1935 from M’Sila were very likely written by intermediaries, fluent in Arabic and literate in French. As Annick Lacroix has shown, the interwar period saw a massification of epistolary practises in Algeria. Beyond literary capacity, the intermediaries possessed a knowledge of the roles and relations of power in

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<sup>102</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Dlimi, Letter Dlimi to president of tribunal, 17 Apr. 1935.

<sup>103</sup> Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, 189.

<sup>104</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Messaoud, PVEA, 25 Apr. 1932.

the legal system.<sup>105</sup> While the identity of either anonymous intermediary is not revealed in the sources, their presence exhibits the fundamental role played by more established migrants in the defence of the rights of colonial workers in the case of Messaoud. For Dlimi, it reveals trans-Mediterranean epistolary services that aided Algerian men who had been injured in the metropole to access their social rights. This fact of collaborative composition suggests that the notion that the 1898 law should preserve the injured worker and their family, rather than simply being a technical exercise for experts that normalised the effects of accidents, went beyond these two injured workers.<sup>106</sup> These letters from colonial subjects who had the least legal protections demonstrate a creative approach to social rights and alternative understandings of justice, that relied upon cooperation and collective action in the composition of justifications and the sharing of legal information.

These alternative understandings of the 1898 law could be combined in syncretic fashion with trade union support structures. After securing an initial rate of 12% with the aid of CGTU mining delegate Emmanuel Layre on 20 January 1932, Mahdi Bahlouli wrote to the civil tribunal of Alès on 21 March to request a *révision*. In the letter, he declared that it was ‘materially impossible’ for him to live with 45 francs per month, and demanded a rent that would permit him to ‘go about [his] usual business’.<sup>107</sup> Here, Bahlouli’s approach fused union legal counsel with the moral economic understanding of accident legislation expressed in the other Algerians’ letters. This combination of support eventually won Bahlouli an increase in his incapacity rate to 15%. Blending recourse to

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<sup>105</sup> On the ties between letter-writing and learning about the French bureaucratic system, see Annick Lacroix, ‘La poste au douar: Usagers non citoyens et État colonial dans les campagnes algériennes de la fin du XIXe siècle à la Seconde Guerre mondiale’ *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 71.3 (2016), 723-27.

<sup>106</sup> This shows how Marichalar’s appeal to question Ewald’s assumption that the 1898 law made consensus among the population can be usefully answered by focusing on the experiences of particularly oppressed groups denied institutional state support. See Marichalar, ‘La violence légitime contre le corps au travail’ in Fassin (ed.), *Vies invisibles, morts indicibles*, 39-56.

<sup>107</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Bahlouli, Letter Bahlouli to president of civil tribunal, 21 Mar. 1932.

union legal structures of solidarity with a direct appeal to the authorities, Bahlouli strategically mobilised the hybrid means of preservation available. In effect, the union official did what the Polish and Czechoslovak states did for their citizens. This suggests that whereas state-centred histories have concluded a progressive exclusion of Algerians by the French state during the interwar period, communist unions engaged with them on everyday labour issues, offering institutional solidarities.<sup>108</sup>

Although Layre had expressed concerns in the press about migrants' legal unawareness, many benefitted from the union's representation at different stages of the accident process. When appealing for *révision* of their incapacity rate, injured workers could sign a *bon de pouvoir* enabling a third party, often a union official familiar with the law, to represent them.<sup>109</sup> In some cases, the effect of union help was evident. Layre successfully represented Spanish Nord d'Alais *manœuvre* José Guzman on 29 May 1935, increasing his damage payments for an injury on 18 September 1934.<sup>110</sup> The same figure also represented Polish miners Jan Dabrowski at Bessèges and Joseph Kozel at Rochebelle in December 1936 and June 1937.<sup>111</sup> Another activist, René Chabis, later took on the role of representation at Rochebelle, supporting Polish Stanislas Mahmic in December 1937 and Algerian Abderamane Kerdouche in June 1939.<sup>112</sup> Given the strategies employed by Rochebelle's doctors and legal representatives against its highly foreign workforce, it is unsurprising that workers of that mine appear to have had a

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<sup>108</sup> Thus somewhat complicating the narrative presented by Mary Lewis in the sixth chapter of *The Boundaries of the Republic*.

<sup>109</sup> On this, see Laure Machu, 'Entre prévention et réparation: les syndicats ouvriers face à la question des risques au travail pendant l'entre-deux-guerres' in Catherine Omnès and Laure Pitti (eds.), *Cultures du risque au travail et pratiques de prévention au XXe siècle: La France au regard des pays voisins* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 189-201.

<sup>110</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Guzman, Procès-verbal de conciliation, 29 May 1935.

<sup>111</sup> ADG 7/U/8/18, Accident Dabrowski, Bon de pouvoir, 14 Dec. 1936; ADG 7/U/8/17, Accident Kozel, Bon de pouvoir, 9 June 1937.

<sup>112</sup> ADG 7/U/8/17, Accident Mahmic, Bon de pouvoir, 14 Dec. 1937; ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Kerdouche, Bon de pouvoir, 21 June 1939.

dedicated legal counsel. It thus seems that unlike state actors, trade unionists indeed provided support ‘without distinction of nationality.’<sup>113</sup>

With the court proceedings themselves unavailable in the archives, the finer details of this support are difficult to access. Nevertheless, the communist pit paper for Nord d’Alais indicates that legal help was literally an everyday presence: Layre held a daily drop-in session from 4.30pm to 6pm in late 1935.<sup>114</sup> As well as this, union representatives took charge of epistolary relations with companies on behalf of injured migrants.<sup>115</sup> By 1938, services were further institutionalised. Arthur Vigne coordinated a service entitled the ‘*contentieux juridique et renseignements gratuits en matières d’accidents de travail* [legal disputes and free advice concerning workplace accidents]’ that intervened regularly on behalf of injured French citizens and European and colonial migrants.<sup>116</sup> Through formal engagement with these forms of institutional union solidarity that Laure Machu has demonstrated existed across France, migrants participated in an antagonistic culture that implied an understanding of workplace accidents as part of the local system of class domination and resistance.<sup>117</sup> Rather than being sporadic and disjointed, relations between European and colonial migrants and the trade union structures were based on regular support with the goal of defending health against company practices.<sup>118</sup> In this way, the infra-political exchanges of the underground and the courtroom were increasingly institutionalised, indicating a chronological progression.

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<sup>113</sup> Workplace accident legal aid was thus part of the Communists’ support for migrants in the 1930s. See Perry: ‘Sans Distinction de Nationalité?’, 337-69.

<sup>114</sup> *L’Emancipateur*, Dec. 1935.

<sup>115</sup> ADG 26/J/18, Letter Nord d’Alais to Layre, 15 Sept. 1936.

<sup>116</sup> See the case of the Algerian Benarab, 7/U/8/19.

<sup>117</sup> Machu, ‘Entre prévention et réparation’, 193-5.

<sup>118</sup> This implies far more regular, productive interaction than conveyed in, for example, Stephane Sirot, ‘Les conditions de travail et les grèves des ouvriers coloniaux’, 65-92.

It was not only to communist counsel that injured workers could turn. The *Fédération nationale des mutilés et invalides du travail* (FNMIT) – formed in 1920 to offer legal support to and to campaign on behalf of people injured at work – also represented injured workers in the Gard.<sup>119</sup> Offering this service in the 1930s was Felix Croze, who represented Alphonse Brasolin at Rochebelle in October 1933, Salvator Piras at Grand’Combe in March 1934 for a 1932 accident, and Michel Popoff at Rochebelle in 1935.<sup>120</sup> Croze’s efficacy is suggested in his intervention on behalf of Wasyl Chmaryk when he wrote to the local court officials in a highly familiar tone on 12 May 1932, asking them to ‘be amicable’ in re-opening Chmaryk’s case from March 1930.<sup>121</sup> Eventually, Chmaryk would obtain an increased incapacity rating of 18%.<sup>122</sup> The archival material available does not shed light on Croze’s background, but it seems that he, and the FNMIT, operated separately from the labour union movement as a whole, especially given that his support persisted after the merger of CGTU and CGT locally. Whatever their motivations, these migrants engaged and benefited from a form of support that existed outside of the communist model of worker solidarity.

Once the courts agreed to review a contestation appeal, medical expertise bodies conducted a new investigation. Despite the 1898 law’s premise that medical expertise would deliver neutral, objective decisions, the process was often characterised by overt conflict. The independence of the medical committee could be the object of such contention. On 29 April 1931, Julian Hernandez arrived with his ‘counsels’ before his *révision* committee to denounce the presence of Dr. Soulier, the doctor who had initially

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<sup>119</sup> Damien de Blic, ‘De la Fédération des Mutilés de Travail à la Fédération Nationale des Accidents du Travail et des Handicapés. Une longue mobilisation pour une « juste et légitime » réparation des accidents du travail et des maladies professionnelles’ *Revue française des affaires sociales* 2 (2008), 123-8.

<sup>120</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Brasolin, Bon de pouvoir, 16 Oct. 1933; ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Piras, Bon de pouvoir, 12 Mar. 1934; ADG 7/U/8/11, Accident Popoff, Bon de pouvoir, 20 Oct. 1935.

<sup>121</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Chmaryk, Letter Croze to Bessèges court clerk, 12 May 1932.

<sup>122</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Chmaryk, REM, 4 Jan. 1933.

assigned him an insufficient incapacity rate immediately after his accident. The Spanish worker, who had been injured at Bessèges in December 1929, questioned the legitimacy of any committee including Soulier.<sup>123</sup> But, the committee responded, while article 17 of the 1898 law prevented the company's doctor from sitting on the *révision* committee, it said nothing about other medical personnel. As Soulier was not employed by Bessèges, his presence was unproblematic. Hernandez's insistence that he and his counsels would reject any decision with Soulier involved is revealing. It indicates that the injured Spaniard and tertiary actors – possibly from the CGTU or the FNMIT – perceived Soulier as representing interests antagonistic to the worker. In this way, light is shed on how broader class affinities were understood to influence medical process.

Just as they were wary of potential bias from doctors close to the employer, some migrants instrumentalised the proclivities of more sympathetic local practitioners. Before examining the patient, the appeal committee would read medical reports delivered by company and victim. Dr. Naud – who featured in Chapter One of this thesis defending Polish workers exposed to silicosis – consistently appeared in *rapports d'expertise médicale* as having delivered favourable certificates to injured migrants, which bolstered their appeal case. This decision could be taken soon after the accident, as in the case of the Algerian Saaoui of Nord d'Alais who was granted a medical certificate by Naud on 25 May 1932 after his injury of 9 April was initially not recognised as such by the company doctor.<sup>124</sup> When Italian miner Petix felt that his employer 'was losing interest' in him after an accident, he visited Dr Naud. This constituted the turning point in the five-month period between Petix's injury of 24 June 1935 and his accident investigation on 26 November 1935, enabling him as it did to obtain an official accident declaration from the

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<sup>123</sup> ADG 7/U/8/6, Accident Hernandez, REM, 29 Apr. 1931.

<sup>124</sup> ADG 7/U/8/17, Accident Saaoui, REM, 30 Aug. 1937.

mayor of Molières-sur-Cèze.<sup>125</sup> In both cases, Naud was mobilised successfully to appeal initial denials from employers.

The date of ‘consolidation’ of an injury was also an important issue, with workers entitled to half their pre-accident wage up until the date on which their injury was considered healed or stable.<sup>126</sup> Naud was often enlisted to dispute the consolidation of an injury, and thus to prolong this period of the damage payment, which would necessarily be higher than any permanent and partial incapacity rating given that these were calculated as a percentage of half of the previously earned wage. Following this logic, Algerian Bessèges worker Mafoud Bouhiten visited Naud on 29 March 1933 three weeks after having had his injury declared as ‘consolidated’ by company doctor Fabrègue. There, Naud validated Bouhiten’s pain and noted disfigurement of the thumbs as counterevidence.<sup>127</sup> This action made Naud an heir – conscious or otherwise – of the social doctors who contested company doctors in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais at the turn of the twentieth century analysed by Judith Rainhorn.<sup>128</sup>

But his sympathetic treatment of injured migrants regarding consolidation dates piqued suspicion among other doctors. With the injured worker back in Algeria by March 1936, doctors Aayali, Beraud, and Saffar in Bougie re-examined Bouhiten’s case. On consulting the contradictory medical reports, these doctors questioned Naud’s rigour before concluding that the thumb injuries he had noted as justification for non-consolidation had nothing to do with the initial injury.<sup>129</sup> Therefore, they upheld

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<sup>125</sup> ADG 7/U/8/16, Accident Petix, PVEA, 26 Nov. 1935.

<sup>126</sup> Article 3, ‘Loi accidents ouvriers’ (1898).

<sup>127</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Bouhiten, REM, 20 Mar. 1936.

<sup>128</sup> Judith Rainhorn, ‘Médecins de compagnie, médecins de ville autour du corps blessé: l’enjeu du certificat médical d’accident de travail au début du XXe siècle’ in Sylvie Aprile, Matthieu de Oliveira, Béatrice Touchelay, Karl-Michael Hohn (eds.), *Les Houillères entre l’État, le marché et la société: Les territoires de la résilience (XVIIIe-XXIe siècles)* (Villeneuve-d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2015), 121-35.

<sup>129</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Bouhiten, REM, 20 Mar. 1936.

Fabrègue's original report ruling consolidation on 7 March, and by consequence denied Bouhiten years of non-consolidation payments. As well as testifying to the extreme lengths of time such cases could endure, this example demonstrates how medical debates about the effects of labour milieu dangers on migrant bodies could assume trans-Mediterranean dimensions. In similar fashion, Stanislas Matacq was declared non-consolidated from his injury of December 1935 by Naud on 6 November 1936 because of swelling and pain in the feet, evidence that was rejected by Dr. Lapeyre who headed a *rapport d'expertise médicale* in February 1937.<sup>130</sup> By consequence, Matacq lost several months of non-consolidation payments. These pieces of evidence suggest that while migrant workers knew that Naud would exhibit greater sensitivity to their pain, local doctors were aware of his proclivities and doctors in Algeria exercised a stern professionalism. Doctors' sympathies shaped their expertise, and, in turn, the way in which it was sought by workers and employers: medical knowledge constituted a battlefield. This is then an even more complex story than 'company doctors' against 'town doctors', given that some of those who denied migrants access to higher payments had no prior links to the companies, nor did they reside in the metropole. Instead, professional identities as well as class and colonial prejudice possibly interacted with other moral or political affinities to shape a complex interaction of different medical gazes.<sup>131</sup>

But it was not only Naud that challenged company claims. It was not uncommon for doctors completing subsequent reports to question the practices of their company-employed confrères. An initial incapacity assessment by Peyre granted Sicilian Rochebelle miner Francisco Piras an incapacity rate of 16% for his wrist's crushing

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<sup>130</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Matacq, REM, 4 Feb. 1937.

<sup>131</sup> Here, the medical gaze is not a unitary notion, but a conflictual process: Michel Foucault, *La naissance de la Clinique: Une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963).

between two wagons.<sup>132</sup> Six months later, the Rochebelle company doctor received criticism in the *révision* report by Dr. Delage for his brevity and lack of evidence. By consequence, Delage concluded from his own examination that the rate should be doubled to 34%.<sup>133</sup> This considerable improvement exhibits a clear critique of the partiality of the company doctor. Similarly, Brazilian-born Italian citizen Alfonso Brasolin was deemed by Peyre not to suffer from a permanent work incapacity, who ruled that from ‘a functional point of view’, Brasolin could do ‘the same work as before’.<sup>134</sup> However, when Alès doctors Boissier, Deleuze, and Coste reviewed this decision in January 1935, they found that weakened muscle tissue had brought about constant pain, and earned the worker an incapacity indemnity of 6%.<sup>135</sup> These instances corroborate local syndicalist legal counsels’ warnings about the partiality of company doctors. Moreover, they suggest that local doctors independent from company employment may be more considerate towards migrant expressions of pain rather than seeing their bodies as ‘a set of tools’ useful only for the process of production.<sup>136</sup>

Once they had scrutinised previous examinations, *révision* doctors pored over the victim’s claim of aggravation. After being injured at Bessèges in December 1931, Polish Jan Karzak had moved north to the mines of the Saône-et-Loire. Due to his injuries, his daily wage had decreased from 38fr to 24fr. The *révision* doctor in Autun, Dr. Dallet, noted in his report that Karzak arrived at the assessment with the ‘the obvious concern to convey to the maximum the greatest number of troubles’. Dallet was suspicious of this approach, adding ‘I had barely moved my fingers towards his head when he complained of sharp pain and I was obliged to have the interpreter tell him that in exaggerating like

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<sup>132</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Piras, Conciliation agreement, 20 Jun. 1934.

<sup>133</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Piras, REM, 5 Dec. 1934.

<sup>134</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Brasolin, PVEA, 10 Nov. 1933.

<sup>135</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Brasolin, REM, 22 Jan. 1935.

<sup>136</sup> Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, 189.

this he would receive a lower rent'.<sup>137</sup> Resonating with the strategy of Grand'Combe doctors, medical professionals in other coalfields were equally suspicious of what they perceived as migrants' desire to exaggerate pain in order to trick their authority and to game the 1898 law. Back in the Gard, Dr. Delage warned in his report about Italian Francisco Piras's '*esprit de revendication très développé* [very developed spirit of demand]'.<sup>138</sup> It is possible that the doctor referred to Piras's attitude in his office. The expression may also have alluded to the strategy Piras had employed between being injured in June 1934 and the *rapport d'expertise médicale*, which involved being seen by three separate doctors who ruled incapacity ratings of 45%. This persistent strategy of visiting multiple doctors was awarded with a rate of 34%, which while higher than the original 18%, still bore the hallmarks of wariness about his '*esprit de revendication*'. Both before and during the *révision* examination, migrant workers were suspected of strategizing to maximise their damage payments.<sup>139</sup> In equal measure, this elucidates the resourcefulness of some migrants in the face of doctors who in seeing themselves as the guardians of objectivity erected barriers to indemnity payments.

Algerian workers faced particularly accentuated scrutiny and doubt from doctors. After Aliane Hachime had been struck on the head by falling rocks in November 1933, an examination by Dr. Goubert in January 1934 accused Hachime of 'exaggerating or simulating' deafness. Subsequent consultations were more sympathetic, with doctor Terracol in Montpellier found him suffering from 'pithiatic deafness'. Following this, yet another consultation in Nîmes ruled 'pseudo-simulation' motivated by 'psychic troubles

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<sup>137</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Karzak, REM, 27 May 1933.

<sup>138</sup> ADG 7/U/8/14, Accident Piras, REM, 3 Feb. 1935.

<sup>139</sup> Such a suspicion was not unique to France during this period. This echoes the xenophobia also exercised in the realm of workplace accidents towards racialised workers in 1920s Germany (about Italians) and in Italian-controlled Libya (about the local population), see Moses, *The First Modern Risk*, 191.

known by the name “*psychose de revendication*”.<sup>140</sup> In this case, what local doctors had originally seen as a conscious attempt to mislead medical expertise came to be pathologized, by a team external to the coalfield, as an unconscious, unintentional, uncontrollable psychological trauma that caused the Algerian truly to believe that he was suffering.<sup>141</sup> This reinforces the notion of the *révision* process as a battle of wits between workers and employers. This battle was mediated through doctors, who were themselves not a coherent group, but were divided along spatial and employment-based lines. Those closest to the mining companies were most likely to take the hard line of denial, while those without close ties were more sympathetic but held their own professionalised prejudices about colonial subjects’ capacities to identify pain correctly.

Algerians who underwent *révision* processes in Algeria found that doctors there frequently challenged their claims. After breaking his arm in Alès in February 1928, Ali Aurahmoune was visited in Lafayette, Algeria on 23 August 1930 by Dr. Margerid who ruled that ‘callouses on his palms that prove[d] that he was not inactive’ contradicting Aurahmoune’s ‘claim’ that he had been unable to work since returning across the Mediterranean.<sup>142</sup> Margerid used Aurahmoune’s body against his word, taking the fact that he had worked to rule that his damages should be reduced from 45% to 35%. Doctors in Algeria thus practiced the same systematic doubt over their injuries as those in the metropole, without considering the possibility that Aurahmoune’s work may have been subsistence farm labour. Whereas doctors’ certificates could aid Polish and Czech

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<sup>140</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Hachime, REM, 13 Sept. 1935.

<sup>141</sup> In a similar vein, British doctors practised a hierarchy of pain perception, according to which white, British, upper-class men were the only people truly capable of properly identifying pain, see Joanna Bourke, ‘Pain Sensitivity: An Unnatural History from 1800 to 1965’ *Journal of Medical Humanities* 35 (2014), 310.

<sup>142</sup> ADG 7/U/8/10, Accident Aurahmoune, REM, 25 Aug. 1930.

migrants to increase their damages payments when they returned home, Algerians could expect no such nationally-rooted support.

In the *révision* process, migrants' capabilities were conditioned by their relationship to the French and other states as well as by their interactions with informal networks and more institutional structures of solidarity. Often, the rhetoric or practises of their appeals challenged hegemonic narratives about the 1898 law. It was the most marginalised actors that delivered the most profound critiques, which articulated moral-economic understandings rooted in preservation against technical medical expertise. When these migrants came up against doctors, they faced powerful but heterogenous social actors whose often discriminatory actions further unveil the non-neutral nature of the 1898 law.

### **Inequality and Solidarity as Lived by Mourning Families**

When a migrant died, their family – tied to the Gard mining labour milieu whether they were present or in the country of origin – faced material hardships. Often dependent upon the mining income, the barriers that they faced to claiming reparations were many. Examining their efforts to access indemnities reveals the specifically gendered ways in which they related to coalfield danger, inequalities, and solidarities, and in turn reveals the spatial expansion of the Gard labour milieu as experienced by coalfield residents and far-flung families.

The widows of European migrants who migrated alone to die in the mines of Alès could, like injured men, involve their state. Czechoslovak woman Petrova Slowenka (née Elisabeth Fales) mobilised the bureaucratic capacities of Czechoslovak diplomacy in 1930 when faced with the accusation that she had ceased to be in an effective relationship with her husband Peter, crushed to death in March by a mine collapse while clearing a

gallery at Grand'Combe. In the accident investigation, Czechoslovak miner Pasył Rovenie alleged that Petrova Slowenka had left the deceased miner nine years ago and that no children resulted from the marriage.<sup>143</sup> This situation would render their relationship '*séparé de corps*', thus disqualifying the widow from any compensation. By August of the same year, the Czech diplomatic services stationed at Mukačevo sent a letter on her behalf, complete with translated marriage and birth certificates for three children, attesting to her and Peter's continued relationship.<sup>144</sup> The Czech Justice ministry vouched for these documents, before communicating them to the French consul in Prague. In death as in life, states of origin could provide support to legitimise their subjects' claims.

For European widows living in the coalfield, death was increasingly synonymous with active interaction with local communist politicians. When her husband Jerzy lost his life in a collapsed mine in June 1934, Polish Vernarède resident Marya Cieslar nominated local Communist Youth activist Fernand Corbier to represent her in legal proceedings that would allocate damages to be paid to the family.<sup>145</sup> The precise social mechanism by which she came to choose Corbier remains unclear from the sources, but the fact that she chose him suggests a local norm that communists would aid migrants. Focusing on the actions of widows following their husbands' deaths attests to the range of collaborations that they could mobilise to access indemnities, while equally conveying how the labour milieu was defined not only in terms of space, but also in terms of social reproduction, around workplace danger.

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<sup>143</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Slowenka, PVEA, 20 Mar. 1930.

<sup>144</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Slowenka, Letter Czech diplomatic services to French consul in Prague, 6 Aug. 1930.

<sup>145</sup> ADG 7/U/8/15, Accident Cieslar, Declaration signed by Marya Cieslar, 23 July 1934.

The families of deceased Algerians, neither present in the coalfield nor benefiting from diplomatic support, had to take a different approach. An extraordinary case details the extreme precarity of the families of Algerians who perished in the mines of the Gard and the limits of rights-based appeals. On a hot Tuesday afternoon on 9 August 1932, Mokrane Kanoune was unloading coal from a wagon at the uncovered pithead at Trélys. Suddenly, his Algerian and Polish colleagues reported, he fell to the ground. These same colleagues took him unconscious to the showers before he was transported to the company hospital. He died two hours later. Immediately, employer lawyers denied that it was a workplace accident.<sup>146</sup> However, an intervention from Isidore Michel, the communist mayor of Le Martinet, insisted to the *juge de la paix* of Saint-Ambroix that the original doctor's note by Manjot had recorded sunstroke as the cause of death, indicating a relation with uncovered surface work. Moreover, he added, the deceased worker had a young child in Algeria.<sup>147</sup> This intervention by a sympathetic mayor, acutely aware of the reproductive repercussions of the death, prompted a workplace accident investigation that drew involvement from unexpected actors.

When news of the death reached home, trans-Mediterranean pressure joined initial local communist support. By October local administrators were gathering information from Kanoune's family. Saida Benfleki, newly widowed, appeared on 14 October 1932 before the *juge de la paix* of Bordj-Bou-Arreridj. From this hearing, the tribunal heard that Kanoune sent 300-400fr per month to his wife. In addition, she insisted that he 'never mentioned having been ill in France'.<sup>148</sup> These statements from Saida Benfleki echo the letters by injured Algerian men by insinuating that the law should guarantee previously assured means of subsistence, with fault laying squarely with the company's effect on her

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<sup>146</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Kanoune, PVEA, 15 Sept. 1932.

<sup>147</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Kanoune, Letter Michel to *juge de la paix* of Saint-Ambroix, 11 Aug. 1932.

<sup>148</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Kanoune, Benfleki interview, 14 Oct. 1932.

husband's health. Another letter received subsequently by the court informed of a further development: Saida had also died.<sup>149</sup> The letter, addressed from the deceased couple's three-year-old daughter Kaltsoum demanded Kanoune's 'primitive wage from before he died, as well as my pension civil that I have the right to.'<sup>150</sup> Here, the performative voice of childhood was deployed, perhaps by another family member, alongside an assertion of rights, albeit not expressed in the official authoritative language accordant with the 1898 law. Here, a grieving Algerian family 'seized upon', to cite Annick Lacroix, the newly extended means of postal communication to claim their right to vitally necessary damage payments.<sup>151</sup> This tragic family story unveils how the expendability of colonial workers had deep familial repercussions that extended far beyond the workers' body, into the realm of family life. By the same token, it demonstrates how the possibilities of demanding indemnities available to the families of the deceased were conditioned by colonial dynamics of power.

Collections for the families of dead migrants demonstrated local practices of mutual-aid in the face of labour milieu danger while also addressing the trans-Mediterranean impacts of death. In December 1931, *La Tribune des Mineurs du Gard* reported that 653fr had been collected for the widow and children of a Polish worker perished in an accident at Cessous, indicating that this showed 'the spirit of solidarity that animates the workers'.<sup>152</sup> In March 1938, after the mining death of Larbi Foued, his colleagues of the Breard pit organised a collection for his wife and three children in Algeria, amassing 730fr.<sup>153</sup> In this way, local workers came together to supply trans-Mediterranean solidarity to people they had never met, tragically tied to the mine through

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<sup>149</sup> ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Kanoune, Kaltsoum letter, undated.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Lacroix, 'La poste au douar', 713.

<sup>152</sup> *La Tribune des Mineurs du Gard*, Dec. 1931.

<sup>153</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 5 Mar. 1938.

colonial exploitation and capitalist death. These cases demonstrate that the community of solidarity was not restricted to the physical space of the Gard. It might be that their publication tells us more about the image of solidarity developed in the communist movement in the latter 1930s than it does about the quotidian practices of support developed around workplace death. The second half of this thesis will investigate these themes further. Be that as it may, in these cases, the community, perhaps propelled by the everyday infra-politics of injury, sought to fill in for insufficiencies in the 1898 law.

Workplace accidents constituted a realm in which the daily dynamics of forcing and preservation characteristic of extractive capitalism were implemented and challenged by a range of actors. This chapter has cast serious doubt upon the notion that the 1898 law normalised occupational risk, and stripped accidents of conflict. Instead, structural and agent-driven discriminations exposed migrants to the embodied precarities that extraction produced in specific ways. In response, migrants relied upon and actively constructed solidarity underground, in the courtroom, and in the community, which extended in some cases beyond the geographical limits of the coalfield. This was not a uniquely heroic or hard-masculine solidarity, but one that was based on immediate care, sensory solidarity in the courtroom, and attentiveness to the vital needs and specific disadvantages of migrants on the part of ordinary workers of diverse origins and trade union institutions. But these solidarities were not automatically determined by shared experiences of suffering or oppression. Rather, they were contingent on actions, which could be influenced by diverse social and political affinities and loyalties.

This chapter has shown how the 1898 workplace accident law was wrought with ‘solidarity’, but not in the way that either François Ewald or the translators of his work

envisaged.<sup>154</sup> Far from bringing about a neutral national solidarity based on a relationship to the social state, employers and victims negotiated and manipulated legal structures to limit or to maximise accident damages. Just as historical actors centred the sensory in these conflicts, this chapter has revealed that *experience* was central to the contemporary understanding of class struggle. Engineers, some doctors, company lawyers, supervisors, and ordinary workers erected or heightened obstacles of knowledge, language, position in the labour hierarchy, to prevent victims from accessing damages. In response, victims and colleagues cooperated underground and affirmed each other's bodily feelings in the courtroom, often expressing support across lines of origin. The sensory experience of accidents was a crucial feature of conflict in this realm, with class relations waged through and by workers' experiencing and feeling bodies. Converting this to solidarity in the courtroom was the next step, that connected disparate sites of the labour milieu. It was not only mining delegates who exhibited a preservational tendency elaborated by Cabot, but also workers, demonstrating its deep-rooted, if unstable nature. While some appeals to the authorities rested within the language and logic of the 1898 law, less legally mediated letters from Algerians and communist rhetoric about company abuses reveal a broader and deeper social and political opposition to risk, to its normalisation, and to discriminatory practises. An approach from the margins that centres the excluded sectors of the working class makes the dominant narrative of the 1898 law looks questionable.

Beyond this, a focus on workplace accidents has implications for historical understandings of migration in interwar France. It adds to state-centred narratives that focus on the ways in which foreigners were excluded and included. In this case, migrants experienced specific but differential sufferings in obtaining justice. Noteworthy are the multiform ways in which Algerians were particularly disadvantaged. It was through a

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<sup>154</sup> Ewald's landmark study of the 1898 law was translated into English as *The Birth of Solidarity*.

developing process of cooperation, that was explicitly conscious of those specific sufferings, involving labour institutions and ‘ordinary’ mineworkers and women, that the population of the Gard developed practises of support and inclusion around workplace accidents. Crucially, this process stemmed from both covert cooperation with colleagues and direct confrontation with exploitative actors, in the form of employers, doctors, engineers, supervisors, and lawyers.

It is thus clear that solidarity, class, and ethnic relations were not merely about the wage-related dimensions of the extraction process. The embodied fragilities of coalmining as a technical process in an unstable labour environment shaped migrants’ relations with their French and foreign colleagues, as well as conditioning their interactions with management and the state. Of course, the impacts of the extraction process were not limited to the workplace, or to the courtroom. In the next chapter, we will examine workers’ interactions in the labour milieu beyond the mine that companies sought to control.

### **Ch.3. ‘Beauties of the regime’: Moral Economies of Housing, Heating, and Pollution**

The issues raised by the management of life in the labour milieu extended far beyond the perilous workplace. A tragic event on a cold night in Salindres in autumn 1937 provides a window into how the interconnected, material issues of housing, heating, and pollution shaped everyday experiences of coalfield life. In the early hours of 17 October, five Algerian men sharing two small rooms suffered carbon-monoxide poisoning. While one awoke in a daze and managed to escape before collapsing outside, three of his roommates died. Before going to sleep, they had been endeavouring to keep warm by bringing their coal-fired stove into the area that hosted the two beds that they shared. While a regional republican newspaper ruled that the deaths were the result of ‘puerile aberration’ on the part of those who had been poisoned, communist weekly *Le Cri du Gard* took a more structural view: ‘Nights are cold in this season, and when housed in such conditions, the cold is even more biting.’<sup>1</sup> This tragedy was the consequence of a response to the heightened exposure to the elements faced by colonial workers in their poor and overcrowded housing. To conclude, *Le Cri* asked: ‘When will the Algerians be given living conditions sufficient to guarantee dignified housing?’ This broader, political point – invoking a deserved dignity and implying that French actors were responsible for the state of affairs – encapsulates the way in which power relations around the management, or indeed mismanagement, of resources unfolded in the interwar Gard.

This chapter explores how company management of environments that were built, mined, and polluted shaped hierarchies and solidarities beyond the workplace. This

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Républicain du Gard*, 21 Oct. 1937; *Le Cri du Gard*, 23 Oct. 1937.

incorporation of heating, housing, and pollution, as inputs to and outputs of the extraction process, contributes to a more total analysis of the socio-environmental experience of the labour milieu involving a broader range of coalfield inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> Studying these environmental factors as central to working-class perceptions of industrial capitalism builds on research by Nicolas Hatzfeld and Renaud Bécot on the development of trade-union critiques of capitalism's impact on the '*cadre de vie*' [living conditions, or living environment] in the twentieth-century French labour movement.<sup>3</sup> But the approach in this chapter also goes beyond union documents to probe the limits of sources – the census, mine guard reports, washerwomen's petitions – that afford partial but valuable glimpses into everyday experiences of extraction often obscured from the historians' view. By studying the configuration and conditions of housing, access to coal resources, and the pollution of the air and rivers, we draw links between alliances of adaptation, disobedience, and outright critique between the diverse and differently impacted groups of the population.

Much of the historical literature on paternalism has focused exclusively on housing and has emphasised company intentions of social control and workforce retention.<sup>4</sup> First, this chapter explores how the allocation and quality of housing interacted with hierarchies of race, nationality, and gender to shape everyday experiences of the labour milieu. Housing quality was a clear factor of difference between workers, while the specific problem of housing single men gave rise to pockets of autonomy. Second, the

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<sup>2</sup> Barca, 'Sur l'écologie', 29.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Hatzfeld, 'Travailleurs, cadre de vie, sante et progrès' 117-38 ; Renaud Bécot, 'L'invention syndicale de l'environnement dans la France des années 1960' *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 113.1 (2012), 171.

<sup>4</sup> A classic example, in the Gard, is Gaillard, 'Un exemple français'. Also see: Yves Le Maner, *Du coron à la cite: Un siècle d'habitat minier dans le Nord/Pas-de-Calais 1850-1950* (Lewarde: Centre historique minier, 1995). For a critical view of the 'social control' thesis, see Guy Baudelle, 'Le contrôle social des mineurs par le logement dans les bassins houiller européens est-il un mythe ?' *Amnis* 20 (2021), doi: 10.4000/amnis.6665.

chapter examines coal as an energy resource, studying its place in the lived experience of energy-precarious inhabitants to tease out a feature of coalfield life marked by racialised and gendered covert contention.<sup>5</sup> This attention to the materiality of coal raises another question less frequently broached in studies of migration to coalfields in France: pollution. Despite the pervasive presence of extractive industry pollution, the question of how this dimension of resource management affected community relations remains largely unprobed.<sup>6</sup> The final section of the chapter thus explores how polluted air and rivers came to be the focus of political contention involving the local workers' movement, washerwomen, and engineers.

Expanding our reading of the labour milieu to consider labour inputs and outputs demonstrates how gender, migration, and colonial status gave rise to situated oppressions that were mediated through the environment. While the entire working-class population lived in inadequate housing, received insufficient coal, and were surrounded by polluted air and rivers, these exposures were accentuated for migrants – in particular Algerians – and women. In the face of company negligence, labour-milieu inhabitants articulated – through covert cooperation, disobedience, and overt complaint – moral economies based around the provision of basic vital minima, which played a fundamental role in local conceptions of extractive power relations. By the same token, while critiques of unhygienic housing and polluted public resources denounced companies' unwillingness to guarantee decent living conditions, spaces of relative autonomy were essential to the emergence of practices of disobedience and resistance.

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<sup>5</sup> On this question in industrial Britain, see Charles-François Mathis, *La civilisation du charbon* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2021). Recent studies have raised the ways in which access to and use of coal as an energy source was gendered, see Sean Adams, 'Making Coal Sharp: Gendered Consumers and Users of Mineral Fuel in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century United States' *Journal of Energy History/Revue de l'histoire de l'énergie* 6 (2021), 1-16.

<sup>6</sup> Outside of mining, see Renaud Bécot and Gwenola Le Naour (eds.), *Vivre et lutter dans un monde toxique. Violence environnementale et santé à l'âge du pétrole* (Paris: Seuil, 2023).

### **Unequal, Controlled, and Insalubrious Housing**

Accommodation constituted a central feature of paternalist resource relations. Gaillard's thesis on La Grand'Combe in the long nineteenth century identified total control of housing as the keystone for establishing a 'capitalist theocracy'.<sup>7</sup> But by the interwar period, Grand'Combe company's housing hegemony was waning, while other companies had never established such control. While scholars of paternalism have debated whether the role of housing was primarily about 'social control' or about securing a fixed workforce, this section examines the contradictions and limits to social control in the face of the messy realities of migratory regimes, the manifold experiences of housing for different migrants, and disputes over conditions.<sup>8</sup> While housing resources were a vector of differentiation and control, both their spatial configuration and quality could prompt critiques of company resource management.

In the wake of the Great War, the Grand'Combe company sought to establish a framework for lodging newly arrived foreign mineworkers. In September 1919, company director Mazodier summoned Raymond – who managed a factory owned by Grand'Combe in Marseille and had experience with Italian migrants – to a meeting to discuss the 'best conditions for the Italian workforce'.<sup>9</sup> Raymond advised that the 500-600 single Italian men due to arrive in the Gard should be housed in camps, sleeping in rooms of four. Rather than a mess hall for all residents, each barracks should become a 'collective house' for twenty workers – ideally from the same village – with a kitchen, dining room, and housework staff. This would avoid drunken 'scenes of disorder' that come with large dining rooms, as well as the danger that 'in periods of agitation or strikes,

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<sup>7</sup> Gaillard, 'Un exemple français', 87-100.

<sup>8</sup> See Baudelle, 'Le contrôle social des mineurs par le logement'.

<sup>9</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Mazodier to Engineer-Director, 20 Sept. 1919.

these great rooms can become tumultuous conference halls.’<sup>10</sup> Raymond explicitly saw the spatial configuration of the domestic sphere as inherently linked to social control. This control could be strengthened through a structure of national intermediaries. Raymond suggested that ‘it would be good to have an Italian, well familiarized with the customs and traditions of his compatriots’ directing food provision, cleaning, moral support, and surveillance of the camps, playing ‘the role of consul.’<sup>11</sup> The ultimate goal of this company functionary was to create conditions in which heads of large families would encourage the ‘spontaneous’ migration of their children and wives, in order to ‘fill in the holes’ left by weak birth rates and war.<sup>12</sup> Behind this policy of social control was thus an aim to stimulate chain migration by these European workers.

A concern for housing quality and spatial configuration persisted in the housing constructed for the families of European migrants. In 1921, accommodation in Saint-Jean-le-Valérisclé housed its first Polish families. Forty-eight lodgings were made available in six separate buildings, each equipped with toilets, drinking water, electric lighting, a *cantine* service, and cooking facilities.<sup>13</sup> At least in the company’s plans, this housing provision represented a desirable and hygienic domestic arrangement intended for European families.<sup>14</sup>

The development of the *casernes basses* [low barracks] district of La Grand’Combe indicates the emergence of hierarchies of housing that unfolded during the interwar years. Despite delivering just a snapshot of housing configuration every five years, census reports are useful for tracing this evolution. In 1926, the company-owned

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Mazodier to Engineer-Director, 20 Sept. 1919.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Gaillard, ‘Un exemple français’, 213.

<sup>14</sup> This system was also how housing allocation functioned in industrial Lorraine, see Noiriél, *Longwy*, 194.

neighbourhood was inhabited by ninety-six French families, five from Spain, eleven from Italy, and a shared accommodation inhabited by twenty-nine Italians, five Czechoslovaks, two Armenians, one Algerian, and one Swiss.<sup>15</sup> This latter household aside, the street was uniquely composed of European nuclear families. By 1931, changes began to occur. In the building identified as Number Nine in the census lived small ‘households’ – very probably sharing rooms – of between two and three Czechoslovak mineworker employees of the Grand’Combe company.<sup>16</sup> In the building identified as Number Ten, lived seventy company employees from across Algeria. The *casernes basses* thus shifted from being principally occupied by families to providing residences for single men, including colonial migrants. Beside it, a whole new district had been created, given the name *casernes neuves* [new barracks]. This sector was inhabited by European families: thirty French, six Czechoslovak, two Italian, one Belgian.<sup>17</sup> In 1936, this model was confirmed, with the *casernes basses* increasingly characterised by large, shared accommodations of Czechoslovak and Algerian working men, while the *neuves* were occupied by European families.<sup>18</sup> Reflections by Fléchon provide a sense of the relative material conditions of the housing. While the *basses* were ‘dingy and old’, the *neuves* were ‘solid houses’. However, Fléchon tempered the advantages of the *neuves*, which were set in a noxious surrounding environment, ‘lined up along the dirty grey stream into which flowed the dirty water of the coal cleaning plant.’<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding this important environmental nuance, the case of the *casernes* lays bare a hierarchy of housing conditions.

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<sup>15</sup> ADG 6/M/235, Grand’Combe census, 1926.

<sup>16</sup> ADG 6/M/236, Grand’Combe census, 1931.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> ADG 6/M/236, Grand’Combe census, 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 51.



Figure 3-1 AMA 5FiGC12, New housing development in La Grand'Combe, 1923

The limited company documentation on the attribution of housing confirms the centrality of family status and coloniality to this division. In a folder entitled ‘lodged workers’ in the records of the Rochebelle company from 1931-32, a series of tables reinforce this reality.<sup>20</sup> A first table, which lists the workers employed in the Fontanes pit who lived in company family housing, contained the names of Europeans only.<sup>21</sup> Another undated, handwritten table from the same folder affirms the imbrication of family and colonial status. Alongside the worker’s name and work section, the table recorded the size of his family. While this may have been a practical question, it seems to have deeper meaning in the context of the preoccupation with pro-natalist ideas prevalent in French society in general and exhibited by the Grand’Combe company engineers when expressing their desire for the arrival of immigrants to bolster the birth rates of a depleted population.<sup>22</sup> Neither the folder nor the archival collection contains the applications

<sup>20</sup> ADG 25/J/82, Rochebelle list of accommodated workers, 1931-32.

<sup>21</sup> ADG 25/J/82, Rochebelle Fontanes Division, List of workers lodged by the company, undated 1931-33.

<sup>22</sup> See Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*, 25-50.

themselves nor their results. Nevertheless, even this rather rudimentary information confirms that housing was a site of differentiation between European and colonial workers: there is not a single Algerian name on the list of requests.<sup>23</sup> Housing was thus a vector through which pro-natalism, ethnic preferences, and the colonial colour line was expressed.

Accessing sufficient and acceptable accommodation was a persistent problem for Algerian workers. In February 1925, a Grand'Combe company agent informed the administrator-delegate that since the beginning of the year the landlords of the town 'shamefully exploited' North African men, making twenty-five of them pay 'excessive prices' of 20-25frs per month each to live in two 'humid' rooms of 16m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>24</sup> The company identified this abuse as a principal cause for problems in the recruitment of Algerians. True to the framework established in 1919, the company's solution was to provide housing. On 9 February, the same administrator revealed that he had opened a building, formerly inhabited by an engineer, for the Algerian workforce.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the company would directly control both price and quality. Yet a detail at the end of the letter indicates that the engineer had left for a reason: 'despite the workings of the mine, it is in a sufficient state to receive [the Algerian workforce].'<sup>26</sup> Although the archive provides no further information, it would appear reasonable to assume that accommodation considered too affected by mine pollution, or other kinds of mining-related surface disturbance, to be occupied by a French engineer was made available for the Algerians.<sup>27</sup> The muted concern

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<sup>23</sup> ADG 25/J/82, Rochebelle accommodation requests register, undated.

<sup>24</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe to Administrator-Delegate, 1 Feb. 1925.

<sup>25</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe to Administrator-Delegate, 9 Feb. 1925.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Rationalised mining prompted increasing surface-level disturbances in the interwar period, see Troch, 'Ne pas grever l'avenir', 376-412.

for Algerian workers' potential exposure to pollution gives hints about the perceived expendability of the colonial workforce beyond the workplace.

Housing allocation to European families, while favourable, was not purely a product of company altruism. Rather, employers understood housing as an essential feature of their production process, and made it conditional upon work. In October 1932, Grand'Combe's administration notified former worker Italian Santo Marini of eviction from his housing following a workplace accident that left him with a 90% incapacity rating the previous September.<sup>28</sup> While the engineer clearly thought the company had been generous for having allowed Marini to remain despite 'his situation as workplace injured', the sixty-year-old Italian was instructed to move in with his daughter and son-in-law, who also worked for the company. This case reveals how the company viewed its housing stock as an important factor of production that should not be wasted on now disabled workers. Racial or family status was thus not the only deciding factor in experience of housing allocation: labour productivity was similarly crucial.

While access to housing represented an important yet complex facet of patronage, companies' control of what happened inside the accommodation was somewhat more limited. As indicated in the reports preparing the arrival of Italian workers in 1919 noted above, companies feared that grouping men in confined accommodation might provoke fights or alarming levels of political autonomy. For this reason, the man in charge of each accommodation was important. Far from the dream of orderly company-run camps, what emerged in the coalfield was a series of *cantines* – some company-owned, but many private – that fed and housed single men. A paucity of company archives on the internal

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<sup>28</sup> ADG 18/J/116, Letter Grand'Combe to Administrator-Delegate, 11 Oct. 1932. On the accident, see ADG 7/U/8/9, Accident Marini, PVEA, 1 Oct. 1931.

dynamics of these spaces is indicative of the complexity of power relations, but can be redressed by turning to state administration and surveillance.

Given their place in the labour milieu of the Gard, *cantines* had an enhanced social role in assuring the social reproduction of the single male workforce. In Paris, Neil MacMaster terms them ‘café-hotels’, and casts them as important for housing and feeding workers, as well as organising their socialising, and Algerian political activity.<sup>29</sup> Alongside these tasks, the Gard’s Algerian *cantiniers* provided recruitment services for employers and became important mediators for Algerians in the coalfield.<sup>30</sup> For example, the 1925 informant who reported on the quality of the North Africans’ housing situation was listed as the ‘Arab *cantinier*’, giving him the status of colonial intermediary.<sup>31</sup> Another such local figure was Saïd Moula, who managed a *cantine* at 19 Rue des Poilus, who piqued the attention of La Grand’Combe’s police in 1925. According to communal administrator of Sidi Aïch, Moula had been garnering positive relations with Grand’Combe elites by acting as a recruitment mediator at a time when Spain and Italy had become less viable sources of labour.<sup>32</sup>

But the existence of these influential individuals with considerable patronage over the space of the *cantine* created problems for local law enforcement. A commissioner reported how Moula, ‘who speaks French very well, attend[ed] all the communist meetings, hidden in the shadows’, before returning ‘to his *cantine* to translate the revolutionary ideas into Arabic for his *coreligionnaires*.’<sup>33</sup> For the local police, then, the

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<sup>29</sup> Sabah Chaïb, ‘Cantines et restaurants algériens à Paris et dans le département de la Seine entre 1920 et 1950. Manger sous contrôles’ *Ethnologie française* 44.1 (2014), 37-50; Neil MacMaster, ‘The Algerian Café-Hotel: Hub of the Nationalist Underground, Paris 1926-1962’ *French Politics, Culture and Society* 34.2 (2016), 57-77.

<sup>30</sup> See Owen Coughlan, ‘De la cantine au congrès: revendications algériennes et syndicalisme minier au bassin du Gard’ *Le Mouvement social* 282 (2023), 99-114.

<sup>31</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/129, Letter Grand’Combe to Administrator-Delegate, 1 Feb. 1925.

<sup>32</sup> AN 19940462/44, Dossier Moula, Letter from Sidi Aich administrator, 28 Mar. 1925.

<sup>33</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Letter La Grand’Combe special commissioner to Prefect, 8 Dec. 1924.

relative autonomy of the *cantine* enabled it to serve as a space for the diffusion of subversive ideas. The figure of the *cantinier*, with his social-reproductive roles, was perceived as exercising real influence. The same police commissioner held Moula responsible for the fact that at the 1 May demonstrations, ‘thirty to fifty Algerians, mostly his clients or lodgers, parade, clapping their hands in Arabic fashion.’<sup>34</sup> His importance was such that the police pointed to the financial difficulties that Moula faced in 1927 as responsible for the cessation of communist activity among the Algerian population of the coalfield.<sup>35</sup> While state administrators and police agents observed Moula’s actions with great interest, the Grand’Combe company itself appears to have been less concerned. Later in this thesis, we will consider in more detail the role of the *cantine* in the development of Algerian political organisations. For now, it is worth signalling the authorities’ view of the *cantinier* who presided over a homogeneous population of lodgers and clients.

The difficulty that state and company agents had in accessing *cantines* restricts our knowledge of their internal dynamics, but it seems that cohabitation did not guarantee harmonious interpersonal relationships. In March 1937, *Le Journal du Midi* reported that French woman Madame Chanière uncovered a body on the banks of the Cèze while collecting firewood with her son. The cadaver was that of Tahar Loubar, *manœuvre* at Molières, with the murderer being soon uncovered as Rabah Regredj, who worked and lived in the same *cantine* as Loubar. On trial, Regredj explained that Loubar exhibited ‘particular habits’ and a ‘questionable attitude’, that pushed him to kill his *cantine* cohabitant with an axe.<sup>36</sup> The vagueness of the language here prevents an understanding

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 12 Sept. 1927.

<sup>36</sup> *Le Journal du Midi*, 24 Mar. 1937.

of the basis of the dispute, but the bare facts reported hints at the tense situations that could materialise in shared lodgings.

*Cantines* were not uniquely for Algerians, but were lived in and managed by Europeans too. European couples often managed the accommodation of European workers. In the Vassal neighbourhood of Alès in 1931, François Surrey and his Spanish wife Domenica managed a *cantine* hosting eighteen Polish and Czechoslovak workers. Close by, a larger, private *cantine* managed by the French couple Marius and Flortouse Richard (who are noted as ‘*patron*’ in the census, making this a private venture), housed 103 Czechoslovak and Polish workers, as well as a Radior Kiniski, who was listed in the census as a ‘Russian interpreter’.<sup>37</sup> This was thus a large building that served the private interests of the Richard couple. Moreover, it seems that they employed Kiniski as a linguistic intermediary with the residents, demonstrating how *cantiniers*’ negotiated the coalfield’s diversity.

Although the *cantines* were invariably managed by men, the presence of women recorded in the census hints at a largely undocumented, gendered system of social-reproductive labour. In La Royale, the Guillaumin couple (François aged 44 and Marie 32) ran a *cantine* together along with Marie’s nineteen-year-old sister Germaine, which hosted thirty workers (fourteen Poles, one Frenchman, one Hungarian, two Serbs, one Russian, and one Czechoslovak).<sup>38</sup> While the social-reproductive work around *cantines* is elusive in the archives, this census hints that the meta-industrial work of cooking, cleaning, and washing was done by Marie and Germaine.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the younger sister’s

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<sup>37</sup> ADG 6/M/160, Alès census, 1931.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> The work of women in such lodgings in the USA has been accessed in oral-history interviews, see Mildred Beik, *The Miners of Windber: The Struggles of New Immigrants for Unionization, 1890s-1930s* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996), Ch.4.

recorded profession was hairdresser, suggesting still more everyday tasks completed by women, who never earned the title of *cantinière*.

The management of such spaces was often the basis for discontent. The local communist press accused *cantiniers* managing Polish shared accommodations of using their material position to reinforce the company's control. *Le Cri du Gard* charged in 1931 that *cantiniers* had refused to provide food to injured Poles as a way of forcing them back to work before their wounds healed.<sup>40</sup> This control over food provision demonstrates how this intermediary figure played a literally vital role in administering resources. Reporting in ironic terms about the 'hospitality' provided by *cantiniers* in Rochebelle, the same newspaper reported that the beds had not been changed for years, the rooms were infested with bugs, and lacked running water and toilets, while the *cantiniers*, 'not content with just stealing from the foreign miners, denounced the revolutionary workers.'<sup>41</sup> In this case, European *cantiniers* were cast as an effective means of social control and political surveillance over the migrant population within company-owned housing resources. It was in the light of this control that in 1930 the Rochebelle CGTU section called, as part of a broader list of demands, for 'workers' control in the *cantines*.<sup>42</sup>

Alongside critiques of social control, the communist press highlighted migrant-specific links between exploitation, housing, and health risks in the latter 1920s. In September 1927, *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* published a short article on 'how the Algerian workforce is treated at the mines of Trélys.' Rather than denouncing workplace treatment, the journalist articulated a critique of their unsanitary housing: more than thirty workers shared one 'infected' room which served as both bedroom and refectory, where

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<sup>40</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 31 Jan. 1931.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 5 Oct. 1931.

‘the most elementary conditions of hygiene [were] completely unknown.’ In the summer workers slept outside to escape the heat, while in the winter they were ‘obliged to light fires if they [did] not want to freeze’, with the consequence that the ‘atmosphere there [was] poisoned by the carbonic acid released by the coal.’<sup>43</sup> The 1926 census confirms that thirty-one Algerian men were living with *chef de ménage* Brahim Lekdir at household 474 in Esteyreins, Le Martinet.<sup>44</sup> The census of course gives no detail as to proprietorship or the state of the lodgings. In August 1928, the communist mayor Isidore Michel sent a list of complaints to the Tréllys’ directors. Top of the list was a demand for the immediate improvement of the building that housed the ‘Arab workforce’.<sup>45</sup> The available evidence makes it difficult to discern whether this campaign resulted in concrete changes. However, the 1931 census lists Brahim Lekdir as *chef de ménage* of a household hosting just nineteen Algerians at a different address.<sup>46</sup> This appears to suggest that the Tréllys company had rehoused its colonial workers following Michel’s complaints.

Communist concern regarding migrant housing conditions was not restricted to the Algerians of Le Martinet. In a publication prior to a Congress of the CGTU of Rochebelle to be held on 27 April 1930, pit-paper *La Gueule Noire* theorised that ‘the class struggle’ was also waged in ‘the question of housing’.<sup>47</sup> A first example of this was that the miners who participated in the day of action of 1 August 1928 against the ‘coming imperialist war’ were subject to an increase in their rents, exemplifying how communists portrayed company domination of housing as a crucial tool of political and social control. The article then went on to denounce the specific conditions endured by migrant workers:

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<sup>43</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 24 Sept. 1927.

<sup>44</sup> ADG 6/M/250, Le Martinet census, 1926.

<sup>45</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 25 Aug. 1928.

<sup>46</sup> ADG 6/M/250, Le Martinet census, 1931.

<sup>47</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 22 Apr. 1930.

Foreign comrades do not find housing and are obliged to live in the *cantines* of the company that are sometimes only just finished. For example: in a new *cantine*, they are exposed to the worst illnesses, housed in humid rooms; [...] they risk contracting bronchitis, tuberculosis, etc.<sup>48</sup>

This source shows how locals mobilised epidemiological arguments to condemn migrants' unhealthy living conditions. Its focus on these problems reflects a longer-term interest in how housing conditions led workers to live in unhygienic environments held by communist journalists.<sup>49</sup> What is most interesting about this critique, is that the Communists at Rochebelle were aware of how the hierarchies of coal capitalism were mediated through the intertwined issues of housing and health. This divergent dimension of lived experience was, for them, a feature of the class struggle.

Yet European families were not guaranteed salubrious accommodation. Duguet recalled in his memoirs that the Polish men who first brought their families to Le Martinet found accommodation in the last available, bottom-floor flats, which were 'humid, in the most isolated and dilapidated shacks.'<sup>50</sup> While this judgement may be expected from a communist activist, engineers also retrospectively reflected on the state of housing. Fléchon recalled the 'modesty, and even the poverty' of the house of a lamp-carrier killed in an underground explosion, leading him to see reason in the worker's communist activity: 'If I had to live there, all year round, would I not also be prepared to do anything to get out of this dump?'<sup>51</sup> The built environment of workers – including relatively favoured European families – was a vector for a critique of capitalist exploitation based in a moral economy of adequate provision.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Hatzfeld, 'Travailleurs, cadre de vie, sante et progrès', 126.

<sup>50</sup> Duguet, *Le Chemin de l'Arbousset*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 115.

Under the Popular Front, the Communist press more systematically drew attention to the particularly poor housing faced by Algerians. This was in part due to the growth of this population since June 1936, and in part the consequence of the increasing political mobilisation of this community that will be examined in detail in Chapter Six of this thesis. In December 1937, *Le Cri du Gard* dedicated considerable space to denouncing the living conditions of colonial workers in a long article by local young communists Charly Villard and Marcel Ferrier entitled ‘Life, sufferings, and hopes of Gardois workers’ emphasised the continuing problems of issues beyond the workplace.<sup>52</sup> While some workers had to travel ‘three hours by foot’ to and from work each day due to a housing crisis, ‘the Arabs in particular’ were qualified as ‘the powerless victims of certain landlords and the Company’, their lot comparable to the living conditions of animals. Villard and Ferrier’s description of Algerian housing sought to convey a sense of injustice about these inhumane conditions:

Next to the Saint-Barbe pit, we saw some of the “housing” where the Algerians employed by the company are cooped up (the word is not too strong). Imagine a room of three to four meters, within a dirty and rickety *masure*. By the door, a small pile of “*tout venant*”, poor quality coal that the company “gifts” to the Arabs in quantities of *one wheelbarrow per room per week!* You enter! In semi-darkness, standing in the only empty space in the room (one or two squared meters from the door), you see six poor camp beds, all touching. On the beds, a “mattress”, “quilts”. On the wall, decrepit and black for not having seen a mason for so long, suitcases hang from screws. A pan, a pot, and a simple bullseye window to light it all up. *Six Arabs are “housed” in this room and EACH pays a monthly rent of 20 francs. And it is the Grand’Combe Company that receives the rents, exploiting the Algerians for a second time!* We saw, housed in a cellar, which undoubtedly formerly formed part of the adjoining house, four beds occupied by four Arabs, sleeping and eating in what in the past certainly served to house a pig or a goat. No tables, no chairs! And again 20 francs per month EACH to the Company! Let us pose the question. *How much does the Company take in from using these houses which, humanly, should now only serve for [storing] old material?* And couldn’t the state authorities “demand” that part of the millions earned for the shareholders by the miners are employed to construct orderly and clean housing for the workers?<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 4 Dec. 1937.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

Such critiques also found expression beyond the Communist press. On Christmas Day 1937, the SFIO newspaper *Le Combat social* printed an article on the ‘housing crisis’ in La Grand’Combe, declaring that while some of the population lodged in ‘modern accommodation’, ‘a very important fraction finds itself living in apartments [that were] too cramped, badly aerated, often deprived of light, and with a total lack of hygiene; entire families live[d] pell-mell.’<sup>54</sup> The socialist publication thus insisted upon the link between disorganised recruitment practices, poor housing conditions, and health risks, including to families. Its author, La Grand’Combe mayor Germain Soustelle, was also clear about the uneven distribution of these conditions. ‘The Algerian workers, in particular, are 8 and even 10 in just one room, eat and sleep there, [in conditions that] animals could not bear.’ This state of affairs ‘makes favourable ground for all sorts of malady, the main ones being tuberculosis, syphilis.’ Linking housing conditions with such ills was hardly new, but it is significant here that once again the Algerian population was singled out as enduring heightened exposure.<sup>55</sup> By way of conclusion, Soustelle assured that the Conseil Municipal would discuss housing and its relationship to ‘well-being’ and ‘preservation’ of the population at its next meeting. Thus, Soustelle articulated an attuned denunciation of the bodily and health sufferings of colonial subjects and at least expressed his will to improve conditions in line with a moral sense of the provision of vital minima.

These appeals by municipal officials were followed by an investigation by a departmental hygiene commission in early 1938. Bernadou, the doctor in charge of the study, alerted colleagues that he faced staunch opposition from private landlords during

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<sup>54</sup> *Le Combat social*, 25 Dec. 1937.

<sup>55</sup> See Hatzfeld, ‘Travailleurs, cadre de vie, santé’, 126-7. These concerns date back to the nineteenth century. See Will Clement’s analysis of Villermé’s *Annales publique d’hygiène*, in ‘Giving the Worker his House’: Intervention, Interaction, and Inaction in Three French Cities’ (PhD Dissertation, University of Oxford, 2018), 30-69.

the process.<sup>56</sup> While the final report is regrettably absent from the archive, the preparatory and summary documents elucidate the housing conditions of Algerians with details that differ only slightly from Socialist and Communist campaigning. They reveal a variety of renting relationships and housing quality: while La Grand'Combe housed 72% of its 1,257 North African workers, this figure fell to just 33% (of 42) at Cessous and 40% (of 434) at Rochebelle.<sup>57</sup> In a report to the Interior ministry, Prefect Lemoine deplored the conditions of those renting from private landlords as 'completely disastrous in every regard.'<sup>58</sup> As an example, he listed 'attics with sloping roofs with a maximum height of 1.9m and a minimum of 1m, a length of 8-10m and 4.5m wide', while in other 'cubbyholes without air or light' one might find four beds occupied by 16 different men, 'one team occupying the bed while the other is at work.' Not only were the conditions – which it appears that the working-class press of the Gard did not exaggerate – poor, the problem of 'exorbitant' rents first seen in 1925 resurfaced. On average, Algerian renters paid 400fr per month – ten days' wages – 'for a single, badly maintained room, in old buildings deprived of running water.' The report paints a rather lamentable overall picture. Exceptions existed: the workers (rather than the rooms themselves) of the Tréllys company who lodged privately in Le Martinet were adjudged by the investigators as 'quite clean', perhaps a legacy of Isidore Michel's campaign of the previous decade.<sup>59</sup> But in general Algerians renting privately continued to face higher rates of exploitation and insalubrious conditions.

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<sup>56</sup> In a letter addressed to his colleague Dr Alcay, Bernadou expressed discomfort about having to inspect the hygiene conditions faced by North Africans renting from private individuals, stating his impression that he had 'all the landlords against' him. ADG 5/M/46, Handwritten letter Bernadou to Alcay, 14 Apr. 1938.

<sup>57</sup> ADG 5/M/46, Letter Prefect to Interior, 15 Mar. 1938.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> ADG 5/M/46, Tréllys housing questionnaire, 24 Feb. 1938.

The quality of company lodgings could vary immensely. The fourteen North Africans whom the Cessous company lodged slept in a ‘large bedroom’, without any access to water, washing facilities or toilets.<sup>60</sup> At Rochebelle, 175 Algerians slept in ‘stone houses covered by tiles’, in dormitories ranging from six to twenty beds, lacking access to cooking facilities, drinking water, and outside toilets.<sup>61</sup> The best arrangement was that at Grand’Combe, where North African workers were housed ‘grouped by village, in buildings situated slightly out of the way’, in rooms shared by four people with beds, stoves, benches, drinking water, washing facilities, and toilets.<sup>62</sup> It was the extension of this model – itself a reflection of Grand’Combe’s model from 1919 – across the coalfield that the Prefect recommended to other companies. Alongside its empirical content demonstrating the situation of disadvantage faced by colonial workers, the very fact that this investigation was undertaken indicates that state actors had been convinced to pay attention to this dimension of their lived experience by the end of the 1930s. Housing during the interwar period was thus characterised by differentiation between groups of workers along household type and colonial lines, and an increasing political salience for the differentially distributed environmental health problems posed by accommodation, in ways that mirrored critiques of workplace accidents.

### **Moral Economies of Heating and Coal Disobedience**

Whatever their housing situation or origin, mineworkers received coal as payment-in-kind. In the latter nineteenth century, only Grand’Combe’s underground miners received such payments, while low-ranking surface workers were left to gather debris. Following a labour struggle in 1881, companies allocated 25kg per week per single miner, 50kg to

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<sup>60</sup> ADG 5/M/47, Cessous housing questionnaire, undated.

<sup>61</sup> ADG 5/M/46, Rochebelle housing questionnaire, 26 Feb. 1938.

<sup>62</sup> ADG 5/M/46, Grand’Combe housing questionnaire, 3 Mar. 1938.

those with a family, and 75kg for those with multiple family members working at the mine.<sup>63</sup> In the interwar period, Bessèges allocated 120kg per family per week in winter, and 80kg in summer.<sup>64</sup> While Gaillard has emphasised the importance of heating as a feature of company paternalism, what interests us here is how quotidian coalfield power relations were mediated through the materiality of the product of extraction, and the differential and controlled access thereto. This novel focus on coal as a heating source builds on work by Charles-François Mathis on ‘energy precarity’ to analyse norms around energy access, ‘from below’.<sup>65</sup> Searching for the perspective of those who extracted and used coal every day throws us into a world of interaction and conflict involving women, migrant men, communists, and local authorities. These interactions unveil moral economies around control, autonomy, and embodied need.

Companies sought to maintain a monopoly over coal that was tacitly contested by combinations of migrants, local wholesalers, and women. The scarce surviving surveillance material from mining companies’ private guards indicates that one of their primary roles was the enforcement of the company’s control over coal resources.<sup>66</sup> This was an important vector of their daily interactions with coalfield women, given that many social-reproductive tasks involved the usage of coal to heat water or cook.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the marginal position occupied by single migrant men involved them in certain forms of coal-disobedience. Forms of behaviour that subverted capitalist property norms and instead asserted usage rights are visible in company-guard reports, hinting at unstable and

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<sup>63</sup> Gaillard, ‘Un exemple français’, 114.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Bousiges, *En Cévennes: Les mines autour de Saint-Florent* (Brignon: Editions de la Fenestrelle, 2019), 148.

<sup>65</sup> Mathis, *La civilisation du charbon*, 171-6; Adams, ‘Making Coal Sharp’, 1-16.

<sup>66</sup> The mining guard was an important local actor in enforcing paternalism, still underappreciated in the historiography. Marion Fontaine and Richard Berthollet’s 2017 documentary examined their role in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais after 1944. For her reflections, see Marion Fontaine, ‘*Sous l’œil des Houillères. Retour sur une expérience documentaire*’ *Le Mouvement social* 269 (2019), 101-16.

<sup>67</sup> Humphries and Thomas, ‘The Best Job in the World’, 9.

potentially weak but real forms of complicity and quotidian solidarity under, though not necessarily against, the system of resource domination.

Company guards constantly surveiled for black markets that challenged the company's local monopoly on heating. In March 1926, Nord d'Alais company guard Euzeby uncovered a scheme in which Spaniard Ramon Brito and French citizens Aubert Ripoton and Henri Langrand sold their coal allowances – 630kg in total – to a local wholesaler, Charèyre, who in turn sold it on to clients.<sup>68</sup> According to Euzeby, the miners were 'probably' aware of Chareyre's intentions, and he 'must have paid them an inferior sum than he would have to the mine.'<sup>69</sup> Euzeby speculated that the workers were able to sell this coal, and thus to undermine the company's local monopoly, due to the generosity of employers in allowing workers to take home defunct pit props from the workplace for firewood. This custom permitted workers too great a degree of energy autonomy, enabling them to engage in coal disobedience by trading beyond the direct control of the companies. He thus called for an end to the pit-prop custom. In addition, a marginal comment on Euzeby's report ruled that they were to be 'deprived of their coal allowance until further notice'.<sup>70</sup> Here, the guard's function enforced a value system of company domination in a situation where material conditions and spatial configurations that limited his power of surveillance created opportunities for alternative moral economies based on the use value of coal.

Other investigations by Euzeby unveiled unauthorised exchanges between European migrant mineworkers and the women who lived around them. In May 1926, Nord d'Alais Spanish underground mineworker Blas Garcia had his coal allowance

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<sup>68</sup> AMA 21/L/1, Report by guard Euzeby, 18 Mar. 1926.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

revoked for having sold 250kg to his neighbour Madame ‘Zestu’ for thirty francs (just over a day’s pay).<sup>71</sup> A third party, S. Salle, whose identity and motivations remain unknown, had denounced this illicit activity to Euzeby. On receiving this information, the guard visited Zestu at 12 Rue Bougère, in Alès, who declared ‘it is correct that on the 29th [of April] I bought 250kg of lumps of coal marked with the letter N from the miner Garcia. This worker told me that the coal came from the allowance that the mine at Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues gave him.’ Zestu hastened to add that ‘it is my first time buying coal from Garcia, but he has sold or given it on numerous occasions to the woman who lodges him.’<sup>72</sup> Garcia thus stood accused of illicitly using coal for exchange rather than consumption on multiple occasions. Zestu’s statement exhibits a complex relationship between coal-disobedience and cooperation between inhabitants. She was aware of the prohibition of the action, and was thus knowingly complicit, with her denials of being a recidivist suggesting that such an exchange was widely appreciated to be illicit. But complicity in disobedience was not synonymous with solidarity in the face of accusation. Silences in the sources make it difficult to assess Garcia’s motivations, but it appears that he felt that he should be able to use coal for exchange rather than just burning. Despite the absence of grand ideological opposition to company dominance, the actions of both point to a practical moral economy of coal use and exchange that operated largely beyond the companies’ sight.

Groups of neighbours participated in coal-disobedient schemes of a different order during the difficult winters of the depression. In February 1932, a mine guard stumbled upon two Polish men and a French woman fleeing a hillside in the pine-forested lands belonging to the Bessèges company at Rochessadoule.<sup>73</sup> Two sacks of coal, a mine pick,

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<sup>71</sup> AMA 21/L/1, Report by guard Euzeby, 3 May 1926.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> ADG 8/S/51, Notes on infraction of 1810 mining concessions law, 19 May 1932.

two axes, and a jacket stood before an entrance that opened up to an exploited coalface of 44m<sup>2</sup>, with 60cm thickness. Pit props using approximately 60m of company pines had been felled close by, and approximately 50 tonnes of coal had been extracted.<sup>74</sup> This scene resulted in an investigation into what the authorities called a *mine clandestine*, that was ‘perfectly propped’ and thus must have been illegally exploited by ‘men of the trade’ in contravention of the mine concession legislation of 1810 which gave actors with a concession from the state the right to mine.<sup>75</sup>

Following an initial report by mine guard Deleuze, Émile Galia – *juge de la paix* in Bessèges – took statements from three Polish men and one French woman, listed as Jean Pedracki, Edouard Pedracki, Stefan Malinski, and Philippine Pourtier.<sup>76</sup> The former, a father of six who gave his statement in Polish, recognized having extracted the coal from the surface, but denied having set the pit props. In addition, he declared that the coal was destined for his family’s heating, denying that it was for black-market commerce, or indeed that he had ‘ever sold’ coal. French-speaking eighteen-year-old Malinski claimed that the whole scene had been a chance meeting, finding his contemporary, Edouard, on the mountainside. Unfortunately for the others, Jean’s eighteen-year-old son Edouard admitted his father’s hand in erecting the pit props, as well as his own in felling the pines. For her part, fifty-four-year-old mother of eight Philippine Pourtier declared that she came across the Poles while on her way to fetch wood in the forest. It is worth emphasising here that like the aforementioned Mme Chanière who found a dead Algerian while gathering wood and Zestu’s illicit purchase of coal, Pourtier’s social reproduction duties

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<sup>74</sup> ADG 8/S/51, Report Daval Mining Engineer, 26 May 1932.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* On 1810, see Lionel Latty, ‘La loi du 21 avril 1810 et le Conseil général des mines avant 1866. Les procès-verbaux des séances’ *Documents pour l’histoire des techniques* 16.2 (2008), 17-29.

<sup>76</sup> ADG 8/S/51, Interrogation reports, 19 May 1932.

went beyond the domestic space itself and involved the procurement of energy sources.<sup>77</sup> On seeing that the men were mining coal, she requested some shortly before the guard's arrival. The hypothesis of the chance meeting was discarded by investigators. Instead, they perceived an illicit scheme existing in the spatial margins of company domination.

The execution of this endeavour required considerable experience in mining *and* extensive knowledge of the landscape around Rochessadoule. All three Polish men had lived in the commune for several years, and worked in coalmining.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the 1931 census shows that the Pedracki family lived in close proximity to the Malinskis – suggesting a complicity relationship between two childhood acquaintances rather than simply between workers.<sup>79</sup> Pourtrier's relation to the men is less evident. Her recourse to this coal-disobedience may be explained by the coal needs of her large family. Beyond these specific motives, there appears to have been an implicit agreement that they could and should have access to the natural resources that surrounded them, regardless of property rights.

At no point did the *juge de la paix* show interest in the motives underpinning their actions, leaving us to hypothesize as to the origins of this scheme. The migrant status of those involved suggests that the kind of moral economy that this unauthorised extraction suggests need not be motivated by a deep-seated affective attachment to a territory, but could stem from a combination of vital necessity and questions over the relative justice of property rights.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, this took place in the context of regional, and wider,

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<sup>77</sup> This focus on the materiality of energy procurement serves to demonstrate the ways in which social reproduction was a complex and tricky process, in which women encountered a range of men and exercised considerable levels of ingenuity as well as physical force to access energy.

<sup>78</sup> ADG 6/M/310, Rochessadoule census, 1931. Jean and his wife Gertrude had their fifth child, Joseph, in the commune in 1925.

<sup>79</sup> ADG 6/M/310, Rochessadoule census, 1931.

<sup>80</sup> Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, 'Resources and the Politics of Sovereignty: The Moral and Immoral Economies of Coal Mining in India' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 40.4 (2017), 798-9.

denunciations of the price of coal and electricity, which the Gard SFIO newspaper *Le Combat social* condemned in that same month of February 1932 as the fault of ‘magnates of the mine’ who lowered wages while simultaneously increasing coal prices.<sup>81</sup> Although the newspaper printed nothing on the specific actions of these Rochessadoules residents, a discourse of injustice around access to coal existed in the local context in which the clandestine mine was exploited.

As with other aspects of the labour milieu, Algerian inhabitants of the coalfield experienced the system of coal allocations in distinct ways. This difference owed to suspicion on the part of state and company agents as well as their specific material situation. In April 1923, Nord d’Alais guard Euzeby noted that a café owner named Laurent who provided lodgings for five Algerian workers in Saint-Martin-de-Valgalmes ‘never’ bought coal.<sup>82</sup> With each of the colonial subjects receiving 780kg of coal per month, Euzeby accused them of selling this coal as payment-in-kind for rent. As was the case with the Europeans, Euzeby perceived that colonial migrants were tampering with the company’s rightful coal monopoly. He suspected that the Algerians saw in the materiality of coal a way of paying for housing, especially during spring months when coal was less vital for warmth. However, ‘despite lengthy surveillance’, Euzeby was ‘unable to unveil the slightest infraction’ of coal regulations. This did not stop him from proposing the reduction by half of the five Algerians’ coal allowances, in an attempt to discipline these colonial subjects. His superior who judged the case reminded Euzeby that his powers were not limitless, declaring that one could not ‘condemn people based on appearances.’<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Le Combat social*, 28 Feb. 1932.

<sup>82</sup> AMA 21/L/1, Report by guard Euzeby, 21 Apr. 1923.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

Disciplinary zeal against energy precarious colonial subjects was also applied to those who did not work for the coal companies. In late December 1924, a group employed by the Forges d'Alais iron foundry in Tamaris had a tense encounter with the private guards of Rochebelle. The director of Rochebelle wrote to the Forges director indicating two events of theft. First, he reported that his guards had 'surprised some Arabs on the premises stealing coal. They fled and threw stones in the direction of the guards who had to fire several revolver shots in the air.'<sup>84</sup> This first scene was followed by a subsequent one, described in more detail by Rochebelle's chief guard Bonnefond. During a tour of the company's land, guards Niel and Sabatier remarked that four twelve-metre-high trees had been felled, of which three had been taken and one left behind.<sup>85</sup> The trees were dead, and had been identified by the guards as candidates for pit props. This was thus a theft of company-owned natural resources earmarked for future extraction purposes. The guards 'thought that the perpetrators of this misdemeanour could only be the Arabs lodged at the barracks of the Forge situated close by.' Rochebelle's guards subsequently liaised with the Forge's guard Chauchard, who granted them access to the 'Arabs' camp'. An interview with the French *cantinier* responsible for the camp, Adolphe Poujol, revealed that its inhabitants were indeed the perpetrators. Subsequently, Rochebelle's guards were unable to identify the thieves themselves, because 'the village or group chiefs did not want to give any indications on the subject', drawing them to the conclusion that 'they were without doubt the instigators of the theft, if they did not actively participate.'<sup>86</sup> The Moroccan Amar Abdallah, and Algerians Ahmed Salmoun, Guermas, and Chinini were discovered with wood beneath their beds. All four men, identified as the 'chiefs' of their groups, were issued with fines of thirty francs. No consideration was given to why these

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<sup>84</sup> AMA 2/L/23, Correspondence Rochebelle director to Mines, Fonderies, Forges d'Alais, 26 Dec. 1924.

<sup>85</sup> AMA 2/L/23, Report Rochebelle mine guards, 22 Dec. 1924.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

North Africans may have been driven to theft. We are left to imagine discussions between these men far from home, surrounded by wood and coal resources but deprived of the right to use them, their decision in the cold month of December to organise night expeditions, and the efforts exerted in felling twelve-meter pines.<sup>87</sup>

Coal theft by North African workers appears to have been a widespread practice, and one that some French actors supported. In an article published in March 1928 ironically entitled ‘the beauties of the regime’, *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* detailed the situation of misery experienced by Algerian workers housed by their employer at La Jasse, noting that ‘it goes without saying that they are far from having suitable, hygienic housing.’<sup>88</sup> In these conditions, the Algerians lacked ‘the coal necessary to protect themselves from bad weather.’ Heating, housing, and protection from cold thus constituted interlinked environmental features of Algerians’ subordinate experience of the labour milieu. When considered in the broader context of material printed in *Le Travailleur* – which blended reports on working conditions and employer malevolence with information on local communist activity – this focus upon the very embodied discrimination entailed in exposure to cold is significant. Not only were heating and its necessity for life seen as an important part of class domination, but they constituted a specific feature of Algerians’ lived and sensed experience of class oppression. Yet these Algerians were not mere victims. Rather, their embodied need for warmth in a context of deprivation drove them ‘to take a few bits of coal from the powerful company’, an act that was ‘not rare’. The article proceeded to describe a cat-and-mouse chase between mine guards, gendarmes, and Algerians, in which, again in a spirit of irony, the thieves were

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<sup>87</sup> Such are the implications of the archive that sought to discipline subaltern subjects, rather than to understand their conditions of existence. On archives and coloniality, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

<sup>88</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 10 Mar. 1928.

able to escape thanks to the ‘beautiful role played by the guard and his noble band’.<sup>89</sup> In this way, the article cast coal theft and the subsequent chase that humiliated the company and state agents as a heroic form of everyday resistance made public: a weapon of the weak.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, its publication is indicative of an attempt to raise solidarity around the theme of heating. What the state and the companies considered to be punishable delinquency was regarded by the communists as a just assertion of a form of moral economy whereby basic needs were met.<sup>91</sup> Seen in this way, coal-disobedience was thus a form of resistance to company domination of resources, facilitated by the practical and spatial limits upon company surveillance.

While the different forms of coal disobedience practiced by oppressed members of the working population probed the boundaries and plucked at the margins of company coal domination, communists strove to articulate these actions with a broader political critique of the labour milieu. In December 1929, *Le Marteau Piqueur*, the communist organ at Trélys – where the three Poles of the clandestine mine were employed – evoked the importance of coal allocations in daily conversations. Addressing the workers directly, it declared ‘comrades, on the day of coal distribution you quite rightly gripe’ about the ‘earth from which it is absolutely impossible to heat oneself or to boil a cooking pot.’<sup>92</sup> The quality of the coal and its insufficiency for domestic purposes was thus as important as its inadequate quantity. The article went on to situate this injustice in the context of rationalisation.

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>91</sup> EP Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76-136. This fits with Scottish historian Ewan Gibbs’ notion of the ‘coalfield moral economy’, as ‘instigated by communitarian claims to economic resources’ that he defines as ‘collieries and the employment they sustained’. Here, we see this also extended to relative access to and autonomy over the product of labour. See Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialisation in Post-War Scotland* (London: University of London Press, 2020), 10-11.

<sup>92</sup> *Le Marteau-Piqueur*, Dec. 1929.

Comrades of Rochessadoule and Bessèges, are you going to stand by while [the companies] refuse a few kilos of coal to those who every day, in the face of all the dangers and under an ever more developed rationalisation which pushes us to produce more and more, that they refuse us [the coal] for our domestic needs, going against long-standing practices here.<sup>93</sup>

This rhetoric represented an articulation of a moral-economic approach to coal allocations, substantiated as it was through reference to long-standing norms and the assurance of vital functions of domestic labour involving heating sources. However, the critique also rooted itself in the specific process of rationalisation shaping all aspects of the Gard's labour milieu at the turn of the 1930s, emphasising the historic injustice by reference to increasing present rates of exploitation.

Trélys was not the only such case of communist mobilisation around coal allocations. In 1930 an article was published by 'one who does not have central heating' – a reference to engineers' comfort compared to workers' energy precarity – in the local newspaper of Molières-sur-Cèze as an appeal to the 'dignity of conscious workers' who had 'complained enough about the bad coal' distributed by the company.<sup>94</sup> In a similar spirit, Rochebelle's communist publication recorded that the miners 'at all times' 'complain about the poor quality coal they are allotted.'<sup>95</sup> Moreover, when they brought defunct pit props from below the surface that were 'supposedly too big', they incurred a fine of twenty francs – two thirds of an average daily wage.<sup>96</sup> In both cases, the publications went on to insist on the communist solution to the problem: meetings, discussions, and an organized response to 'impose' change on the companies' policies of allocation. These sources cannot tell us whether those who lived under the auspices of the companies thought about coal allocation in such concrete class terms, nor do they assure that the coal-disobedient used such an ideological framework to justify their actions.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *La Voix du Mineur*, 24 Apr. 1930.

<sup>95</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 30 Oct. 1930.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

However, the references to complaints and recriminations indicate that company allocation of heating resources was a persistent source of discontent, suggesting that understandings of coal allocations rooted in mentalities of class antagonism formed part of the local worlds in which acts of coal-disobedience occurred.

Although often implicated in coal-disobedience, migrants and women did not feature explicitly in communist rhetoric and propaganda. References to miners' complaints on the day of coal distribution masculinized the issue, obfuscating women's specific implication in heating resource access and the place of coal in their domestic labour. However, demands for heating sources could chime in indirect ways with issues more likely to affect newcomers. In January 1930, *La Gueule Noire* of Rochebelle demanded 'heating for all without distinction', adding 'it is scandalous that workers are obliged to work for three months and sometimes more to have the right [to coal].'<sup>97</sup> It is possible that this complaint's purchase stemmed the high turnover that marked Rochebelle's recruitment of migrants. The inclusion of the phrase 'without distinction' nods to a denunciation of inequalities between workers, depending on origin.<sup>98</sup> Here, the link between a politicised workers' solidarity and the more infra-political forms of combination and complicity in disobedience emerges in response to unjust company management of the resource that those who disobeyed had extracted from the earth. In this way, Communist discourses on heating resources reflected the salience of the issue, explicitly recognized migrant-specific problems while implicitly hinting at women's struggles, and sought to eradicate the need for coal-disobedience.

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<sup>97</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 25 Jan. 1930.

<sup>98</sup> See for example Perry, 'Sans Distinction de Nationalité?'.

### **Pollution, Community, and Gendered Experience**

Contestation over company management of the labour milieu also included the pollution of air and water. As was the case with the questions of housing and access to coal, these unintended consequences of coal extraction shaped coalfield inhabitants' everyday experiences. While pollution might be thought about as a transversal question affecting all, divergences, particularly along lines of gender, also operated in this domain.<sup>99</sup> In response to the companies' pollution, diverse groups of inhabitants opposed forms of contestation that hinted at moral economic critiques of company domination similar to those in the other environmental realms of housing and heating. While migration was not necessarily the lens through which pollution was understood, populations' responses reflect in important ways the moral economies of the labour milieu beyond the workplace, as well as being essential to understanding how migrant specific issues sat within a broader material context.

A distinct coalition of social actors contested the companies' mismanagement of public resources. In La Grand'Combe, this first emerged during the municipal elections of 1925 when the candidate supported by the company lost for the first time.<sup>100</sup> Within a confidential dossier entitled 'Relations with the commune', company administrators reproduced an article from the regional newspaper *Le Petit Provençal* addressed by a 'group of housewives' to the 'electors of the commune'. Among a list of complaints about 'careless municipal maintenance', this group denounced the 'coal dust that blinds us in summer' as well as the state of the 'public washrooms: foyer of epidemics and tuberculosis.'<sup>101</sup> The alleged author and audience of the article was important:

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<sup>99</sup> A classic text on the unequal distribution of pollution, that does not identify gender as a principal axis of inequality, is Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities*.

<sup>100</sup> Eckert, 'Une ville autrefois minière', 90-91.

<sup>101</sup> *Le Petit Provençal*, 26 Apr. 1925, in ANMT 90/AQ/181.

‘housewives’. Given that women were denied the right to vote by the Third Republic’s constitution, the group instead implored housewives to ‘engage your husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, to vote for the candidates of the workers’ list’. This indicated an attempt to construct a gendered coalition, mobilizing men’s political-voting capacity to benefit women. In effect, the specific issues of air quality and the unhygienic state of washing facilities with its impacts on health were actively mobilized in the electoral campaign – the first of these pertained to the environment beyond the workplace, and the second to women’s labour.

The company considered an assemblage of labour milieu issues as responsible for the subsequent victory of the Communist-Socialist-Radical list in this municipal election. According to correspondence between company officials, central to this outcome was ‘the question of water’, with the company ‘accused of wanting to strangle the commune’, despite having made ‘sacrifices that perhaps many other companies may not have made.’<sup>102</sup> At the first meeting between the new SFIO mayor Larguier and company director Bonnevey the mayor raised several issues relating to hygiene, including, for example, ‘the removal of household waste from the Italian *cantine*’.<sup>103</sup> By placing this instance of waste management – afflicting a group of migrants without voting rights – alongside water access, company officials demonstrated an awareness that the hygienic management of vital resources was a salient political issue.

Beyond elections, the dust and smoke emitted by mining companies prompted conflicts over responsibility and management between local politicians, engineers, and state administrators across the coalfield. In November 1930, *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*

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<sup>102</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/181, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate-Administrator, 4 May 1925.

<sup>103</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/181, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate-Administrator, 1 June 1925. On the prominence of this question, see Yann Brunet, ‘Gestion des ordures ménagères et fabrique du territoire lyonnais au cours des années 1950-1960’ *Histoire Politique* 43 (2021), doi: 10.4000/histoirepolitique.525.

published an article entitled: ‘The permanent danger of carbonic acid threatens the lives of hundreds of miners and even the population of Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues.’<sup>104</sup> On Wednesday 19 November at 4.45am, an explosion of carbonic acid occurred during routine underground works, sending a strong current of toxic smoke up the mine shaft. While the workers present managed to escape the pit, this explosion affected humans and animals beyond the physical space of the mine: ‘an acidic fog reached the main highway and the plain opposite the pit, into the henhouses, killing the livestock of the town’s inhabitants, and forcing the people to flee’. In response, the miners employed at Nord d’Alais refused to work that day. Beyond this traditional action of labour withdrawal, the newspaper implored the creation of a broader alliance between municipal authorities, workers, and all other inhabitants based on their shared experience of exposure to pollution:

the miners must react by constituting a struggle committee supported by the working population of this locality and its communist municipality. This committee will work to struggle against the company and the public authorities to demand security measures for the lives of miners and of the population.

Led by workers, this labour-milieu alliance of the victims of pollution saw its opponents in companies and the state. This initiative to create an environmentally-sensitive alliance between workers and village inhabitants to protect both through improved security measures represents a significant attempt by local communists to transcend the barrier often placed between workplace and community, mirroring the toxic fog.<sup>105</sup>

This was followed by official complaint from elected representatives. On 16 May 1931, the PCF mayor of Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues Henri Polge signed a statement voted by the municipal council denouncing the way in which the ‘dust emitted by the

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<sup>104</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 22 Nov. 1930.

<sup>105</sup> Renaud Bécot, ‘Les murs de l’usine et le dilemme syndical face à la pollution industrielle’ in Anne Clerval, Antoine Fleury, Julien Rebotier and Serge Weber (eds.), *Espace et rapports de domination* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018), 355-65.

agglomerated factories' of the Rochebelle and Nord d'Alais companies 'invaded the surrounding neighbourhoods.'<sup>106</sup> The companies were not doing enough to mitigate emissions, and the communist council demanded that they employ 'certain desirable techniques' to reduce them. At the crux of the demand the council iterated what was at stake due to the companies' (lack of) actions: 'public hygiene'.<sup>107</sup>

This formalized complaint led to an investigation between June and October by the state mining engineers Martin, Pons, Damian, and Daval.<sup>108</sup> In their investigations, the engineers dismissed Polge's complaints. At Nord d'Alais, directors promised that they would employ all possible technologies to mitigate emissions. Nevertheless, the engineers exonerated the company of guilt by invoking a series of misfortunes ostensibly beyond their control:

the Nord d'Alais pit head is close to a national road, its coal is extremely dusty, released spontaneously, and in these conditions, it is normal that the neighbourhoods around the exploitation are invaded by dust when the midi or tramontana winds blow strongly.<sup>109</sup>

In this way, the engineers' naturalisation of the problem removed blame from the company, and expressed this exoneration in terms of regional identity by their reference to the Mediterranean winds. This naturalisation of the phenomenon was similar to the response which saw a deadly industrial fog in Belgium attributed to natural factors in 1930.<sup>110</sup> After delineating the filtering systems used by Rochebelle, Pons naturalised the

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<sup>106</sup> ADG 8/S/51, Register of proceedings of Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues municipal council, 16 May 1931.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> On the legal framework, see Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, 'La régulation des nuisances industrielles urbaines (1800-1940)' *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 64 (1999), 59.

<sup>109</sup> ADG 8/S/51, Report of mining subdivision in response to Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues complaint, 20 June 1931.

<sup>110</sup> See Alexis Zimmer, *Brouillards toxiques*.

pollution in similar fashion, emphasising the role of the wind.<sup>111</sup> This scientific expertise, it appears, was successful in quashing local complaints.

While the enquiry itself went no further, this was not the end of the politicisation of industrial pollution in Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues. Three years later, *Le Cri d'Alès* deplored the company for its lack of action to address the problem despite the passage of the Morizet law in 1932, which prohibited industry from emitting smoke, soot, and toxic gas for the first time.<sup>112</sup> Again, the communist press articulated the interconnected nature of the workplace and its environs. The dust that 'rots the lungs' of miners underground also 'collects on the furnishings of the families of the workers and destroys the health of our women and our children'. Continuing to demonstrate an intimate awareness of the noxious effects of coal dust and gases on health at the community level, the rallying cry to readers was to 'demand that the atmosphere not be poisoned by "these crooks, exploiters of workers".'<sup>113</sup> Here, the communist newspaper was incisive in denouncing the effect of capitalist companies' pollution on the environmental health of workers and of other labour-milieu inhabitants, expressing knowledge of specific effects depending on gender and age as part of a broader, moral-economic critique. In important ways, this reflects the concern for preserving worker health examined in the previous chapter of this thesis. Moreover, it foreshadows an environmental critique of capitalism that connected worker and community health in the post-1968 historical moment.<sup>114</sup>

Companies had a somewhat unsurprising response in the face of rising critiques of their mismanagement or outright damaging of the atmosphere. In a confidential

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<sup>111</sup> ADG 8/S/51, Report of mining subdivision in response to Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues complaint, 20 June 1931.

<sup>112</sup> Massard-Guilbaud, 'La régulation des nuisances industrielles urbaines', 59.

<sup>113</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 7 Mar. 1934.

<sup>114</sup> For example, see Feltrin and Sacchetto, 'The work-technology nexus and working-class environmentalism', 810-35.

meeting with Grand'Combe company directors, on 20 January 1937, the town's mayor Soustelle raised the important issue of 'industrial smoke', 'being agitated everywhere at the moment.'<sup>115</sup> The directors insisted on the dangerous implications of demands around pollution, citing examples where such forms of agitation had led industrial enterprises to opt for alternative sources of energy. By consequence, it was 'the job of workers' representatives to oppose the application of laws' that may threaten polluting industries.<sup>116</sup> To their declared regret, no technical apparatus existed that could reduce the smoke emanating from his factory. Through this reasoning, the Grand'Combe directors sought to expose a contradiction between jobs and environment in the face of critiques from below that had attempted to link workers and the broader labour-milieu community through health.<sup>117</sup> What this reveals is the continuing political salience of environmental questions, conceived of in class terms.

While all coalfield inhabitants breathed polluted air, company contamination of other resources could expose some people more than others. Complaints to the hygiene administration reveal accusations that mining companies regularly emitted waste into rivers. As Roman Garcier has demonstrated, the pollution of rivers sat at something of a legal blindspot between watercourse protection and industrial pollution.<sup>118</sup> Water held a similar importance to coal in the execution of women's domestic labour. *Lavoirs publics* [wash houses] were available in some communes in the coalfield. For example, a centenary book about the PCF municipality Le Martinet vaunts that 'the public washrooms at Henri Barbusse square stopped women from having to go to wash clothes

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<sup>115</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/181, Report on Grand'Combe company director meeting with mayor of La Grand'Combe, 20 Jan. 1937.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Similar arguments were made by local officials and employers in northern England, who declared 'where there's smoke, there's hope.' See Barry Doyle, 'Managing and Contesting Industrial Pollution in Middlesborough, 1880-1940' *Northern History* 47.1 (2010), 140.

<sup>118</sup> Roman Garcier, 'The placing of matter: industrial water pollution and the construction of social order in nineteenth-century France' *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2020), 132-42.

in the streams'.<sup>119</sup> However, across the coalfield, women's access to this recourse was conditioned by poverty, which often intersected with nationality. In his Resistance memoirs, Ange Álvarez recalled swimming in the 'coaly' Gardon as a child migrant from Spain in the interwar period, while the Spanish women, including his mother, washed their clothes in the same river because they were too poor to afford the ten sous fee to use the public washrooms.<sup>120</sup>



Figure 3-2 AMA 5/Fi/GC1, Postcard of the public washroom in La Grand'Combe, C. Artige fils, *Le Gard pittoresque* collection, undated

In the departmental archives compiling contentions over environmental degradations related to industry, the refracted echoes of women's denunciations of pollution can be traced. On 19 May 1933, municipal councillor Bonnafoux wrote to the Alès Sub-Prefect criticising the 'abuses' committed by the Soulier pyrite mines and the Rochebelle Company, 'who eject their dirty waters into the bed of the Gardon'. He filed this complaint 'in the name of all the housewives of the La Royale neighbourhood and its

<sup>119</sup> *100 ans d'histoire du Martinet*, 19.

<sup>120</sup> Ange Álvarez, *Mémoires de Résistances. Cévennes, Montpellier, Val d'Aran, Alès* (Montpellier: Espaces sud, 1994), 28.

surroundings'.<sup>121</sup> The justification Bonnafoux employed suggested that he had been approached by local women who brought experiential proof of the problem, stating 'the washerwomen are right to complain it is impossible for them to wash because the water that comes from Pyrite burns their clothes', adding that the bed of the river had been coloured red.<sup>122</sup> Here, Bonnafoux transmitted a collective complaint from residents who had used embodied, sensory strategies to critique pollution. Although absent from Bonnafoux's complaint, water capable of burning clothes might also pose a threat to health. Moreover, the complaint gives insights into the spatiality of women's work and hygiene complaints.<sup>123</sup> Coalfield women completed the domestic reproductive labour of washing the clothes of workers (and future workers). Whether there was a washroom in the commune or not, this labour determined a crucial space of women's sociability.



Figure 3-3 AMA 13Fi/Alès/2-65, Washerwomen in the Gardon, undated

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<sup>121</sup> ADG 8/S/52, Letter Bonnafoux to Sub-Prefect, 19 May 1933.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> The solidarity implied in this collective complaint harks back to Michelle Perrot's analysis of *menagères* and washing, see: Perrot, 'La *menagère* dans l'espace parisien au XIXe siècle' *Annales de la recherche urbaine* 9 (1980), 3-22.

Although Bonnafoux assured that the washerwomen's suspicions had been corroborated by the Alès municipal hygiene bureau, the eventual investigation undertaken in October 1934 by mining engineers unsurprisingly found the water from the pyrite mines compliant with the laws of 19 December 1917 and 20 April 1932 relative to dangerous, insalubrious, or incommodious establishments.<sup>124</sup> Engineer Pons adjudged that the level of sulfuric acid in the Gardon was so diluted that 'the washerwomen do not risk burning their clothes.'<sup>125</sup> In the face of the women's experiential exposure to water that burned their clothes – not to mention the probable effects on their bodies – while completing domestic labour, engineering expertise dismissed experience-based knowledge with calculations about the objective level of sulfuric acid present.

In the north of the coalfield, the *Syndicat intercommunal des riverains et usagers de la Cèze* river accused Bessèges company of environmental damages. The existence alone of a local group to defend the river confirms again the importance of community opposition to river pollution. In 1933, the group denounced the 'ash and residue' that fell upon the town.<sup>126</sup> The following year, the Syndicate deplored the 'pitiful state' of the river on working days compared to Sundays when no extraction occurred.<sup>127</sup> Due to the company's depositing of mining waste in the river 'at certain hours', washerwomen were unable to use the 'sludgy water' for their tasks. This change may be attributed to the fact that emergent longwall mining techniques analysed in Chapter One meant that more non-coal material made it to the surface. A communist journalist visiting the Gard from Paris in 1936 supports this notion when he commented on the recent proliferation of slag-heaps, with their 'emanations of carbonic gas' representing a 'real danger'.<sup>128</sup> While punctuating

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<sup>124</sup> ADG 8/S/52, Report Engineer Pons, 2 Nov. 1934.

<sup>125</sup> ADG 8/S/52, Report Engineer Pons, 2 Nov. 1934; Note from Daval, 13 Nov. 1934.

<sup>126</sup> AMA 1/N/5, Deliberations of the municipal council of Meyrannes, 3 Mar. 1933.

<sup>127</sup> AMA 1/N/5, Letter Syndicat intercommunal des riverains et usagers de la Cèze to Prefect, 7 Mar. 1934.

<sup>128</sup> *La Vie Ouvrière*, 17 Dec. 1936.

the archival record only briefly, the *Syndicat* of the Cèze is significant for the links it drew between mine waste, pollution, and women's labour, with the appeal indicating a belief that the Prefect, and therefore the state, should regulate company contamination of water in order that washerwomen may complete their tasks safely.

By 1936, it was the turn of the mayor of Saint-Florent-sur-Auzonnet to plead with the authorities on behalf of the washerwomen of his commune. After writing to no avail to the director of the Tréllys company, he wrote to the Prefect in May: 'the washerwomen of my commune who are obliged to execute the work of washing in the river because we have no public washrooms, cannot effect this operation in an appropriate manner, without risk of contamination.'<sup>129</sup> In a further letter to the same authority, the mayor emphasised that the company's dumping of 'silty waters' in the 'bed of our river' was a threat to 'public health'.<sup>130</sup> Through his choice of language, the mayor articulated a critique of how company practices damaged common resources – in 'our' river – and how this mismanagement, or active contamination, of the resource had specific effects on women's capacity to execute what he named their 'work'. Ultimately, the vision of public health expressed by the mayor was environmental, and took seriously the gendered hierarchies of the labour milieu. Taken together, these critiques of unacceptable management of public environmental resources by the company and the emphasis on health impacts suggests the gendered ways in which 'environmental health conflicts' shaped a broad set of inhabitants' experiences of the Gard labour milieu.<sup>131</sup>

That the identities of the washerwomen were not included in the official complaints is unsurprising in an historical period when women were not considered to be

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<sup>129</sup> ADG 8/S/52, Letter Saint-Florent-sur-Auzonnet mayor to Prefect, 30 May 1936.

<sup>130</sup> ADG 8/S/52, Letter Saint-Florent-sur-Auzonnet mayor to Prefect, 13 Jul. 1936.

<sup>131</sup> Grettel Navas, Giacomo d'Alisa and Joan Martinez-Alier, 'The role of working-class communities and the slow violence of toxic pollution in environmental health conflicts: a global perspective' *Global Environmental Change* 73.3 (2022), 102474.

legitimate political actors. Yet this does not mean that they did not have identities beyond being washerwomen or housewives. An investigation of the censuses of La Royale around 1933 shed suggestive light on the actors of the petition that Bonnafoux transmitted to the Prefect. They unveil that between 28% and 35% of these women were likely to have been foreign.<sup>132</sup> In 1931, out of a total of ninety-four women, sixty-eight were French, seven Spanish, six Czech, five Polish, five Turkish, and three Italian. More significant still is the fact that of those listed officially as *ménagères*, just seven were French, with three Spaniards and Poles, two Turkish women, and one Italian. 65% were thus migrants. Neither the councillor's letter nor the census reveals a logic behind who could be classed as *ménagère* (as opposed to *sans profession*). It may be that this status in the census reflects a more professionalised service being exercised by these women. A speculative hypothesis – regrettably unverifiable – would be that these women were professionally involved in washing for single men, housed in *cantines* or private accommodation. If this were the case, it would suggest that migrant women were overrepresented in jobs that exposed them to environmental risks. In the census of 1936, the term disappeared altogether – most likely a reflection of changing administrative sensibilities. Out of seventy-four women in the neighbourhood in 1936, forty-six were French, sixteen Polish, six Czechoslovak, three Turkish, two Spanish, and two Italian. While this indicates the influx of Polish families which occurred in the 1930s, the basic fact remains that migrant women constituted a significant proportion of the population of La Royale, and therefore most likely featured amongst the women who complained about burnt clothes in 1933.

While it is perilous to speculate about the levels of interaction between neighbours, census household number 35 presents an example of particularly heightened

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<sup>132</sup> ADG 6/M/160 Alès census, 1931 (28%); ADG 6/M/163 Alès west census, 1936 (35%).

inter-ethnic cohabitation.<sup>133</sup> In 1931 it housed one French family, three Turkish families, and five Polish families. By 1936, it was inhabited by a French family, four Polish families, three Turkish families, a Spanish-Czechoslovak couple, and a Czechoslovak couple. Did the women of this building go to the river together to complete their washing labour? And did they contest, alongside other women, the companies' pollution of the resource? Reflecting the power relations of the time and of archives more broadly, these questions remain unanswered. Nevertheless, this combination of census data and the petition points tentatively towards the ways in which women too forged solidarities across boundaries of origin in the face of extraction-workplace dangers.<sup>134</sup> Where Maria Charvet has pointed to a 'hygienist acculturation' among washerwomen with the rise of public washrooms in the latter nineteenth century, the cases of La Royale and Saint-Florent demonstrate a historical progression, with washerwomen directly challenging company pollution.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, it serves to show how the strict boundary between workplace and environment does not hold in the case of women's labour. As with the case of Algerian housing and access to coal, it is by looking to the margins that the links between apparently disparate phenomena can be drawn. Social reproductive work was thus a site of the formation of certain forms of sociability, moral economies, and in this case solidarity in the face of industrial pollution hazards.

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<sup>133</sup> Approaching migration history at the level of the apartment building is an emergent approach, that has prompted innovative approaches. See: Langrognet, *Neighbours of passage*; Muriel Cohen, 'Revisiter le logement des migrants à l'échelle de l'immeuble: pistes pour une histoire de la vie quotidienne' *Diasporas* 40 (2022), 49-57. On using such sources for probing interactions, see: Antonin Plarier and Thierry Guillope, 'Une ville-mine d'Algérie par les archives de ses protagonistes (Ain Mokra, mi-XIXe siècle-fin XIXe siècle): Jalons d'une micro-histoire en situation coloniale' *French Colonial History* 21 (2023), 279-311.

<sup>134</sup> And thus opposition to pollution could promote relations of cordiality, mutual-aid, and solidarity, see Didier Terrier et Judith Rainhorn (eds.), *Etranges voisins: altérité et relations de proximité dans la ville depuis le XVIIIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010). Also see: Leen Beyers, 'Everyone Black? Ethnic, Class and Gender Identities at Street Level in a Belgian Mining Town, 1930-50' in Stefan Berger, Andy Crolland Norman Laporte (eds.), *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 146-63.

<sup>135</sup> Maria Charvet, 'Laver et sécher son linge en ville au XIXe siècle' in Fabien Knittel and Pascal Raggi (eds.), *Genre et Techniques XIXe-XXIe siècle* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013), 205-20.

Experiences of the labour milieu were mediated through environmental factors that were lived differently by specific groups of inhabitants. While the pollution emitted by mining companies entered the atmosphere indiscriminately, expanding our reading of the environment of the labour milieu to consider labour inputs and outputs expounds the weight of gender, migration, and colonial status in fundamentally shaping everyday lived experience. While the working-class population as a whole lived in inadequate housing, received insufficient coal, and breathed polluted air, these exposures were accentuated for migrants – in particular Algerians – and women. Rates of crowding and poor hygiene were heightened, suspicion about pilfering coal was rife, and the poorest women were forced to complete their daily cleaning tasks in polluted rivers.

This chapter has demonstrated the existence of a series of practices and discourses that shed light upon a moral economy of safe vital minima in the Gard labour milieu. The component elements of this shared feeling included: hygienic and secure housing for all, expressed with explicit regard for the specific suffering of Algerians and other single migrants; a rejection of energy precarity in the face of inadequate company management of the product of miners' labour; and clean air and rivers, both of which were perceived as mitigable products of the companies' avarice and lack of scrutiny. While none of these issues sat at the centre of Gard politics, they served as the means of articulating a critique of the companies' exploitative mismanagement of vital resources. As such, this historical experience reflects a specifically working-class understanding of how social relations were mediated through environmental factors.

The restricted nature of company and state domination of the labour milieu created space for autonomy for the subjects they sought to control, together with posing

methodological problems for historical research. In some cases, it was company choices about concentrating single migrant workers in large lodgings that could generate subaltern actors and sites of sociability and influence. In others, it was their vast concession territories that hindered the surveillance of company-controlled resources. For this very material reason, it is difficult to ascertain the extent of the phenomenon of coal-disobedience. To a greater degree, women's experiences of the labour milieu were excluded from the archive. This stemmed from structural misogyny that failed to protect domestic labour with risk legislation. Again, the contemporary lack of interest in their living conditions renders necessary a reasoned speculation in proposing that exposure to certain mining toxicities was profoundly gendered.

The everyday and infra-political relations of exploitation, hierarchy, and solidarity in the labour milieu did not remain consigned to covert actions. Rather, the organized labour movement of the Gard coalfield developed during the interwar period within and in conscious relation to this reality. The remainder of this thesis studies in greater detail how the divergent and convergent dimensions of experience in this diverse labour milieu were grappled with in the realm of labour politics.

## Ch.4 ‘Their place is not on the barricades’: Diversity, Radicalism, and Strikes, 1923-33

On 8 March 1931, a man stood before a strike committee meeting at the Salle Jean-Jaurès in Alès and declared, in Spanish, ‘in the struggle there are no Spaniards, French, or Algerians, there are only men who, in the battle, must be united.’<sup>1</sup> In uttering these words, the anonymous Spaniard sought to forge universal workers’ solidarity across boundaries of origin. For him, and for the editors of *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, the communist regional newspaper that reported his intervention, this was the most promising way of rallying Spaniards at the meeting, and mobilising French-speaking readers to strike against a wage reduction. However, the very language in which he spoke reveals the linguistic differences that required practical responses tailored to the coalfield’s diversity, while his anonymity in the publication teases at the repression that politically engaged migrants risked. This chapter examines how the diversity and hierarchies of the labour milieu shaped the development of strikes in the 1920s and early 1930s. To do so, it traces the strategies employed to negotiate and address differences of language, labour milieu experience, and political rights not only as theoretical ideas, but as practical problems that a range of marginal actors responded to through different forms of labour struggle.

Over the decade prior to the Spaniard’s intervention, the diverse population of the Gard coalfield had made its presence felt during all mobilisations over wages. Moments of downward pressure on wages either at a national level, as was the case in 1923 and 1931, or at a regional scale, in January 1929, prompted the reformist CGT and the locally more important revolutionary CGTU into attempts to organise resistance. By their very

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 14 Mar. 1931.

presence, migrants posed an ideological and practical challenge for a French labour movement that was wrought with internal divisions and regional variation.<sup>2</sup> Alongside the labour milieu complexities of differential experience expounded hitherto in this thesis, one of the most important practical problems was that of differences in language, which made cross-linguistic communication a crucial conduit of the class struggle. The question of how to communicate ideas around strikes to a population who spoke French, Occitan, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Catalan, Czech, and more, was anything but banal or simple. In the Gard, French labour unionists, CGTU-affiliated foreign propagandists, locally-rooted migrants, the Prefect, and employers engaged more or less organised initiatives to tackle this practical problem. Priorities over which languages to communicate in unveiled hierarchies of suspicion on the part of the authorities, which evolved in response to subversive actions by migrants.

Much historical work on the interwar period has sought to understand how repression and cultural divisions brought about a perceived lack of migrant engagement in French political disputes.<sup>3</sup> Their central concern has been with why migrants kept away from the barricades. Other works have chosen to emphasise tensions between internationalist discourses and local realities of indifference on the part of unions, or have focused on the efforts made by French figures, especially in the PCF, to organise migrant workers in Paris.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, this chapter explores the active participation of the coalfield's marginalised in episodes of labour insubordination, tracing the development

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<sup>2</sup> For a global view on this conundrum, see Bastien Cabot, *La gauche et les migrations: Une histoire de l'internationalisme XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2024), 23-26.

<sup>3</sup> Schor, *L'opinion française*, 239-74; Slaby, 'Dissimilarity Breeds Contempt', 239-244; Ralph Schor, 'Les pouvoirs publics français et les activités politiques des étrangers dans l'entre-deux-guerres' *Parlement[s]* 27.1 (2018), 65-9.

<sup>4</sup> Noiriel, *Longwy. immigrés et prolétaires*, 278-289; Pinna, *Migranti italiani tra fascismo e antifascismo*, 344-52; Rainhorn, *Paris, New York*, 147-154; Meriggi, *Entre fraternité et xénophobie*, Ch.1.

of how the diversity and hierarchies of the labour milieu mapped onto working-class struggle.

The chapter is divided into three sections, the logic of which is both chronological and thematic. First, it treats the question of cross-linguistic communication, how it was practised, and how it related to the relative threat or subversive potential perceived among different groups of migrants by various sections of French coalfield society. Second, it turns to focus on the strike of January 1929, investigating how episodes of radical confrontation with the forces of order by the marginalised of the coalfield brought into being new and different forms of solidarity that emphasised engagement with the specific oppressions that these groups encountered.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the chapter considers the legacy of January 1929 for the coalfield's labour movement. As a result of the dynamics unleashed during that month, an increasing sensitivity to the practical and experiential differences among the working population emerged. This nascent form of solidarity did not immediately establish dominance, but established itself in a dialectic with the worker-universalist form that stressed proletarian sameness as its foundational premise.

At its core, this chapter is about how diverse groups of marginalised coalfield inhabitants imposed their specific dispute practises and demands into struggles originally called over wages. Cross-linguistic communication, the risk of deportation, and engagement in subversive, radical action characterised the interventions of migrants. Far from being passive objects in broader conflicts between labour and capital, migrants and other marginalised actors were active subjects, forcing incomplete but undeniable change from below and from the margins to the meaning and practise of solidarity.

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<sup>5</sup> Focusing on radical actions and their underlying logics builds upon Samuel Hayat, 'Une politique en mode mineur: Ordre patronal et ordre communautaire dans les mines du Nord au XIXe siècle' *Politix* 119.3 (2017), 126; Vincent Gay, *Pour la dignité: ouvriers immigrés et conflits sociaux dans les années 1980* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2021).

### Communicating Class Conflict

The circulation of information across linguistic diversity and the participation of migrants became central features of labour insubordination in the 1920s. Strikes over wages in the Gard took place after pay declined in 1922 in the context of stagnation and growing competition in international coal markets.<sup>6</sup> By February 1923, a movement developed around nationally constructed demands for a three-franc increase.<sup>7</sup> On 13 February, the national coal employers' association the CCHF advised company directors to privilege negotiations with the CGT, and to keep a ceiling of 1fr50 on any wage increases.<sup>8</sup>

As this was the first strike they faced with the new diverse population, directors at Grand'Combe were preoccupied by foreign participation. On 15 February, company director Bonnevey wrote to a CCHF administrator to report that a meeting held by the CGTU had attracted 100 workers, including thirty foreigners.<sup>9</sup> Immediately after the meeting, a demonstration took place against the occupation of the Ruhr which attracted a crowd of 250-300, carrying sixteen flags, 'some red, others black and red'.<sup>10</sup> This combination of a strike about wages with broader political issues on which the PCF was campaigning was typical of the party's strategy in the early 1920s.<sup>11</sup> But the presence of red-and-black flags implies that it was not only communists who participated, but anarchists too. This presence might stem from local anarchists who prevailed in the region around 1890.<sup>12</sup> However, it is possible that these flags – closely linked as they were with

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<sup>6</sup> *Capital et Travail*, 15 Jun. 1922: This newspaper, 'for the collaboration of labour and capital', featured in the Prefect's dossier on wages in the mining industry.

<sup>7</sup> ADG 1/M/795, Dossier Strike Feb. 1923.

<sup>8</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Letter Fevre, CCHF to company directors, 13 Feb. 1923.

<sup>9</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 15 Feb. 1923.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> David Noël, 'Le mouvement communiste et l'antimilitarisme dans le Pas-de-Calais de la fin de la première guerre mondiale au tournant des années trente' *Revue du Nord* 438.1 (2021), 101-36.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Michel Gaillard, 'Le 1er mai 1890 dans le bassin houiller du Gard' *Le Mouvement social* 94 (1976), 59-76.

the Spanish CNT – had another provenance.<sup>13</sup> The following day, four hundred workers attended a meeting at which mining delegate Georges Vital ‘preached resistance’. In the crowd, Bonnevey reported, were a ‘great number of *Sidis* [Algerians], Spaniards, and Italians’ and, after the meeting, a crowd composed of ‘*Sidis*, Spanish, and about 20 kids, with only 30-40 French workers above the age of 22’ paraded through the streets.<sup>14</sup> While this supports the notion that Spaniards may have been behind the anarchist banners, the more significant revelation here is Bonnevey’s insinuation that the action was immature and illegitimate due to its participants.

The following morning, a group of strikers stood under the cover of darkness ‘close to the workplace, in the alleyways between houses, and threw stones at workers on their way to work’.<sup>15</sup> Using both the natural cloak of night and a knowledge of the urban geography of La Grand’Combe, the group engaged in violence against strikebreakers. While the identity of the stone-throwers is ultimately unknown, this episode represents an important first instance of cooperation between a very probably demographically and politically diverse group. Behind the actions of these workers, according to Bonnevey, lay Georges Vital, the communist agitator who would ‘heat them up’ before leading them into battle.<sup>16</sup> But questions remain as to how Vital communicated these sentiments to a multi-lingual and recently arrived group.

Later that year, local surveillance authorities recognised the generative role played by migrants in antagonistic labour relations. Appeals in November by the unions for a three-franc raise per day were met with rejection by employers, who offered between one

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<sup>13</sup> On the usage of the flag in Spanish anarchism, see Javier Navarro Navarro, ‘La calle rojinegra. Anarcosindicalismo, rituales de movilización y símbolos en el espacio público (1931-1936)’ *Pasado y Memoria* 13 (2014), 141-72.

<sup>14</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Bonnevey report, 17 Feb. 1923.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

and two depending on the worker's post. Five days of agitation and mobilisation by the CGTU ended on 19 November, when the CGT refused to join the strike.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the strike's eventual failure, the Prefect signalled the role of certain migrants in mobilizing their compatriots. In La Grand'Combe on 16 November, a meeting of the CGTU attracted 250, including sixty 'Italian or Spanish' workers.<sup>18</sup> At the meeting, an Italian miner from Champclauson, identified as 'Stoky' by the Prefect, translated Vital's speech. He invited 'the Italian workers of La Grand'Combe to follow the example given by the Italians of Champclauson who had unwaveringly adhered to the movement.'<sup>19</sup> 'Stoky', whose name informers were surely spelling phonetically, thus fulfilled the crucial role of cross-linguistic communication of strike propaganda to a set of newcomer workers. Similarly, after Italians at Saint-Jean-de-Valérisclé had worked on 16 November, an 'Italian comrade' of the CGTU intervened in order to bring his compatriots into the struggle.<sup>20</sup> When striking workers subsequently voted for the continuation of the strike on 17 November, the Prefect credited an Italian, Aurioli, with assuring that his compatriots 'made common cause with their French comrades'.<sup>21</sup> But the call for participation at Grand'Combe went beyond simple appeals, to demonstrate the material dimensions of solidarity. Vital requested that those present provide material aid to an Italian striking worker whose wife was gravely ill – a message also translated into Italian for the audience.<sup>22</sup> While appealing to material contributions, Vital also effectively advertised the mutual aid that implication in strike activity could promise.

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<sup>17</sup> ADG 1/M/795, Report special police commissioner of Alès on strike, 10 Dec. 1923.

<sup>18</sup> AN F/7/13903, Report Prefect to Interior, 17 Nov. 1923.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *L'Humanité*, 17 Nov. 1923.

<sup>21</sup> AN F/7/13903, Report Prefect to Interior, 19 Nov. 1923.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

The next day, *L'Humanité* reported that the distribution of material support to migrants during the strike had brought 'a great number' of new members to the CGTU.<sup>23</sup> A combination of influential individual foreigners and their translation of union structures of support were therefore able to generate institutionalised class solidarities across boundaries of language.<sup>24</sup> This practical mediation sought to transcend differences between workers in order to forge proletarian sameness and thus to drive forward joint participation in struggle under the banner of worker-universalist solidarity politics.<sup>25</sup>

Migrant propagandists' mediation surfaced again during the important strike of January 1929. According to Grand'Combe engineer Fléchon, late 1928 was characterised by growing complaints from men about wages, while women denounced unreasonable prices at market.<sup>26</sup> The eventual watchword of the strike would be for a five franc increase to daily wages. Furthermore, this atmosphere of social tension came about when the increasing exigences of the labour rationalisation treated in the opening chapters of this thesis were becoming evident. At the beginning of December, *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* published an article denouncing the 'work of rationalisation' in the 'bosses' offensive against the miners and in particular against our foreign comrades in the domain of workplace accidents'.<sup>27</sup>

On 30 December 1928, a meeting took place at the Bourse du Travail in Alès, attracting 200 workers. Following interventions from mining delegates Isidore Michel and Henri Chapon on the need to follow the miners of the Loire coalfield who had begun

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<sup>23</sup> *L'Humanité*, 18 Nov. 1923.

<sup>24</sup> Recent sociological work has probed the crucial role of translation in contemporary multi-lingual organizing contexts, see: Gabriella Cioce, Marek Korczynski, Davide Però, 'The improvised language of solidarity', 10-12.

<sup>25</sup> This approach to mobilisation can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. See Xavier Daumalin, 'Usages et résistances des ouvriers immigrés dans l'industrie marseillaise (1880-1914)' *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 84 (2012), 241.

<sup>26</sup> On these complaints, see Fléchon, *Trente ans de fond*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 8 Dec. 1928.

a strike, the Prefect reported that ‘alone, a Spanish worker, from Saint-Martin-de-Valgalmgues, got up on stage and explained, in his language of origin to his compatriots the advantages of joining’ the CGTU.<sup>28</sup> The Prefect’s report noted that the Spaniard should be subject to continued surveillance and potential eventual deportation. This early intervention by a linguistic-political intermediary alerted the authorities and informed their repressive strategy. Equally, on 3 January, the regional communist newspaper *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* reported that a reputed Italian communist had received a deportation order in the week preceding the strike.<sup>29</sup> As well as those directly implicated in meetings, the authorities also pre-emptively expelled foreign individuals known for agitation.

The authorities also engaged in cross-linguistic communication in an attempt to prevent migrants from striking. As well as passing an order that prohibited gatherings in all of the principal mining communes, Prefect Maurice Mounier commissioned posters in French, Italian, and Spanish, ‘inviting [foreigners] to abstain from all political agitation and all demonstrations’, to be posted in mining communes on 2 January.<sup>30</sup> Its text is indicative of the constraints upon migrant agency.

On occasion, groups of foreign workers exhibit an attitude that contrasts with the benevolent welcome they receive in our country. The French Republic, which remains loyal to its tradition of hospitality and which guarantees the free exercise of those rights to which they can pretend to those foreign workers living peacefully on its territory from the product of their labour, has the right to expect from them a strict observation of legality and an absolute respect of order. They must, therefore, abstain from all political agitation, all demonstrations, especially on public roads or surrounding workshops or factories. This is an essential rule that has no exceptions. It will be vigorously observed, and severe sanctions will be taken against those who violate it.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> AN F/7/13905, Letter Prefect to Interior, 2 Jan. 1929.

<sup>29</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 3 Jan. 1929.

<sup>30</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 3 Jan. 1929.

<sup>31</sup> AN F/7/13905, Poster ‘Warning to foreign workers’, 2 Jan. 1929.

This poster cast a stark warning to foreign workers in unambiguous terms: participation in strike activities contravened the ‘benevolent welcome’ that foreigners received in France, and would be severely punished. This sheds light on a central contradiction in migrants’ political and labour rights. While the Waldeck-Rousseau law had long granted migrants and French workers the same rights to join unions, discrepancies remained on their rights to political engagement.<sup>32</sup> The spatial dimension of Mounier’s warning is important for this contradiction. Rather than illegally banning migrants from union activity, Mounier excluded them from public space – from ‘demonstrating in the vicinity of workshops or factories’.<sup>33</sup> Communist national newspaper *L’Humanité*’s Pierre Lacan, dispatched as a special envoy to report daily on the emergent dispute in the Gard, was clear about the poster’s intention, writing that it sought to compel migrants ‘to let themselves be exploited by the bosses without a word, and to deny any proletarian solidarity.’<sup>34</sup>

But, while the poster ostensibly targeted all migrants, its distribution betrays a hierarchy of concern about the political subversion of different groups. In January 1929, 574 Spaniards and 531 Italians worked in the Gard mines.<sup>35</sup> The Prefect prioritised these groups with the language of his warning, rather than the 666 North Africans, 1,017 Poles, or 442 migrants of other origins. Perhaps this choice was dictated by the linguistic resources at the Prefect’s immediate disposal. Yet it also reflects nationally-held stereotypes about the political proclivities of foreigners seen in Chapter One, reinforced by local experiences of agitation by southern European migrants dating back to 1923.

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<sup>32</sup> Rainhorn, *Paris, New York, des migrants italiens*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> Xavier Vigna notes the street and the workplace as the key strike spaces in the twentieth century. It is significant that migrants were prohibited from both areas of action: Xavier Vigna, ‘La violence dans les grèves ouvrières en France au XXe siècle’ in Hatzfeld, Pigenet and Vigna (eds.), *Travail, travailleurs et ouvriers d’Europe au XXe siècle*, 170-5.

<sup>34</sup> *L’Humanité*, 9 Jan. 1929.

<sup>35</sup> Chambon, ‘Matériaux pour l’histoire sociale du bassin minier d’Alès’, 313.

The poster campaign was unsuccessful. On 3 January, Grand'Combe director Bonnevey noted that a 'violent' speech was given by 'leader of the movement' Georges Vital at a meeting in the town's main square.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, an improvised demonstration marched along the town's main roads towards the residence of an engineer, Blanc, who had encouraged strike-breaking that morning.<sup>37</sup> Here, the striking mineworkers targeted an agent of rationalisation, and openly contravened the order against public gatherings to do so. Bonnevey also recorded another important detail about the demonstration: it attracted, he stated, 500-550 people, 'almost uniquely foreigners: Italians, Spaniards, and Arabs. There were not thirty local workers over the age of thirty.'<sup>38</sup> Echoing earlier condescension about foreign and youth participation in strikes, this report reveals that a diverse group defied cross-linguistic threats of discipline about the occupation of public space and was targeted in its action.

Language was equally crucial to the mobilisation of Algerians. At a meeting that attracted 1,500 participants at Les Salles-du-Gardon (La Grand'Combe) on 8 January, police commissioner Pras reported to the Prefect on speeches given by Vital and by Monmousseau, a member of the political bureau of the PCF visiting from Paris.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the meeting, an Algerian worker translated Monmousseau's speech into Arabic, encouraging, according to Pras' report, 'his compatriots to prevent non-strikers from going to work'.<sup>40</sup> A note later appended to the report, in different ink, stated the identity of this Algerian worker: Ahmed Hadache, born 30 September 1893 in Constantine, employed at the Grand'Combe company since November 1926, having come from the

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<sup>36</sup> ANMT, 90/AQ/131, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 4 Jan. '1928' (year incorrect in document).

<sup>37</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 4 Jan. 1929.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> ADG 1/M/797, Report La Grand'Combe police commissioner to Prefect, 9 Jan. 1929.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

coal-mining basin of Saint-Etienne.<sup>41</sup> Potential barriers to Algerian strike participation were therefore overcome by the mediation of Hadache who was familiar with French and, it appears, with mining union activism.

The Prefect's report on the meeting's contents was marked by his repressive proclivities, and his and Monmousseau's ignorance regarding certain facets of Gard social reality. In his report to the Parisian authorities, the Prefect omitted any mention of the Arabic translation, choosing instead to emphasize, again, the 'violent' nature of Monmousseau's discourse, who encouraged miners to 'descend on the streets and use their picks to win just as they use them to extract coal.'<sup>42</sup> Monmousseau's incitement to the miners to use their picks in the industrial dispute was evidently an attempt to stir miners into action by tying together their workplace experiences to a political solidarity. However, it was relevant principally to *mineurs*, whereas *manœuvres* – the majority of whom were migrants – exercised other ancillary tasks. By emphasizing one part of the mining process, Monmousseau tacitly marginalised some minework.<sup>43</sup> The Prefect's decision to omit the Algerian intervention may have stemmed from his primary concern at the growing involvement of national PCF figures in the strike, with this letter intended as an appeal to the Interior Ministry for additional aid. In addition, the surveillance personnel's lack of Arabic left the Prefect – and leaves the historian – in the dark about whether Hadache altered the wording in his translation to accord with the Algerians' workplace realities.

Polish workers similarly became involved in this dispute, and the consequent issues of translation. A telegram sent by the Prefect to Paris at 12.30 on 9 January

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 9 Jan. 1929.

<sup>43</sup> This may also stem from the fact that Monmousseau was never a miner himself.

indicated that Poles from Saint-Martin-de-Valgalmgues had been ‘prevented from going to work’.<sup>44</sup> His use of the passive voice implied a desire to work on the part of Poles, who had been blocked by strikers ‘armed with batons’ at Champclauson and Bessèges.<sup>45</sup> However, the authorities’ actions suggested that not all Polish mineworkers wished to work. *L’Humanité* reported on 10 January that the companies went to seek Poles at their residence to prevent them from joining the movement and, on the previous day, police arrested three Poles and a French miner for forming a picket.<sup>46</sup> In response, the authorities once again resorted to linguistic translation. On 9 January, a police commissioner in Alès wrote to the Prefect with a Polish translation of the warning previously issued to the Italian and Spanish workers.<sup>47</sup> ‘Fearing that the Polish interpreter had not conveyed the correct meaning in his translation’, the police commissioner had asked a ‘young Polish girl in residence at Bessèges’ to translate the interpreter’s original version into French.<sup>48</sup> When the Polish girl – who had presumably attended school in France – confirmed the accuracy of the initial translation, the commissioner recommended the printing and posting of the message in Polish. The importance attached to this level of verification indicates both a real concern at Polish involvement in the strike, and a conviction among the local authorities that correct communication might counter their participation. More broadly, cross-linguistic communication and its diverse agents were widely recognised as crucial for shaping class disputes.

Threats of deportation were met by a unifying response from Communist activists. *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* denounced the ‘hypocritical vaunting of French hospitality’, and instead emphasised the common cause of all workers.

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<sup>44</sup> AN F/7/13905, Telegram Prefect to Interior 12.30, 9 Jan. 1929.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *L’Humanité*, 10 Jan. 1929.

<sup>47</sup> ADG 1/M/797, Letter Alès police commissioner to Prefect, 9 Jan. 1929.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Whether Algerian, Polish, or Italian, you have the same rights to defend as your French comrades, you are exploited in the same way as them, you suffer identical working conditions, like them you are subject to the same mine collapses and firedamp explosions.<sup>49</sup>

While criticising the targeting of migrants with the threat of state repression, the Communist newspaper identified their shared experiences of labour milieu precarity. In light of the previous chapters' analysis of the complex hierarchies that operated in the labour milieu, this assertion of commonality seems a voluntaristic attempt to produce unity based on homogeneity of class. This form of solidarity may be considered an assertion of a kind of worker-universalism; a model crafted to transcend difference and emphasise proletarian oneness through discourse. It was an approach to solidarity that would increasingly encounter alternative visions.

### **Radical Action, Fraternisation, and Special Demands in January 1929**

As the strike of January 1929 moved into its second week, state forces, local trade unionists, migrant workers, and coalfield women escalated the dynamic of repression and resistance. On Monday 7 January, Bonnevey wrote to the Prefect to express his unwillingness to engage with workers' demands.<sup>50</sup> The employers' refusal to negotiate went hand-in-hand with an escalation of repressive forces by what Michel Pigenet calls the 'État-gendarme', when, on 9 January the Prefect deployed 650 troops to protect the pits 'day and night' at the request of the employers.<sup>51</sup>

As the word of repression mounted, so did the emphasis on radicality and diversity in the communist coverage of events. *L'Humanité* journalist Lacan described the diverse and determined crowd gathered in La Grand'Combe to discuss how to circumvent

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<sup>49</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 12 Jan. 1929.

<sup>50</sup> AN F/7/13905, Letter Bonnevey to Prefect, 7 Jan. 1929.

<sup>51</sup> ADG 1/M/797, Report Prefect to Interior, 9 Jan. 1929; AN F/7/13905 Report Prefect to Interior, 9 Jan. 1929; ANMT 90/AQ/131, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 10 Jan. 1929. Michel Pigenet, *L'État contre les syndicalistes?* (Paris: Arbre bleu, 2023), 19-33.

repression on 8 January: Algerians, whose chechias ‘struck the red note’, young *manœuvres*, and women ‘who underst[ood] their role in the class struggle and who want[ed], in this battle, to show solidarity with their companions’.<sup>52</sup> The diversity of the working class thus represented a source of strength and growing radicalism rather than of weakness and illegitimacy, as representations by the authorities would suggest. Furthermore, the power structures of the strike reflected its diversity: *L’Humanité* reported that the strike committee bureau at a meeting on 14 January at La Grand’Combe was presided over by Georges Vital, ‘assisted by a youth, a woman, a Pole, and a colonial’ (*sic*).<sup>53</sup>

Efforts to defy the policies of state repression brought the meeting’s diverse and marginalised attendees to the centre of the dispute. At Grand’Combe’s pit head on 9 January, strikers tipped over wagons of coal and fought with strike-breakers.<sup>54</sup> On 10 January, the Prefect reported the presence of flying pickets, allegedly organised by the CGTU.<sup>55</sup> The following morning before dawn, a ‘crowd’ of around 150 ‘French, Algerians, Spaniards, Italians, and about fifteen women’ invaded the pithead at Pontil, one of the Grand’Combe Company’s principal pits, that was being guarded by military personnel.<sup>56</sup> With the women identified in police commissioner Lala’s report as ‘Madame Bachir ben Ahmed, Madame Tudescq, and Madame Parisio at the front’ of the group, the group of strikers responded to the guarding soldier’s question ‘who are you?’ by voicing a new demand: ‘we want bread!’.<sup>57</sup> Next, the ‘calm’ strikers broke past the soldiers with

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<sup>52</sup> *L’Humanité*, 9 Jan. 1929.

<sup>53</sup> *L’Humanité*, 15 Jan. 1929. If, as Stéphane Sirot suggests, strike meetings were important moments of legitimisation, this committee’s composition demonstrates a broad recognition of the importance of encompassing the diversity of the population. See Sirot in *La grève en France*, 124-133.

<sup>54</sup> *Le Matin*, 10 Jan. 1929.

<sup>55</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 11 Jan. 1929.

<sup>56</sup> AN F/7/13905, Special commissioner Lala report to Sûreté Générale, 12 Jan. 1929.

<sup>57</sup> *L’Humanité*, 12 Jan. 1929; AN F/7/13905, Report special commissioner Lala to Sûreté Générale, 12 Jan. 1929.

ease, before seeking strikebreakers in the washrooms and ordering that they turn off boilers and other key infrastructure.<sup>58</sup>

These actions reflected both a combative radicalism and an expansion of the strike to encompass the complexities of different labour-milieu actors. By their encroachment onto prohibited space, these marginalised actors challenged directly the authorities, and indirectly their subordinate positions.<sup>59</sup> Rather than ‘taking their picks’, migrant strikers tipped over coal wagons to inflict upon strikebreakers the task – that we saw in Chapter Two came with health risks – of rerailing them, and as an acknowledgement of and challenge to their place as haulers in the division of labour. Similarly, the women voiced a demand for bread that reflected their social-reproductive role in the Gard labour milieu.<sup>60</sup> An interview with an anonymous woman surrounding her trial following this affair confirmed this particularity, when she exclaimed ‘I manage a household. Knowing what is necessary to live in a working-class household, it was my duty to demand a wage increase.’<sup>61</sup> Another, ‘camarade Broccarde’ emphasised that, with her seven children, she knew what was needed to ‘live’, meaning that her place was ‘side-by-side with the strikers, at the front of the demonstration’.<sup>62</sup> In this way, women could draw upon their differential position to escalate the strike’s radicalism and reinforce unity while also spatially challenging patriarchal structures that in everyday life kept them away from the mine and in the home.<sup>63</sup> These actions were taken in a context in which the company also

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> On the importance of imposition of the marginalised on the spatiality of labour politics, see: Ruth Percy, ‘Picket lines and parades: labour and urban space in twentieth-century London and Chicago’ *Urban History* 41.3 (2014), 470-2.

<sup>60</sup> Julia Greene, ‘Rethinking the Boundaries of Class: Labor History and Theories of Class and Capitalism’ *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 18 (2021), 98; Claude Durand, ‘Revendications explicites et revendications latentes’ *Sociologie du travail* 15.4 (1973), 394-409.

<sup>61</sup> *L’Humanité*, 4 Feb. 1929.

<sup>62</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 16 Feb. 1929.

<sup>63</sup> One might say that she asserted a political form of ‘reproductive citizenship’, see: Barton, *Reproductive Citizens*.

sought to use social reproduction to weaken the strike. On 13 January, *Le Moniteur des Cévennes* – a Grand’Combe company-financed weekly newspaper – vaunted that Grand’Combe’s directors offered women free coal, instrumentalising their energy precarity and emphasising the company’s power and benevolence to undermine the strike.<sup>64</sup>



Figure 4-1. *L'Humanité*, 19 Jan. 1929. 'Hardened, firm, and resolute features. The wives of the Gard miners took their place in the first row of the battle...'

<sup>64</sup> *Le Moniteur des Cévennes*, 13 Jan. 1929. On the newspaper, see: Sugier, 'La Première Guerre mondiale et le déclin du contrôle social', 216.

The ease with which the strikers broke past soldiers at Pontil prompted a national debate about fraternisation. In response to the claim by the regional newspaper *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* and *L'Humanité* that soldiers had 'fraternised' with strikers by allowing them to enter the pits, La Grand'Combe's police commissioner hastily issued denials.<sup>65</sup> *La Victoire* agreed, condescendingly qualifying the stories of fraternisation by soldiers with strikers as 'Meridional exaggeration'.<sup>66</sup> However, the journalist also divulged information on interactions between strikers and troops the day before the Pontil incident. The strike committee brought them 'wine, cigarettes, sausages, cheese', material provisions that the journalists claimed may have motivated the *artilleurs* to show 'a bit of softness'.<sup>67</sup> Emphasising the gendered dimension of this interaction, *Le Matin* suggested that the strikers sent women to 'entice' the soldiers.<sup>68</sup> Conflicting in their emphases, these reports nonetheless coincide in underscoring the potential importance of material provision and interpersonal contact to attempts to generate solidarity. Looking back on events, Le Martinet communist Élie Duguet's memoirs recalled that this fraternisation had been accomplished by a group of men and women from Le Martinet who braved icy slopes to reach Pontil, where they offered cigarettes to the soldiers and played on their emotions by singing songs that invoked the memory of the soldiers who had refused to fire upon the great wine revolt in Béziers in 1907.<sup>69</sup> While not without its own biases, this account by Duguet delivers a fuller picture of the encounter, hinting at the interwoven nature of the material and the emotional aspects of conflict.

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<sup>65</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 12 Jan. 1929; *L'Humanité*, 12 Jan. 1929. AN F/7/13905, Report La Grand'Combe police commissioner to Prefect, 12 Jan. 1929.

<sup>66</sup> *La Victoire*, 13 Jan. 1929. This article can be found in the form of a newspaper clipping located in AN F/7/13905. Its archival location suggests that it informed national authorities' perceptions of the strike.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Le Matin*, 16 Jan. 1929.

<sup>69</sup> Duguet, *Le chemin de l'Arbousset*, 80.

Interactions between strikers and soldiers took on programmatic, as well as material, dimensions. In February, Castets, the Procureur de la République in Nîmes, led an investigation into seditious behaviour during the strike. One of the objects of the inquest was a pair of tracts written in Arabic and French, that encouraged ‘indigenous soldiers’ guarding the pitheads to disobey orders.<sup>70</sup> According to the Prefect’s anonymous sources, the tracts ‘invited the indigenous of the Gard coalfield to *se solidariser* with French strikers’, and had been circulated by Parisian CGTU figure Mostefa Merouch, who had also spoken in Arabic at numerous strike meetings in La Grand’Combe.<sup>71</sup> This raises the possibility that, even if their fraternisation was no more than passive, what motivated the removal of the troops from the coalfield was the threat of solidarity – between workers and soldiers, but also between Algerians in both categories. The report in *L’Humanité* revealed that this propaganda included demands for a twelve-franc wage increase, free transport, and, crucially, equality of service time for indigenous conscripts.<sup>72</sup> This ambiguous passive fraternisation of some soldiers with striking mineworkers in La Grand’Combe thus took place in a context in which a set of demands particular to colonial troops was articulated. It was this combination of material provision and voicing of specific demands by the strike committee, the radical invasion of the pit, and the troops’ alleged fraternisation that contributed to the episode’s national notoriety. By 14 January, the Prefect and Sub-Prefect were ‘speaking quite openly of a revolutionary strike’, which had evolved beyond its original wage demands, involved the coalfield’s most marginal actors, and generated cooperation between different groups of newcomers.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Letter from Castets to Prefect, 16 Feb. 1929.

<sup>71</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Letter from Prefect to Castets, 19 Feb. 1929.

<sup>72</sup> *L’Humanité*, 12 Jan. 1929.

<sup>73</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Report Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 15 Jan. 1929.

Algerian strikers' radical actions in the strike's third week flowed from the inequalities of the labour milieu. While the mine directors remained resolute in refusing negotiations, the Prefect began to express concern about coal stocks running low.<sup>74</sup> It would thus seem that the strike, still maintaining an official turnout rate of 73%, was succeeding. On Monday 14 January, Bonnevey blamed the low proportion of strike-breakers on 'troubles at Champclauson'.<sup>75</sup> According to the director of the Grand'Combe company, 'Arabs' from Trescol, who were 'notorious strikers', had 'gone to spend the night from Sunday to Monday in two or three bedrooms of Arab strikers of Champclauson or at the homes of CGTU friends' before 'the next morning, fifty or sixty strong, they tried to terrorise the workers of Champclauson who wanted to go to work.'<sup>76</sup> According to Bonnevey, they were 'driven' by Jouve, a member of the CGTU in Champclauson, to attack first the 'Arab' and then the French strikebreakers.<sup>77</sup> A report by the gendarme in charge, Croissant, added that the Algerian Ben Azzou also exercised an influence over the workers. Armed with clubs and stones, the Algerians – eighty in number, according to Croissant – attacked workers as they passed under a bridge. When invited to cease their actions, they let out what Croissant described as a 'war cry' and attacked the gendarmes stationed at one entrance.<sup>78</sup> After this group was repelled by the bayonets of the gendarmes, around fifteen Algerians emerged from their lodgings 'situated at 150m from the entrance to the mine' and attempted to prevent five non-strikers from going to work. Again, these Algerians were repelled by the gendarmes' bayonets, leaving several of them

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<sup>74</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 15 Jan. 1929.

<sup>75</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Report Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 14 Jan. 1929.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> ADG 1/M/797, Report Lieutenant Croissant to Sub-Prefect, 16 Jan. 1929.

wounded: a fact that the Prefect would later deny, stating that only one Algerian was injured when attempting to ‘disarm’ a gendarme.<sup>79</sup>

This experience of violence reflected a specific oppression by the authorities against the Algerians. Yet it also reveals the workers to have been far more than passive victims. These Algerians intervened in an organised and collective manner in and on the spatial politics of the coalfield. Sleeping in the bedrooms of other Algerians or at the homes of CGTU members to pursue strike-breakers revealed their vernacular knowledge of the coalfield landscape. Moreover, it is highly likely that the bedrooms slept in by the striking Algerians were company-owned. Coherent with the picture of Algerians’ accommodation as a factor of labour-milieu discrimination outlined in the previous chapter of this thesis, the proximity between housing and the mine’s entrance here is indicative of their exposure to environmental dangers. Crucially, they appropriated this position of disadvantage to their own tactical ends. Further still, they made their housing – a ‘latent’ grievance – into an unavoidable issue in the strike.<sup>80</sup> According to *L’Humanité*, the company subsequently engaged with this question of housing by threatening strikers with eviction from their homes, and by sending engineers and gendarmes to find Algerians at their homes ‘to bring them to work’.<sup>81</sup>

These actions by the Algerian strikers implied and generated solidarities of various kinds. In the moment of conflict, the actions undoubtedly reflected and forged bonds between those who participated in them. Soon after, strike organisers sought to

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* Although his ‘genealogy’ focuses primarily on the period following the Second World War, French sociologist Michel Kokoreff’s proposition about the colonial roots of police violence and their effect upon social contestation more broadly in France is evident here, in the metropole, in actions against colonial subjects: Michel Kokoreff, *Violences policières, généalogie d’une violence d’État* (Paris: Textuel, 2021), Ch.3; AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 16 Jan. 1929.

<sup>80</sup> Noiriel, *Longwy*, 171-195; Durand, ‘Revendications explicites’, 394-409.

<sup>81</sup> *L’Humanité*, 17 Jan. 1929.

instrumentalise this radicalism to intensify solidarity at a broader scale.<sup>82</sup> This process was evident at a Miners' Congress which took place in the Salle Jean-Jaurès in Alès on 14 January, just a few hours after the events at Champclauson. Twenty speeches were given to 1,500 attendees, including by 'a certain number of foreigners', according to the Prefect.<sup>83</sup> During the afternoon session, a Spanish speaker, Perez, married anti-capitalist sentiment with anti-colonial declarations regarding Morocco, while Canal, a French organiser from Le Martinet, claimed that the strike-breakers were 'almost all French'.<sup>84</sup> An Algerian miner with a bandaged eye then took to the stage. The president of the Congress announced that the gendarmes had injured him that morning at Champclauson.<sup>85</sup> According to *L'Humanité*, this was followed by a 'moving moment' wherein the Congress 'saluted him with The Internationale.'<sup>86</sup> The emblematic song of proletarian solidarity both reflected and generated a sense of solidarity. Through this rousing and emotional episode and its publication in the newspaper, the violence suffered by Algerians who had defied their subordinate status was mobilised to forge bonds between workers, as the strike moved into its crucial third week. Meanwhile, this dramatic and radical scene was supplemented by more quotidian solidarity: the strike committee organised food distributions, 'most of which were distributed to foreigners', and which reached a level of 800 meals by 12 January.<sup>87</sup> The recipients of this mass provision may have been those foreigners in France without a family, habitually more dependent upon company *cantine* provision of food, withdrawn during the conflict. More broadly, the fact that migrants occupied such a significant place in the Congress reinforced the notion of

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<sup>82</sup> The idea that participation in actions during strikes forms bonds of solidarity between workers is put forward in Sirot, *La grève en France*, 143.

<sup>83</sup> ADG F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 15 Jan. 1929.

<sup>84</sup> *Le Petit Méridional*, 15 Jan. 1929.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *L'Humanité*, 15 Jan. 1929.

<sup>87</sup> *Le Petit Méridional*, 13 Jan. 1929.

migrant centrality to this strike, and its importance as a moment of cohesion among diverse actors.



Figure 4-2 *L'Humanité*, 20 Jan. 1929. Top to bottom: Polish refectory in Alès; two Algerian strikers at Grand'Combe; miners' women and children at a people's soup-kitchen in Alès

The tide of the strike turned after a final open confrontation between a diverse group of strikers and the police. With the number of workers breaking the strike at La Grand'Combe increasing, one arrest was reported by the Prefect.<sup>88</sup> Local communist agitator Paul Pantel allegedly attempted to stop a group of strikebreakers at La Levade from getting to Trescol (Grand'Combe). On his arrest, a group of 150 – ‘including some women and around thirty Algerians’ – rushed to his aid, and a ‘skirmish’ ensued that saw the group climb a hill to throw ‘large stones’ at the gendarmes.<sup>89</sup> This episode reinforces the impression of a combative and diverse group of strikers and women engaging their knowledge of the landscapes of the coalfield in confrontations. Again, Algerians were portrayed as following French ‘*meneurs*’ [agitators] – an interpretation rooted in a condescending vision of popular agency. At the level of the coalfield, this episode seems to have marked a turn in the tide of mobilisation. According to Bonnevey, the arrests undertaken left a great impression on the strikers, which led him to conclude that the strike would be over by the end of the week.<sup>90</sup> As evidence to support his claim, he pointed out that Champclauson’s delegate to the Alès Congress on 14 January who had voted for the continuation of the strike was back at work that morning, with just four CGTU militants and five or six ‘Arabs’ still posing problems.<sup>91</sup>

On 20 January, with the mobilisation waning, company-linked newspaper *Le Moniteur des Cévennes* printed a condemnation of the radical events.

Look at the Arabs, the Spanish, the Italians, who leave their countries because the wages are too low to come and work in France; we give them work, they are paid more than at home, and when a few agitators call on them to take to the streets, they foolishly obey. But if they’re not happy here, why did they come? And if they’re no longer content, why don’t they go home? We hold out our hand to those who come to make up for our fifteen hundred thousand war dead and our low birth rate, but when a conflict erupts, they should remain neutral, at least. Their place

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<sup>88</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 18 Jan. 1929.

<sup>89</sup> ADG 1/M/797, Croissant report on La Levade, 16 Jan. 1929.

<sup>90</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 17 Jan. 1929.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

is not on the barricades, as we saw at Pontil, Champclauson, and La Levade, set against the old Grand'Combiens.<sup>92</sup>

Depicting foreigners as ungrateful to the company, these sentiments echo those expressed by the Prefect in his warning when he deemed foreign participation in strikes to be a contravention of French 'hospitality.' But the newspaper also expressed its condescending attitude to the migrant workers, who had 'foolishly obeyed' the order of 'a few agitators' to take to the streets. Rather than acting on their own will, these migrants had followed the orders of malfeasant communists. This perspective ignored the fact that communist agitation had long been commonplace in the coalfield, but did not on each occasion result in a generalized rising up of the migrant population. Nor did it account for the autonomy of their actions, and how these actions reflected labour-milieu grievances that went beyond the issue of pay. This article was therefore a rather crude example of an employer-controlled press organ garnering xenophobic sentiment 'from above' as part of its anti-strike propaganda.<sup>93</sup> Whether this had any impact upon the French readership of the newspaper remains unclear. Yet, in a context where cooperation between workers of different origins prompted fears among employers and the police while also constituting a key line of communist propaganda, *Le Moniteur's* attempt to foment division along ethnic and linguistic lines underscores the importance of solidarity involving migrants.

Other accounts of migrant action during the strike accorded them a good deal more agency. On 19 January, *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* reported having received a letter from 'the Algerians of La Grand'Combe'. While not reproducing it in full or naming its authors, the article based on the letter invoked the suffering of Algerians during the Great War before going on to state, from a position that evokes the brutal nature of colonial

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<sup>92</sup> *Le Moniteur des Cévennes*, 20 Jan. 1929.

<sup>93</sup> See the study of 'racism from above', as identified and theorized in Nicole Kleinheisterkamp González, "'Our Turks make the best German cars": Racism as a Tool to Break Workers' Power in the 1973 Ford Strikes' *Antipode* 54.3 (2022), 873-91.

policing, that the actions ‘of the Gard prefecture d[id] not surprise them at all.’<sup>94</sup> *L’Humanité* painted the Algerians as increasingly isolated but determined, meeting alone to vote for the continuation of the strike.<sup>95</sup> A tract preserved in the archives of the Grand’Combe Company suggests some Algerians’ motivations in wanting to continue the strike. Brought by ‘an Arab from Saint-Etienne’ on Sunday 20, and signed by the national-level Office for colonial workers of the CGTU and the Gard CGTU, it voiced specific demands alongside the five francs around which the strike coalesced:<sup>96</sup>

Before the bosses’ arrogance, the CGTU, in accordance with all the workers, North African and foreign included, responded with a general strike. North Africans, you understood in abandoning your work!

You once again showed your French comrades that you are not here to degrade the job, you have showed the bosses and the oppressive government you will not only to obtain the justified five franc raise, but to satisfy your special demands: the right to organise and to strike. The right to a pension and family allocations. Participation in the election of security and illness fund delegates. The abolition of the Indigeneity code, freedom of immigration; the improvement of work and hygiene conditions. Do not be discouraged by the cowardice of the strikebreakers. These reckless idiots went back to work under the influence of the reformist union and to get on the good side of the bosses in order to become supervisors, joiners, or governors.

Beware of the charmers of the companies and the bourgeois newspapers. You will go back to work only on the order of the Unitary union. You will go back underground only following your French comrades. You are “men”, and we have complete confidence in you!<sup>97</sup>

This tract provides a powerful insight into the specific oppressions that the colonial miners faced. It blended everyday labour-milieu experiences of work and hygiene with a broader critique of the legal discriminations and reduced rights faced by Algerians as ‘French subjects’ in metropolitan France, as underpinned by the Indigeneity code.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>94</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 19 Jan. 1929. On the invocation of the ‘moral economy of wartime sacrifice’ in Algeria, see Dónal Hassett *Mobilizing Memory: The Great War and the Language of Politics in Colonial Algeria, 1918-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 97-104.

<sup>95</sup> *L’Humanité*, 21 Jan. 1929.

<sup>96</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Letter Bonnevey to Delegate Administrator, 21 Jan. 1929.

<sup>97</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Algerian tract, undated, attached to above letter.

<sup>98</sup> Laure Blévis, ‘L’invention de l’« indigène », Français non citoyen’ in Abderrahmane Bouchène, Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, Ouanassa Siaria Tengour and Sylvie Thénault (eds.), *Histoire de l’Algérie à la période coloniale, 1830-1962* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), 212-8.

local CGTU clearly recognised the potential of campaigning on the basis of the ‘special demands’ related to colonial workers’ specific situation, and appears to have been more attuned to these specificities than the CGTU in Paris.<sup>99</sup> In fact, Algerian protagonism in the Gard strike appears to have bucked a perception held by communists, highlighted by Michael Goebel, that North Africans in the metropole were averse to mobilisation.<sup>100</sup> However, that the tract was published at a moment when the strike was effectively over also reflected the difficulties that French unions would have in balancing worker-universalism and specific claims throughout the twentieth century.<sup>101</sup> Nonetheless, the tract demonstrated how CGTU agitation and the agency of colonial migrants during strikes could challenge the colonial relations of power that shaped Algerians’ experiences of the labour milieu.

### **Recognising the Legacy of 1929**

The recognition of the radical actions of the marginalised came to mark labour politics in the Gard after January 1929. One route via which this recognition was expressed was state repression. Even before the end of the strike on 15 January, the authorities earmarked two Italians – Mario Sellan and Catherina Gabrera – for deportation because of their verbal or physical violence during a picket.<sup>102</sup> It is impossible to discern the impact of this move on the Italian population, but from this date they ceased to appear in surveillance material. Conscious that excessive repression could prompt a social backlash, the Prefect telephoned Bonnevey at 5.30pm on 21 January to warn him against laying off too many strikers. For his part, Bonnevey feared future restrictions on the

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<sup>99</sup> A similar tract, without specificities regarding family allowances, working conditions, and housing, was posted on public walls in Paris on 1 May 1929: Ralph Schor, *L’opinion française*, 254.

<sup>100</sup> Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 184.

<sup>101</sup> Gay and Perdoncin, ‘Français et immigrés’, 155-66.

<sup>102</sup> AN F/7/13905, Report Prefect to Interior, 15 Jan. 1929.

recruitment of foreign workers if he sacked too many French workers.<sup>103</sup> His company planned to lay off fourteen Frenchmen, one Spaniard – identified for deportation – and three ‘Arabs’.<sup>104</sup>

Companies also instituted tighter controls on the workforce outside of the workplace. According to a final report in *L’Humanité*, the companies sought to render migrants more servile, by obliging them to eat at the company *cantine*, and thereby to have them more under their ‘domination.’<sup>105</sup> Instituting discipline and surveillance to a sphere of life hitherto relatively free, this response recognised the important role of spaces of social reproduction in January’s radicalism.

Punishment continued through the winter in the courts. With the physical prevention of strikebreaking constituting an illegal act during the interwar period, many strikers passed before the court in Nîmes.<sup>106</sup> Between 5 February and 5 March, the public prosecutor of the Gard charged thirty-three people in six separate trials.<sup>107</sup> By and large, they were the participants in the episodes of radicalism, with French and Polish women being sentenced alongside French, Algerian, and Spanish men. On 30 March, the *Secours rouge international* (SRI) launched an appeal in *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, denouncing the fact that seven foreigners had been expelled during the strike and its aftermath.<sup>108</sup> In the following month, donations appeared on its front page from regional union branches, shopkeepers, associations, and individuals, which were intended to pay fines and rebuild the CGTU’s strike fund.<sup>109</sup> While the forces of order administered physical repression against colonial subjects in particular during the strike, Europeans

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<sup>103</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/131, Letter Bonnevey to Managing Director, 24 Jan. 1929.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *L’Humanité*, 25 Jan. 1929.

<sup>106</sup> Sirot, *La grève en France*, 233.

<sup>107</sup> ADG 1/M/797, Letter Procureur de la République to Prefect, 12 Mar. 1929.

<sup>108</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 30 Mar. 1929.

<sup>109</sup> See *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 6 Apr. 1929.

faced deportation in its wake. In response, the regional communist newspaper provided an infrastructure for the temporal and spatial expansion of solidarity with the strike's participants.

The workers' movement also exhibited palpable and important shifts in its regard for foreign workers following the strike. In early February, the Gard CGT's departmental congress featured a report compiled by teachers' representative Marthe Compan on the foreign workforce. It examined the conditions of the 'Arabs, Italians, Polish, Spanish' who extracted Gard coal, with Compan arguing that the union should 'defend their interests, that may be different from those of the French workers.'<sup>110</sup> So soon after open hostilities had subsided in Alès, Compan articulated what would become one of the strike's most important lessons for the regional labour movement.

An awareness of difference did not, of course, turn union activists polyglot. An investigation into a speech given by Emmanuel Layre at the showers when workers were changing into their work clothes for the morning shift at Nord d'Alais on 12 November 1929 demonstrated the continuation of linguistic problems. The four French employees interrogated were able to inform mine guard Euzeby that Layre sought to incite a strike on Saint Barbara Day, the patron of miners, by invoking the Soviet seven-hour day and five-day week. In contrast, the two migrant workers interviewed demonstrated the limits of French-language militancy. The Spaniard Isidore Gomez informed Euzeby that Layre had 'pronounced a few words that [he] did not understand, being declared in French, although [he] understood the words Russia and Saint-Barbara'. Meanwhile, Algerian *manœuvre* Boularbi stated that he had 'not understood' what Layre had said, but indicated that when the speech ended, 'everyone clapped their hands.'<sup>111</sup> Here, the Algerian's

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<sup>110</sup> *Le Combat social*, 9 Feb. 1929.

<sup>111</sup> AMA 21/L/1, Nord d'Alais Euzeby report on actions of mining-delegate Layre, 12 Nov. 1929.

evocation of applause indicates the non-verbal dimensions of pit-level agitation: the very act of the speech in the showers and the crowd's reaction form part of a gestural language of politics. Nevertheless, if we believe Gomez and Boularbi – instead of seeking to ascribe a strategy of hiding behind their foreignness to reduce potential punishment for themselves and for Layre – these statements reveal the continuity of linguistic limitations on mobilisation.

When it came to print, however, local Communist communication strategies began to address this issue. In the 22 April 1930 issue of *La Gueule Noire*, the Communist newspaper in Rochebelle, articles appeared in Spanish and Polish to target the company's migrant workers ahead of 1 May. Bearing a number of spelling errors, the Spanish article evoked the '*deber* [duty]' of workers to attend the preparatory meeting of 27 April, at which they were expected to elect a delegate. It concluded in bold capital letters, readers were informed that a 'comrade' would speak to them in Spanish.<sup>112</sup> On the reverse leaf, a different text appeared in Polish. This one called for equality of rights and pensions, alongside the abolition of the contract identity card system, ending on the evocation of 'long live workers' solidarity'.<sup>113</sup> In evidence, local Communist militants recognised the necessity of engaging with migrants and had modest linguistic means through which to do so. Moreover, the content of their appeals indicated a growing emphasis on the different demands of foreign groups.

This approach underwent further institutionalisation at the scale of the coalfield. In May 1930, a CGTU Miners' Congress reflected the evolution of the place of migrants in union strategy. *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* recorded the diversity of the meeting, noting the presence of 118 French, eleven Spanish, eight Italians, ten Poles, three

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<sup>112</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, 22 Apr. 1930.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

Czechoslovaks, and two colonial workers. During proceedings, some of these foreign workers voiced their specific situation of disadvantage as foreigners: ‘foreign miners asked their French comrades to help them in their difficult struggles against the companies who take advantage of contracts and the constant threat of sacking.’<sup>114</sup> Affording the institutional space of the Congress for migrants to voice migrant-specific issues indicates a move towards formally integrating a recognition of differential experiences into Communist union practice.

The nature of the strike of January 1929 pervaded local memory and informed the strategies undertaken by various coalfield actors when the next major industrial dispute occurred in early 1931. Coalmining wages took a significant hit during the Depression: a reduction of between 8 and 12% was already underway in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, which was due to be extended to the Loire on 23 February. Citing increasing competition from Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Polish coal, employers in the Gard announced the same reduction on 1 March.<sup>115</sup> In his report anticipating this announcement, Sub-Prefect Franck Rouvière noted that the ‘workers’ milieux’ required ‘very close’ surveillance.<sup>116</sup>

Again, the Prefect commissioned multilingual warning posters. What differentiated this strike was the publication, from the outset, of warnings in Polish and in Czech alongside French, Spanish, and Italian.<sup>117</sup> Reflecting the legacy of unexpected Polish engagement in the 1929 strike, this precaution occurred following the participation of Polish and Czechoslovak workers in a one-day national strike on 6 October 1930. Local trade-unionist Camille Méjean wrote in *L’Humanité* that foreigners were particularly combative in this strike that drew 90% of underground workers away from the pits,<sup>118</sup> and

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<sup>114</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 3 May 1930.

<sup>115</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 17 Feb. 1931.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Poster ‘Warning to foreign workers’, undated.

<sup>118</sup> *L’Humanité*, 7 Oct. 1930.

an internal PCF document stressed the notable participation of Poles and Czechoslovaks at pickets.<sup>119</sup>

The legacies of previous strike action were apparent in a letter sent by Rouvière to the Prefect, explaining his translation needs. First, a teacher at the *lycée* in Nîmes named Tenora translated the warning into Czech, while Rouvière also requested a re-translation of the Polish notice from 1929.<sup>120</sup> The Sub-Prefect referred to the ‘previous strike in the coalfield’ as the reason for the necessity of diligence over the Polish translation.<sup>121</sup> This recognition that cross-linguistic communication was a crucial factor in industrial relations was reinforced too by the offer by a locally based Polish priest Prusakieucz to provide translation services in return for the Prefect’s support in his application to become the official Polish translator at the Nîmes *cour d’appel* and the Alès *tribunal correctionnel*.<sup>122</sup>

The legacy of the January 1929 dispute also weighed in ambivalent fashion on the side of the worker’s movement in early 1931. National publication *La Vie Ouvrière* for example warned in March against making the same ‘mistake’ of not bringing all foreigners into the struggle that had undermined the Loire strike of December 1928-January 1929.<sup>123</sup> In an article for *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* that same month, local communist miner Guiraud emphasized the need to express demands that reflected the specificities of migrants’ situations and to grant them representation in strike committees

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<sup>119</sup> Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History 3/MI/6/73/487, Letter Martin to Political Bureau of the PCF, 1 Dec. 1930.

<sup>120</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 5 Mar. 1931.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Letter Prusakieucz to Prefect, 9 Mar. 1931. This shows an agent of religious provision acting in a capacity specifically related to class politics and the secular Republic. A similar fusion of religious and secular Polish authority occurred in the realm of Polish education locally. See Anna Ambrochowicz-Gajownik, ‘Szkolnictwo polonijne w południowo-wschodniej Francji... z perspektywy konsulatu polskiego w Marsylii w okresie międzywojennym’ *Res Gestae. Czasopismo Historyczne* 6 (2018), 206-9.

<sup>123</sup> *La Vie Ouvrière*, 13 Mar. 1931.

as a condition for the ‘common struggle of French and migrant workers’.<sup>124</sup> Less enthusiastic, socialist organ *Le Combat social* had reported on 28 February on a demonstration the previous Saturday at which CGTU mining delegate Dupuy ‘took advantage of the discontent caused by unemployment’, leading a chorus of The Internationale before a group of ‘about one hundred workers of all nationalities, especially Polish and Czechoslovak, sorrowful and resigned’.<sup>125</sup> Such a statement suggests that Marthe Compan’s appeal to engage enthusiastically with migrant workers had been relegated below the CGT’s sectarian dispute with the CGTU.

Nevertheless, the first Miners’ Congress on 8 March 1931 cemented the legacy of January 1929. In his report, the Prefect noted that ‘the foreign workers [were] more inclined to agitation than the French workers’.<sup>126</sup> Perhaps not unrelated to this tendency, the Prefect detailed how alongside motions against the reduction of wages, calling for a seven-hour working day, the Congress also denounced ‘the contracts of slavery imposed on foreign workers’.<sup>127</sup> A more expansive treatment of the event was printed in left-wing newspapers. First, a Spanish delegate asked why young *manœuvres* under 18 were not entitled to the same wages as those aged over 18. Then, another Spaniard speaking ‘in his own language’, called upon ‘his compatriots to *se solidariser* [unite] with their French comrades’, before declaring that ‘in the struggle there are no Spaniards, French, or Algerians, there are only men who, in the battle, must be united.’<sup>128</sup>

This stirring appeal to solidarity in unity of action that went beyond national categories was, however, complicated by the enduring alterity of migrant experience. *Le Travailleur du Languedoc* emphasized in its report on the Congress the material

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<sup>124</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 7 Mar. 1931.

<sup>125</sup> *Le Combat social*, 28 Feb. 1931.

<sup>126</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Alès police commissioner to Prefect, 9 Mar. 1931.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Le Petit Méridional*, 9 Mar. 1931.

differences experienced by foreigners, indicating that the migrants represented ‘the most exploited sectors of the mining proletariat’, noting how they were subject to ‘exploitation in the mines, bullying, declining living conditions.’<sup>129</sup> This perspective, which recognised specific oppressions and sufferings rather than attempting to negate them, indicates a more complex relationship between local communists and migrants. Instead of seeking to occlude differences based upon nationality, *Le Travailleur* shed a glimpse of sensitivity to the ways in which the migrant condition shaped how the labour milieu was experienced, and therefore how it could be contested.

It was not only towards migrants that this sentiment was extended. Another article on the same page, written by Irène Cadourcy, a prominent communist activist in the Languedoc, was addressed to the women of the coalfield: ‘workers, sorters of coal, wives of miners and unemployed’. To begin, Cadourcy set out with nuance how women’s place in social reproduction made them particularly sensitive to attacks on wages: ‘you are the first to complain about the meagre wage of the miner with which it is no longer possible to feed and to dress the household’, before comparing the 30-35fr average wage to the price of bread (2fr55 per kg), potatoes at 20 sous, ‘10 sous per leek’. After this invocation of the cost of social reproduction with which coalfield women were so familiar, Cadourcy issued a rallying cry: ‘continuing the tradition of your women comrades of the coalfield, you will participate in the preparation of communist soups.’<sup>130</sup> This emphasis upon the women’s undeniably essential role in organising collective sustenance during strikes sat rather awkwardly with the recent engagement of women in 1929 in confrontations with the forces of order, and demonstrates an enduring gendered influence on solidarity.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 14 Mar. 1931.

<sup>130</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 14 Mar. 1931. Regarding this tendency to tie women uniquely to the sphere of reproduction, see notably Dressen, ‘La femme, le mineur et la compagnie’, 118; Humphries and Thomas, ‘The Best Job in the World’ 1-45.

<sup>131</sup> For the division between ‘domestic’ and ‘political’ women in early twentieth-century North-East England, see Valerie Gordon Hall, ‘Contrasting Female Identities: Women in Coal Mining Communities

Nevertheless, these articles demonstrate a recognition by local communists of the necessity to engage with the specificities of politically marginalised but economically central sectors of the local population, for the success of any contestation.

A second Miners' Congress was held on 15 March, at which 223 delegates voted to strike on 30 March. This meeting took place behind closed doors, with only official delegates permitted entry – organisers likely implemented this security measure in part to defend migrants. *Le Petit Méridional's* journalist was thus denied entry. Despite this secrecy, the newspaper continued to propagate the idea that the liminal moment of radical possibility was inherently tied to demographic diversity. Before the meeting, it reported, 'groups of foreigners' held 'animated conversations', the content of which remains unknown due to the journalist's 'ignorance of diverse Slavic and Spanish languages'.<sup>132</sup>

During the public afternoon session to which journalists – and no doubt police informers – were granted entry, repression and migrant radicalism were central topics of discussion. Raoul Calas – regional secretary of the PCF and Irène Cadourcy's husband – denounced the unequal treatment of foreigners. While 'fascists and white Russians' operated without hindrance, he alleged that 'foreign workers who struggle for the improvement of their wage' were threatened with reprisals.<sup>133</sup> In effect, commenting on the decision to delay the strike, the police commissioner noted the success of 'the military occupation of the coalfield, a massive occupation from the beginning, [which] profoundly influenced the decision of the delegates'.<sup>134</sup> The preventative mass presence of repressive forces and the threat of the deportation of migrants thus prompted reticence on the part of

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in Northumberland, England, 1900-1939' *Journal of Women's History* 13.2 (2001), 107-131. For these contradictions in the US context, see: Waldron Merithew, "'We Were Not Ladies'", 63-94.

<sup>132</sup> *Le Petit Méridional*, 16 Mar. 1931.

<sup>133</sup> AN F/7/13904, Report Alès special police commissioner to Prefect, 16 Mar. 1931.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

strike organisers.<sup>135</sup> The authorities too therefore believed that they had learned lessons from the events of 1929.

Crucially, the meeting was also the site for the articulation of specific solidarity with foreign workers against the threat of repression. The Congress passed a ‘resolution of solidarity with the foreign workers’, denouncing the prefect’s multilingual threats as an explicit attempt to ‘break the solid united front of French and foreign workers’. Compounding the importance of the prefect’s move was the fact that locally ‘the foreign mineworkers [had] proved their combativity on every occasion.’<sup>136</sup> This evocation of ‘solidarity’ was thus about defending common actions by the diverse workforce, and shows the local pertinence of migrant radicalism.

Tensions abounded between the CGTU and CGT following the meeting.<sup>137</sup> The PCF called the strike on 30 March, resulting in a huge difference in participation rates depending on the implantation of the CGTU in certain mines.<sup>138</sup> In the event, despite a febrile build-up during which the memory of January 1929, migrants, and women were all central actors, the strike did not match expectations. The national newspaper *Le Temps* reported that in the Gard, ‘where a very high proportion of strikers was expected’, just 1,590 out of 9,398 workers took action on the first day.<sup>139</sup> The following day, all of the miners returned to work.<sup>140</sup> While CGT representatives negotiated with the Gard Coal Companies Board, CGTU meetings across the coalfield decided on a strike from 7 April, at which a Spanish miner from Nord d’Alais called on ‘all his comrades, French or

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<sup>135</sup> Military preventive policing can be traced to the turn of the twentieth century. See Anja Johansen, ‘Policing and Repression: Military Involvement in the Policing of French and German Industrial Areas, 1889-1914’ *European History Quarterly* 34.1 (2004), 89-91.

<sup>136</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 21 Mar. 1931.

<sup>137</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Prefect to Interior, 14 Apr. 1931.

<sup>138</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Prefect to Interior, 1 Apr. 1931. In Rochebelle, Le Martinet, and Nord d’Alais, where the CGTU and CGT held equal sway, participation rates stood at 30, 40, and 30% respectively. At Bessèges, where the CGT were in the majority, only 5% of workers went on strike.

<sup>139</sup> *Le Temps*, 31 Mar. 1931.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

Spanish, to take to the pitheads'.<sup>141</sup> Participation strengthened in the CGTU centres (Rochebelle 45%, Nord d'Alais 51%, Trélys 35%, La Jasse 55%) and weakened where the CGT held more sway (Bessèges 1.9%, La Grand'Combe 1.5%). During the mobilisation, three Frenchmen were arrested alongside a Spaniard, Moya, for preventing strikebreakers' 'freedom to work'.<sup>142</sup> Despite rumours in the national press of a striking miner stabbing a police horse, riot police who charged crowds that evening received nothing more than stones in response.<sup>143</sup> The strike ended with the imprisonment of Young Communist Radiguet, and Moya's deportation.<sup>144</sup>

This repression spelled the end of the strike. Although the local population supported industrial action in the beginning, Mounier declared that its popularity waned when miners and their families saw it would endure: 'they still had the memory of the strike of January 1929 when, after three weeks of struggle, they had to start again from scratch'.<sup>145</sup> While the Prefect made the comparison with 1929 only in relation to both strikes' eventual failure, it is clear that the productive and constructive radicalism of January 1929 cast a certain shadow over the events of 1931. In its early stages, the spectre of broad mobilisation – including that of marginal actors – contributed to a certain liminality around the strike, informing repressive and syndicalist strategies. However, a bleaker economic outlook and the memory of the repression and eventual failure of the previous struggle meant that the strike of March-April 1931 never reached the heights of radicalism witnessed in 1929.

A similar diagnosis with a very different remedy was expressed during a meeting held by the CGTU's foreign workforce commission, headed by Giraud in January 1932.

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<sup>141</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Prefect to Interior, 3 Apr. 1931; *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 3 Apr. 1931.

<sup>142</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Alès police commissioner to Prefect, 8 Apr. 1931.

<sup>143</sup> *Le Temps*, 9 Apr. 1931; ADG 1/M/798 Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 8 Apr. 1931.

<sup>144</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Alès police commissioner to Prefect, 14 Apr. 1931.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

In a context of economic crisis and rationalisation, the commission noted that struggle was possible only on the condition of the organisation of foreign workers. Compounding this necessity was a national crisis of xenophobia. In the face of these difficulties, the commission set out a new mobilisation strategy. ‘Of primary necessity’, was the constitution of foreign worker commissions at each pit, ‘composed not only of our foreign friends, but especially of French members, with the role of managing membership fees, foreign press, etc.’.<sup>146</sup> Great importance was accorded to French involvement in the administrative management of migrant recruitment. However, the plan was not for a unidirectional dynamic in which French activists supervised to foreigners, in line with the PCF’s national model that saw ‘language groups’ as uniquely for propaganda, with ‘no powers of decision or discussion’.<sup>147</sup> Instead, activists should ‘give them all the possibilities to meet between themselves, to discuss particular claims, agitation amongst their comrades in *cantines* and lodgings, to constitute a kind of foreign language group.’<sup>148</sup> Such a proposal is indicative of a recognition of the alterity of the migrant condition relating to language and housing, a local allowance of a degree of organisational autonomy albeit under the auspices of the CGTU, and an articulation of not only the coexistence of particularist and universalist claims, but the necessity of the former for the completion of the latter.

But these advances did not spell an outright victory for sensitive solidarity over worker-universalism. Rather, the two models existed alongside each other and interacted as the years progressed. The fate of Yugoslavian miner Dermidor Brados at Rochebelle in late 1933 gives particularly revealing insights into union strategy over mortal accidents. After his death on 30 November, *Le Populaire* dedicated one sentence to Brados in their

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<sup>146</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 24 Jan. 1932.

<sup>147</sup> Manassis and Virgeux, *Avec tous tes frères étrangers*, 30.

<sup>148</sup> *Le Travailleur du Languedoc*, 24 Jan. 1932.

regular section on workplace deaths, entitled ‘labour martyrs’.<sup>149</sup> In response, the CGTU of Rochebelle distributed tracts calling for a twenty-four-hour strike ‘against the insecurity of their work’.<sup>150</sup> On seeing the tract, the Rochebelle company owner requested extra police protection from the Alès Sub-Prefect; but, on the day of the strike, just ninety workers were missing, which was ‘normal after payday’.<sup>151</sup>

Subsequently, details emerged that presented the opportunity to imbue the affair with broader meaning. According to a tract advertising a meeting for Thursday 14 December, the rocks that crushed Brados caused his arm to be particularly stuck. In response, Chapuis, the engineer on hand, ordered a miner by the name of Cyprien Gravier to cut off the trapped arm so the body could be removed more swiftly from the gallery so that extraction could recommence. Gravier, a CGTU activist, refused. After a standoff, another worker eventually agreed to cut the arm off with an axe. The CGTU argued that this severance of a dead worker’s body was a ‘cruel and barbarous act against the bodies of ours’, motivated uniquely by the Company’s ‘thirst for profit’.<sup>152</sup> More than just an individual tragedy, the Brados case represented an allegory for the way in which capital mutilated the working-class body.

These appeals failed to provoke the Rochebelle mineworkers into a political movement. The meeting on 14 December attracted just seventeen attendees, and another held on Sunday 17 drew only thirty.<sup>153</sup> The first meeting addressed an open letter to Rochebelle’s directors and workers, which blamed ‘money-saving measures’, that resulted in insufficient pit-propping and a haste to get production back underway, for the

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<sup>149</sup> *Le Populaire*, 2 Dec. 1933.

<sup>150</sup> *Le Temps*, 2 Dec. 1933.

<sup>151</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Note prefecture from Sub-Prefect’s report, undated.

<sup>152</sup> ADG 1/M/798, CGTU Tract ‘Crime capitaliste’, undated.

<sup>153</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Gard Prefect to Interior, 23 Dec. 1933.

‘cruel’ act of bodily mutilation.<sup>154</sup> It is particularly noteworthy and surprising that the propaganda circulated was uniquely in French. In a particularly diverse company – in December 1933, 1,013 of the 2,204-strong workforce were foreign migrants, including three North Africans, 142 Spanish, 83 Italians, 574 Polish, and 219 ‘Other’, most of whom were from Czechoslovakia – this linguistic inflexibility may have cost dearly.<sup>155</sup> But it is also not surprising, given that the local labour unionists’ denunciations of the company centred upon a defence of a universal working-class body against capitalist demands, eschewing any mention of Brados’s origins, or a broader denunciation of migrants’ structural exposure to danger. Here, an embodied form of worker-universalism persisted as the preferred, and unsuccessful, means for generating solidarity action.

Reflecting on the events of January 1929 in his memoirs, PCF militant Élie Duguet identified a qualitative shift – ‘a harvest’ of new activists emerged on the ‘fertile ground of a grouped working class’.<sup>156</sup> Although Duguet was referring to a new generation of French PCF activists, his recognition of the strike as a generative moment is borne out in the argument of this chapter. However, this chapter has demonstrated how the ‘grouped working class’ was not a pre-existing homogeneous bloc, but rather a ‘differential unity’ in formation, that raised a set of practical and programmatic problems.<sup>157</sup>

In the multi-lingual Gard coalfield, language was a crucial mediator of class struggle. Migrants with various gradations of connection to the French union movement acted as agitators and cross-linguistic communicators. In response, the local Prefect expelled influential mediators and engaged in his own cross-linguistic communication,

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<sup>154</sup> ADG 1/M/798, CGTU open letter, 14 Dec. 1933.

<sup>155</sup> Chambon, ‘Matériaux pour l’histoire sociale du bassin minier d’Alès’, 313.

<sup>156</sup> Duguet, *Le chemin de l’Arbousset*, 84.

<sup>157</sup> Wilder, ‘Solidarity’, 265.

which was influenced first by national stereotypes and increasingly by local experiences of not only southern European subversives but also eastern European and Algerians entering the political realm. Much of the quotidian communication between strikers falls silent in the archives, but the number of diverse actions during events imply that an ‘improvised language of solidarity’ came into existence.

If January 1929 can indeed be seen as a formative moment, this chapter argues that actions by the marginalized of the coalfield initiated the development of an expansive politics of solidarity. It constituted a moment of durable importance, during which European and colonial migrants, French men, and coalfield women acted radically in direct opposition to employers, local police, and the military. In themselves, these actions, that often entailed spatial dimensions, forged bonds between those who undertook them. Furthermore, these radical actions often raised specific demands and critiques based on the labour milieu experiences of marginalised groups, which served to broaden the stakes of the strike beyond the five-franc watchword. During this strike and in 1931, French unionists began to appreciate the importance of incorporating such differential demands for the victory of industrial disputes and for advancing class solidarity, while not entirely jettisoning worker-universalism, and certainly without a sustained critique of the role of gender in shaping the labour milieu. Although the strike was unsuccessful – and its contributions did not immediately impose themselves as the case of Brados demonstrates – these partial but significant shifts in conceptualising solidarity contributed to effecting a lasting shift in the coalfield’s labour politics.

But the other legacy of January 1929, as demonstrated in 1931, was that of repression. This was another point of differentiation, between French and migrants, and among different migrant groups. While all risked losing their work, Europeans faced the threat of deportation, and Algerians that of physical violence. Following this experience,

labour politics of the 1930s never reached those heights of radicalism. Indeed, the years that followed would be marked by economic hardship and the risk of deportation, even for 'ordinary' migrants not engaged in union activity. Nevertheless, the following chapter charts the institutionalisation of a sensitivity to some, but by no means all, migrant particularities in the structures of the local Popular Front.

## Ch.5. ‘His right to life’: Migrant Protection and Trade Union Politics in the Popular Front Movement

In late February 1936, the Labour Ministry in Paris received a letter defending Polish mineworker Dijak’s ‘right to life.’<sup>1</sup> Composed by the secretary of the Secours rouge international of Le Martinet and the mayors of Saint-Florent and Le Martinet, the petition denounced Dijak’s repatriation to Poland. Ostensibly, bureaucratic reasons justified this return – Dijak lacked the requisite identity papers to prevent his *refoulement*.<sup>2</sup> But in its report on the petition, communist newspaper *Le Cri du Gard* indicated that the real motivation was that Dijak belonged to ‘the organisations of the Popular Front.’ This letter is indicative both of migrant participation in political institutions, and of a broader sentiment of solidarity that denounced this oppressive administrative treatment faced by some migrant workers in the 1930s. This chapter traces and analyses the place of migrants in the institutional development of the Popular Front in the Gard coalfield.

Employed by Le Martinet’s Popular Front politicians to critique the administrative treatment of migrants at the hands of the state, the notion of the ‘right to life’ encapsulated a broader set of experiences during the interwar period. Beyond the Gard, Greg Burgess has recently uncovered debates around the *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* in the 1930s about this contested notion that critiqued the state of rights in France, calling for an all-encompassing guarantee, ‘including social and economic freedoms’ for all and in dignity.<sup>3</sup> While such language may have been present in the mental worlds and reading material of Gard coalfield activists, the ‘right to life’ also had a very concrete local basis. I argue that

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 28 Feb. 1936.

<sup>2</sup> This word has a precise meaning: an ‘order to leave the country, short of formal expulsion’. Like Mary Dewhurst Lewis, I leave it in its original French. See Lewis, *Boundaries of the Republic*, xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Burgess, ‘The *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* and the ‘Right to Life’ in the 1930s’ *Contemporary European History* (2023), 1-16.

the emergent labour solidarity politics treated in the previous chapter, which was sensitive to and contested the multi-layered and different threats to migrant mineworkers' lives, was institutionalised as a fundamental feature of Popular Front politics by a broad coalition of trade unionists, local politicians, and foreign and French coalfield inhabitants.

This analysis poses serious questions to the historiography of the Popular Front. The scholarship largely agrees that once in government, the Front never delivered on the initial hopes for a special statute for migrants guaranteeing equality.<sup>4</sup> Migration histories that address the Popular Front tend towards a rather reductive picture. A period of widespread indifference or outright hostility towards migrants was followed, in the days of May-June 1936, by a sudden rapprochement.<sup>5</sup> This line of reasoning is most aptly captured in Janine Ponty's otherwise magisterial work on the Poles of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, in which she justifies Polish unionisation during the period with quite the turn of phrase: '*la joie des autres ouvriers les saisit*.'<sup>6</sup> While some labour histories of the Popular Front have given some attention to the 'prehistory' of the strikes of May-June 1936, this remains fragmentary, especially with respect to migrants.<sup>7</sup> Dimitri Manassis and Jean Vigreux's recent book marks itself out by identifying the 'Popular Front of immigration', indicating that the migrant question occupied a more central role in PCF politics before the Front's electoral victory.<sup>8</sup> My approach here builds on their alternative view through a local case study that focuses not on one institution's shifting strategies, but seeks to

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<sup>4</sup> Rahma Harouni, 'Le débat autour du statut des étrangers dans les années 1930' *Le Mouvement social* 188 (1999), 68.

<sup>5</sup> On widespread hostility, see, for example, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Les luttes et les rêves: Une histoire populaire de la France de 1685 à nos jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 597-603.

<sup>6</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, 323.

<sup>7</sup> Antoine Prost, 'Les grèves de mai-juin revisitées', 33-54. An important exception is Perry, 'Sans Distinction de Nationalité?', 350.

<sup>8</sup> Manassis and Vigreux, *Avec tous tes frères étrangers*, 70.

capture the complex social history of how the Popular Front was co-constructed in the context of the Gard mining labour milieu.

This chapter seeks to question binaries of xenophobia and fraternity by treating solidarity as a complex historical process, rather than a transcendental event. It does so by taking both a longer view of events – locating practices in the labour agitations of 1929-32 – and by placing the local significance of migrants both as objects and subjects of solidarity at its heart. Given that I conceive of the formation of the Front as a generative process, the chapter takes a concrete approach to solidarity, taking seriously advances in the realms of discourse, practical action, political programmes, and institutional representation. While labour histories have turned away from trade unions over the past thirty years, this chapter is concerned with the development of solidarity politics in which trade unionists played an undeniable role, while never being the sole agents.<sup>9</sup> A broad range of actors, French and foreign, men and women, unionised or not, played an important role in shaping this process of solidarity articulation.

This chapter is structured chronologically in four parts. First, it explores the deportation of migrants during the years of depression, to which individuals and collective organisations responded in varied ways. This demonstrates both that the politics of migrant defence was crucial particularly in some centres in the coalfield (Le Martinet), and, simultaneously, that this form of labour solidarity was not the teleologically determined outcome of the situation of misery. Other routes were available to people based on their position. Second, the chapter considers the passage of migrant protection into the institutional sphere of labour politics. During the CGT-CGTU unification in late 1935, migrants had formalized representation in unions, and labour

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<sup>9</sup> Lex Heerma van Voss, 'Whither Labour History? Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives' *International Review of Social History* 58 (2013), 103.

issues specifically pertaining to them were consistently central features of discussions. Third, a strike at the Trélys company in February 1936 demonstrates the imbrication of the politics of migrant protection with the defence of working-class life more broadly. The final section of the chapter shows through a combination of symbolic and material actions – including funerals, union programmes, and campaigns to expel migrants hostile to the workers’ movement – that a politicised protection of migrants’ lives was an integral feature of Gard labour politics before the electoral Front crumbled in 1938.

### **Depression, Deportation, and Migrant Defence, 1933-35**

For labour migrants, the economic crisis of the early 1930s brought significant duress: unemployment, misery, popular and state xenophobia, and, for many, departure from France.<sup>10</sup> Previous downturns had weighed heavily upon the Gard’s most marginalised. In November 1927, the Grand’Combe company had sacked 500 ‘Arab’ workers in response to a drop in demand for coal.<sup>11</sup> But the depression that began in 1931 saw *refoulement* strike European migrants. When crisis began to bite in 1931, monthly questionnaires distributed by Parisian administrators to departmental employment offices requested statistics on production, markets, employment, and ‘foreigners’.<sup>12</sup> Central agents of the bureaucratic state thus flagged migration as the cause and potential solution to the problem of unemployment. Yet while the absence of evidence should not necessarily be taken as evidence of absence, it seems that there was little popular xenophobia amongst the working class of the Gard coalfield to match the national trend

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<sup>10</sup> Annie Lacroix-Riz, ‘La gestion étatique du travailleur étranger dans la France des années trente, reflet de la priorité de l’ennemi intérieur: les cas polonais et yougoslave’, in Pilar Gonzalez-Bernaldo, Manuela Martini, and Marie-Louise Pleus-Kaplan (eds.), *Etrangers et sociétés: Représentations, coexistences, interactions dans la longue durée* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 127-38; Daniel A. Gordon, ‘The Back Door of the Nation State: Expulsions of Foreigners and Continuity in Twentieth-Century France’ *Past and Present* 186 (2005), 201-32.

<sup>11</sup> ADG 1/M/830, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 3 Nov. 1927.

<sup>12</sup> ADG 1/M/831, Questionnaire on Gard Employment, monthly 1931.

of the depression years.<sup>13</sup> In the departmental archives on unemployment, just one letter from an anonymous resident of Molières-sur-Cèze can be found accusing foreigners of taking French jobs.<sup>14</sup> The surveillance of extreme-right movements in the coalfield suggest that organised chauvinistic sentiment was largely consigned to company directors, accountants, engineers, and some *maître-mineurs*.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than migrants, the Chief Mining Engineer in the Gard repeatedly evoked market competition as the driving force of crisis. From 1932, Gard companies had to compete at the Mediterranean port of Sète with coal from the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, England, Poland, and Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the proliferation of hydroelectricity led to a reduction in demand.<sup>17</sup> In this context of competition for smaller markets, employers sacrificed migrants first. In November 1935, 4% of French mineworkers had their working week reduced by one day, compared to 11% of foreign workers.<sup>18</sup> In the Gard, as elsewhere, migrants bore the brunt of the economic crisis.

In the face of such hardship, the town of Le Martinet was a hotbed of discontent, deportation, and resistance. Following their implication in the events of January 1929 and subsequent strikes, local postal surveillance had paid close attention to its Polish community. Between the months of June and October 1930, agents uncovered that Polish-language communist newspapers were being received by local CGTU officials: an evident cause for concern.<sup>19</sup> In early April 1933, Le Martinet was the Gard mining village with

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<sup>13</sup> On which, see Meriggi, *Entre fraternité et xénophobie*, Ch.2.

<sup>14</sup> ADG 1/M/827, Anonymous letter Molières resident to Sub-Prefect, 20 Jan. 1931.

<sup>15</sup> ADG 1/M/714, Report on extreme-right in coalfield, 9 Feb. 1929.

<sup>16</sup> ADG 1/M/832, Coal market report Daval to Gard Prefect, 14 Jan. 1932; ADG 1/M/834, Coal market report Daval to Gard Prefect, 14 Nov. 1934.

<sup>17</sup> ADG 1/M/832, Coal market report Daval to Gard Prefect, 14 Sept.

<sup>18</sup> ADG 1/M/835, Questionnaire on employment, Nov. 1935. On national trends, see Singer-Kérel, 'Foreign workers in France', 289.

<sup>19</sup> ADG 1/M/901, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 25 June 1930; ADG 1/M/901 Letter Prefect to Sub-Prefect, 4 Aug. 1930; ADG 1/M/901 Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 31 Oct. 1930.

most participation in the CGTU's national strike mobilisation.<sup>20</sup> Just nine months later, Tréllys was the first Gard company to implement mass sackings against their foreign workforce.<sup>21</sup> This sequence of events suggest a link between migrant precarity and the political disquiet of employers.

The Gard Prefect would soon assert to the Interior Ministry the need to expel unemployed foreigners in order to prevent them from becoming an 'easy instrument of troubles.'<sup>22</sup> It seems that the local reputation of Le Martinet's Poles inverted the stereotype about the obedient eastern European worker compared to the undesirable Italian or Spaniard. Between 1933 and 1936, the number of Poles employed at Tréllys fell from 324 to 270 – a significant change, while numbers of Italians and Spaniards remained stable.<sup>23</sup> Correspondence between the Prefect and Sub-Prefect Franck Rouvière in August 1934 suggests that the treatment of Poles who had dramatically occupied a pit in the Pas-de-Calais weighed upon the administrative approach in Gard.<sup>24</sup> According to Rouvière, 'deportations have been and remain numerous' in the Pas-de-Calais because the Polish population was 'extremely worked up by communist agitators.'<sup>25</sup> This demonstrates how fears shared by employers and state actors about Polish political radicalism were informed by local and national events, driving dismissals.

In response, local communist institutions mobilised solidarity efforts in favour of those facing deportation. Although Janine Ponty has suggested that this period saw a great disconnect between union leaders and the base, among whom solidarity 'shattered as soon

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<sup>20</sup> ADG 1/M/833, Report on strikes Mining Engineer Damian, 14 Apr. 1933. The strike rates in the coalfield were: La Grand'Combe 2.7%, Bessèges 5%, Rochebelle 9.5%, Cessous 32%, Tréllys 46.5%, Nord d'Alais 48.7%.

<sup>21</sup> ADG 1/M/834, Unemployment questionnaire, Jan. 1934.

<sup>22</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Prefect to Interior, Labour, Public Works Ministries, 27 Jan. 1934.

<sup>23</sup> Chambon, 'Matériaux pour l'histoire sociale du bassin minier d'Alès', 313.

<sup>24</sup> On this dramatic four-day occupation, see Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, Ch.10.

<sup>25</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 10 Aug. 1934. On political activism and exclusion, see Paul Lawrence, 'Naturalization, ethnicity and national identity in France between the wars' *Immigrants and Minorities* 20.3 (2001), 18.

as work was scarce', it is worth considering the material institutional aid offered by local actors.<sup>26</sup> When the first deportations occurred in January 1934, elected communist officials and the broader community sought to reject this arbitrary state action. First, *Le Cri d'Alès* commended the 'beautiful gesture of solidarity' demonstrated by the population of Le Martinet who had raised 1,200fr for the expelled Poles of the town, alongside organising public demonstrations and petitions that had prevented some of the political deportations.<sup>27</sup> Later that month, a group of communist mayors from the coalfield came together to produce a resolution that denounced an 'ignoble campaign' against foreigners, especially those who were active in 'revolutionary organisations.'<sup>28</sup> One of those to be expelled was the communist Josef Chabel. According to police records, his crime was to have struck Wladimir Sodledrajski with a placard during the Saint-Barbara demonstration of December 1933, on the grounds that the latter was collecting intelligence on Poles participating in the communist counter-demonstration for the Rochebelle company.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the mayors argued, various right-wing foreign figures including priests and the 'famous teacher Kousivich at Molières' were given free rein to agitate among the populations.<sup>30</sup> The resolution encouraged French workers to 'rise up against the deportation of immigrant workers, who are brothers of labour'.<sup>31</sup> Mayors had no legal power over the matter, but they used their position of local influence to politicise the defence of migrants at risk of deportation. By imploring French workers to defend migrants, the mayors sought to extend the solidarity practices seen in Le Martinet to the newspaper's readership across the coalfield. Moreover, they identified the hypocrisy of

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<sup>26</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, 294.

<sup>27</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 10 Jan. 1934.

<sup>28</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 24 Jan. 1934. This made it to the national press, with *L'Humanité* printing a report on the expression of solidarity with two Poles threatened with expulsion on 31 Jan. 1934.

<sup>29</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Gard police commissioner on Miners' Congress, 1 Jan. 1934.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 24 Jan. 1934.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

state policy, which only disciplined political action on the left, while allowing the right to agitate as they wished. These themes would become important features of labour politics in the 1930s.

Campaigns during the nationally significant month of February 1934, which saw the inauguration of the Popular Front movement, exhibited the continued separation of politics of labour and migrant rights. Following the 6 February 1934 demonstrations of the extreme-right in Paris, the forces of the left called for nationwide demonstrations the following week.<sup>32</sup> After successful mobilisations in the coalfield, the local CGTU commended participants for their unity ‘without distinction of political orientation or nationality, of age or of sex’ in *Le Cri d’Alès*.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the text, the local CGTU representatives sought to transcend difference, which melted away when ‘all the proletarians’ grouped together, through discursive voluntarism. This appeal sits awkwardly next to the campaigns of January in Le Martinet that conceptualised a defence of migrants as part and parcel of working-class politics. Rather than seeing in this worker-universalism winning out over particularist solidarity, it is more fruitful to interpret this action as part of an ongoing and iterative process of defining the relationship between trade unionism and migrant issues.

A labour dispute at Rochebelle in April 1934 provides a good example of the contours of trade union action in matters involving migrants. A call to protest written by local secretary Cyprien Gravier denounced the ‘modern slave drivers’ of Rochebelle, where five workers had been physically beaten by their *chef de poste* Bazalgette in the space of three months.<sup>34</sup> This protest in particular condemned the near strangling of

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<sup>32</sup> Antoine Prost, ‘Les manifestations du 12 février 1934 en province’ *Le Mouvement social* 54 (1966), 6-27.

<sup>33</sup> *Le Cri d’Alès*, 21 Feb. 1934.

<sup>34</sup> ADG 1/M/798, CGTU call to protest by Gravier, undated.

Dominico Tonio, and the physical beating of Polish Fedor Vizichanik. A subsequent report in *Le Cri d'Alès* explained that the foreman's trial saw the company's lawyer blame 'revolutionary activity down in the mine' for the *chef de poste's* actions.<sup>35</sup> Despite the foreign origins of the two who had been physically assaulted, the Rochebelle CGTU clung to a class-politics frame of interpretation at the expense of an analysis that might have seen in this violence both a reflection of supervisor xenophobia, and thus another iteration of the relations observed around workplace accidents.

It was in Le Martinet that CGTU figures sought to articulate a coherent position that tied together the defence of migrants with broader community-based solidarities. The first edition of the newly founded *Le Cri du Gard* – that increased the reach of the previous newspaper to the whole department – in February 1935 reported that the CGTU of Le Martinet held a meeting on the 'important question of the *refoulement* of immigrant workers'.<sup>36</sup> At the meeting, delegates strove to tie the plight of expelled migrants with that not only of fellow mineworkers, but also with local small shopkeepers, given that deportations would 'take away hundreds of consumers'.<sup>37</sup> Delegates thus articulated a specific position for migrants within the Front's broad social coalition. This local concern was articulated as coherent with 'international solidarity' that implored coalfield inhabitants to protect their 'brothers of misery'.<sup>38</sup> Such an analysis is important because it represents an example of weaving together the issues of deportation and broader economic suffering, directly contradicting xenophobia by casting migrants as central to the functioning of the local economy. While the report of a meeting in a communist newspaper does not imply a general subscription to the view elaborated at it in the

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<sup>35</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 25 Apr. 1934.

<sup>36</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 2 Feb. 1935.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

coalfield more broadly, the presence of this argument indicates an institutionalisation of the incorporation of migrants into broader narratives of community solidarity.

This articulation of solidarity gradually found increasing practical application through the local *Comités des Chômeurs*. In his work on the PCF, immigrants, and unemployment in 1930s France, Matt Perry has suggested that the Popular Front saw a shift from protest to ‘advice work, lobbying and delegations sent to the authorities’.<sup>39</sup> This pattern seems to be evident in the Gard coalfield, where actions of solidarity focused on the resolution at the municipal level of specific grievances. But in the Gard, migrants participated alongside French union officials in this collective self-defence. In April 1935, two unemployed Polish men who were heavily involved in their local Comité were expelled.<sup>40</sup> Several weeks later, the Alès *Comité* denounced the ‘deportation *en masse* of honest foreign workers’.<sup>41</sup> By June, a meeting of the *Comités* of the region at the Alès *Bourse du Travail* accorded central importance to the situation faced by unemployed foreigners, demanding amnesty for the expelled, together with free travel back to the country of origin for those who wished to return.<sup>42</sup> This represented an institutionalisation at the departmental level of local political initiatives first seen in Le Martinet. It is difficult to ascertain the participation or levels of agency of migrants in these organisations, for no comprehensive archival record exists. Nonetheless, the deportation of these Poles suggests an active role for at least some migrants, that in this case was the catalyst for the elaboration of migrant-specific demands. Such a participation helps to shift the narrative about the practice of solidarity away from being a one-way supplying of support and towards being an iterative process wherein multiple actors exerted influence.

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<sup>39</sup> Perry, ‘Sans Distinction de Nationalité?’, 356.

<sup>40</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 6 Apr. 1935.

<sup>41</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 11 May 1935.

<sup>42</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 29 June 1935.

The unemployment campaigning of migrants was not a uniquely male affair. The case of Bronislawa Zyk who lived in La Grand'Combe exposes how Polish women could play an important role in resisting such treatment. On 18 November 1934, at a 'foreigners' dance' organised by the PCF, she 'spoke in Polish to protest against unemployment', with the content of her speech absent from the archive owing to the surveillance personnel's lack of Polish.<sup>43</sup> Despite this detail, the fact of having given the speech was later used as evidence to justify Zyk's deportation, along with her husband Boleslaw Jadowski in June 1935. It was not only men that suffered from and opposed unemployment. In this case, Zyk spoke out in public in a way reminiscent of the radical, gendered action by the women of January 1929. The site of her crime, an event for foreigners organised by the communists, indicates the emergence of formalised spaces of social life in which migrants could contest their specific oppressions together.

But outright resistance and communist solidarity were not the only expressions of agency.<sup>44</sup> When in 1935 repatriations continued to progress, migrants in different situations interacted with state administrative procedures to pursue varied agendas. Janine Ponty has explored the pressures exerted on Poles for them to leave France; while many were forced, some returned of their own accord.<sup>45</sup> An inspection of the Gard Office de Placement's management of unemployed foreigners reveals the extreme circumstances in which such choices were made. On 6 April 1935, Maria Janas addressed a letter to the Gard Prefect requesting money for her and her children's return to Poland following her husband's recent death.<sup>46</sup> Roux, director of the Nord d'Alais company, confirmed to the

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<sup>43</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Report Prefect to Interior, 10 Apr. 1935.

<sup>44</sup> Here, I employ an understanding of labour agency constituted by a range of actions, including struggle, mobility, and negotiation. See Siân Lazar, *How We Struggle: A Political Anthropology of Labour* (London: Pluto Press, 2023).

<sup>45</sup> Janine Ponty, 'Les rapatriements massifs des travailleurs immigrés polonais dans les années trente' *Hommes et Migrations 1115* (1988), 33-9.

<sup>46</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Letter Janas to Prefect, 6 Apr. 1935.

police commissioner that his company would contribute 500fr to Janas' family's return.<sup>47</sup> It seems very plausible that Maria's deceased husband was Stanislas Janas, whom we met in Chapter One of this dissertation, complaining of 'feelings of suffocation' after years of working *au rocher* at Nord d'Alais. While Maria's archival trace is limited to this one letter, it reveals her strategic mobilisation of state resources to return home in response to her ultimate exposure to the labour milieu's toxic fatality. This exhibits the complex material duress under which decisions to leave the Gard were taken by the families of those who had crossed borders to perish in the mines. Moreover, it serves to underscore that Poles were not a homogenous bloc, and that solidarity politics were not a teleological outcome of misery.

Equally, migrant men could enlist state capacity to reassert their familial dominance. On 21 March 1935, Polish man Ludwig Dolata, who had previously been employed at Rochebelle between June 1933 and October 1934 when he left the coalfield, wrote to the Prefect of the Gard from Szamotuły demanding that his wife and children be expelled from Alès.<sup>48</sup> This request and its justification by reference to Dolata's wife's alleged infidelity represented an attempt to mobilise the French state to enforce gender norms through transnational means. A prefectural investigation established that since her husband abandoned the family, Julianna Dolata had mobilised a gendered support network typical of the Polish women's experience of the labour milieu: living with an '*amie*' who ran a *cantine* at Tamaris, and working as a washerwoman. The Alès Sub-Prefect leant on a technicality and on patriarchal sentiment to recommend her *refoulement*: she worked despite possessing a non-worker identity card, and was 'without resources' while caring for two young children.<sup>49</sup> Two months later, the general consul of

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<sup>47</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Letter Nord d'Alais director Roux to central commissioner of Alès, 15 Apr. 1935.

<sup>48</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Letter Dolata to Prefect, 21 Mar. 1935.

<sup>49</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 4 Apr. 1935.

Poland in Marseille agreed to pay for Julianna's *refoulement*.<sup>50</sup> Nowhere in the investigation was there consideration for Julianna's wishes. Ultimately, administrative measures enacted a transnational collaboration to reinforce the power of husband over wife.<sup>51</sup> State power here chimed with patriarchal domination. Highlighting these varied responses demonstrates that solidarity politics developed in a contingent context in which migrants pursued a range of strategies for varied ends, not all of which were progressive.

While varied individual strategies played out, March 1935 saw the local communist press seek to escalate the role of migrant solidarity in local political spaces. An article in *Le Cri* denounced how the bourgeoisie used the threat of *refoulement* to 'push the exploitation of foreign workers to the maximum'. Against this strategy, the newspaper called for 'not one public meeting, not one union or anti-fascist assembly without an explanation of the objectives of the bourgeoisie in its attack against migrant workers', indicating that similar efforts by Communists in Toulouse had led to 250 migrants joining the CGTU.<sup>52</sup> With this appeal, the newspaper made a productive attempt to encourage its activists to articulate the links between the anti-fascism and labour politics that drove the Popular Front, and the precarious condition of migrants.

Two months later, *Le Cri* published a tragic story that interwove the question of deportation with that of employer responsibility for workplace injury. It began by recalling that 'the whole population of Le Martinet remembers the magnificent action that the *Secours Rouge International* led to protest the deportation of two Polish mineworkers, Rutkiewicz and Kaszler.'<sup>53</sup> Though the campaign's street demonstration was enough to

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<sup>50</sup> ADG 4/M/613, Letter general consul of Poland to Prefect, 27 June 1935.

<sup>51</sup> This is a similar dynamic to that identified by Nimisha Barton, of migrants attempting to mobilise the state to mediate gender and citizenship relations. While her work focuses on how some migrant women made material gains and established themselves as 'citizens', Julianna clearly lost out in this case. See Barton, *Reproductive Citizens*, Ch.2-3.

<sup>52</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 23 Mar. 1935.

<sup>53</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 25 May 1935.

delay their repatriation, the two were finally expelled in February 1933. Tragic news had now travelled across the European continent from Poland:

One of those whom the Trélys company had brutally chased and who was being paid injury damages following an accident suffered at the company, our comrade Kaszler Stanislas, father of two young children, has committed suicide in Poland. Without work and without resources, this comrade was driven to this tragic end, a victim of capitalism. If, in our country, there were a sense of responsibilities, we would hold the mining company and local authorities responsible for this death because it is them who in depriving him of his breadwinning capacities and in pushing for his expulsion contributed to depriving two small children of their only support.<sup>54</sup>

This evocative article directly linked the issue of workplace accidents and responsibility that was so potent in the coalfield's everyday politics to the abusive practice of deportation. By doing so, it articulated together two discriminations faced by migrants, demonstrating a marked departure from the treatment of Dermidor Brados' death. In this case, Kaszler's migrant condition exposed him to the extremes of hardship, and company and state shared in responsibility for his death and for the knock-on effects on his family.<sup>55</sup> The response to this combination of embodied injustice – deportation and the physical ravages of capitalist extraction – was identified as 'proletarian solidarity.'<sup>56</sup> While xenophobia and indifference dominate understandings of the period 1933-35, it was during these years that the defence of migrants' right to health and to live in France against employers and the state assumed political pertinence.

Communist strategies for fostering solidarity drew increasing concern from the authorities. If the Alès Sub-Prefect Rouvière could report to his superior in Nîmes in August 1935 that the coalfield was 'very calm', stating with pleasure that the 'masses'

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Moral responsibility thus *was* a potent category for interpreting work-related death in 1930s France. For a later period, see Pascal Marichalar, Gerał Markowitz, David Rosner, 'Sartre as prosecutor of occupational murder: notes from a People's Tribunal in a French mine (1970)' *International Labor and Working-Class History* 99 (2021), 167-76.

<sup>56</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 25 May 1935.

did not respond to the communists' 'agitation', he was nevertheless concerned that a slight drop in wages could prompt the unity of the workforce.<sup>57</sup> Earlier in the year of 1935, migrant rights occupied a marginal but undeniable place on union programmes. On 27 January, the CGTU held a meeting of the unemployed at the Bourse du Travail. In the poster shown advertising the meeting was an unequivocal, somewhat didactic message against xenophobia. In the context of worsening crisis and continued employer profits, the poster told its audience 'you will not follow the xenophobic current against foreign workers that the bourgeoisie is attempting to penetrate in the working class' and that the CGT facilitated, calling instead for a 'united front'.<sup>58</sup> In the list of demands figured a rise in wages in line with living costs, respect of working hours, unemployment benefits paid for by the bourgeoisie, and 'the same rights and advantages for foreign workers.'<sup>59</sup> Rather than shying away from the prospect of working-class xenophobia, the Communists showed workers that the strength found in proletarian unity must be arrived at through a struggle in favour of migrants' rights.

The summer of 1935 saw an institutionalisation of migrant involvement in union politics as well as a broadening appeal of symbolic solidarity. In June, *Le Cri du Gard* reported a large demonstration that gathered at the railway station in Alès to bid farewell to expelled Poles.<sup>60</sup> *Le Cri du Gard's* account of this action is interesting in multiple ways. First, mass participation in the demonstration indicates that municipal practices of solidarity resonated with the broader population. Second, it was published on the request of the '*sous-section de langue polonaise*' of Alès, indicative of the continued institutionalisation of language group structures implemented in the region after January

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<sup>57</sup> ADG 1/M/798, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 9 Aug. 1935.

<sup>58</sup> ADG 1/M/827, Poster CGTU, Jan. 1935.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 29 Jun. 1935.

1929. Third, the framing of the action sought to cast solidarity based on shared experience and feeling as the focal point of labour politics: ‘these comrades, experiencing the same blows and starvation wages of capitalism, showed their full solidarity and the greatest fraternity towards their expelled comrades.’<sup>61</sup> The emphasis on the language of sensorial, bodily experience of blows and starvation as the material and rhetorical source for solidarity chimes with the politics of accidents. What might seem like a contradiction, between the specific organisation of the Polish language group and the emphasis on shared experience, was in fact the crux of the culture of solidarity in the coalfield.<sup>62</sup> It was in this environment of growing expressions of solidarity and unity that also recognised difference that the Sub-Prefect felt that social peace was under potential threat.

The experience of mass deportation during the depression thus prompted a range of responses in the coalfield, including but not limited to the development of a union solidarity politics based on the recognition of differential experience. Local communist mayors, trade unionists, and Polish women formed a developing bloc of resistance on this specific issue that in turn began to shape labour politics more broadly. Similar such localised campaigns have not featured in the historiography of migrant-trade union interactions during the period.<sup>63</sup> Whether this implies a real specificity for the Gard or a broader trend as yet uncovered in other places is a question that future research should consider.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Here, communists appear to transcend the supposed contradiction between worker-universalism and particularism which would mark trade unionism in the latter twentieth century, see Gay and Perdoncin, ‘Français, immigrés’.

<sup>63</sup> None are uncovered in the cases of Ponty, *Polonais méconnus* or Frey, *Polonais d’Alsace*. For exceptions, see Perry, ‘Sans distinction de nationalité?’, and Françoise de Barros, ‘Les chômeurs étrangers dans l’entre-deux-guerres. Variations à l’échelle communale d’une catégorie de gestion étatique’ *Hommes et Migrations* 1263 (2006), 35-46.

### **Union Unity and the Institutionalisation of Migrant Defence**

The actions and rhetoric of solidarity developed during the depression years found their place at the centre of debates around the reunification of the union movement in late 1935. On 22 September 1935, a Miners' Congress was held at La Grand'Combe with the goal of unifying the CGT and CGTU. A special police commissioner sent by the Sub-Prefect later wrote in his report how delegates first discussed wage issues and the technicalities of unification.<sup>64</sup> Next, Arthur Vigne presented a report on the 'foreign workforce', evoking how they were 'odiously exploited by the bosses', before denouncing how the authorities rendered difficult any political action that might allow them to struggle with the French against 'the capitalists, the enemy of the people.'<sup>65</sup> It is noteworthy that Vigne's speech when presented in *Le Cri du Gard* differed considerably from the police commissioner's version. While maintaining the analysis of employer exploitation and repression by the authorities, *Le Cri's* version ended by Vigne imploring his 'French comrades to defend immigrant workers, to incorporate their demands to those of the union, because – in particular in the Gard – they have always been in the frontline in struggles and in strikes.'<sup>66</sup>

While the police commissioner dwelled on the efficacy of his forces in preventing unitary actions, the communist newspaper's version was revelatory on two accounts. First, it was prescriptive about how programmatic solidarity must be practised: incorporation of migrants' specific demands as part of the union's broader programme. This is indicative of an approach that saw migrants as a distinct group with particular struggles: unions could derive and build power from a recognition of and engagement

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<sup>64</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Grand'Combe special commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 23 Sep. 1935.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 28 Sep. 1935.

with this fact. Second, Vigne accorded the past actions of migrants in local strikes significant agency in justifying this new approach of programmatic solidarity. Rather than unions ‘making’ the migrant cause, as Laure Blévis and Eric Pezet have argued about the CFDT in the 1960s, migrants actively participated in this process of construction.<sup>67</sup>

It was not only the past actions of migrants that influenced this line. *Le Cri* reported that a speech from a Polish miner, who affirmed that ‘the migrant workforce’ would be ‘side by side with their French comrades in the struggles to obtain their demands’, was ‘strongly applauded.’<sup>68</sup> This is significant because it shows, again, an active and direct involvement of migrants in the local culture of solidarity. Subsequently, *Le Cri* revealed that a ‘resolution of the delegations of immigrant workers’ was read by ‘a comrade from Le Martinet’, and submitted to the union reunification commission.<sup>69</sup> Although the emphasis on applause for a migrant speaker might be read as a communist attempt to generate fraternal feeling as opposed to a reflection of exact events, the mention of ‘delegations of the immigrant workforce’ hints at the institutionalised presence of a larger group encompassing all immigrant workers. Appeals for a solidarity that recognised difference were not merely a figure of discourse, but existed as an institutional practice. That this practice occupied a significant place in a meeting preparing the reunification of the CGT and CGTU owes much to the Gard’s specific historical experience of migrant political activity and communist dominance in the union.<sup>70</sup>

While the police commissioner pointed hopefully to the lack of delegations from Rochebelle and Nord d’Alais at the meeting of September as evidence of the movement’s

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<sup>67</sup> Blévis and Pezet, ‘CFTC/CFDT Attitudes towards Immigration’, 692.

<sup>68</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 28 Sep. 1935.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> On a national scale, the CGT was broadly more hostile towards migrants while some communists sought to build solidarity. See Schor, *L’Opinion française*, 274. Schor’s study is based on the press; it seems very likely that more local case studies following this thesis may reveal further solidarities.

weakness, he would be disappointed by a meeting of the workers of those companies held in October to formulate similar demands and structures.<sup>71</sup> It is thanks to the rare union material that survived destruction in early 1940 that the meeting of the miners of Alès and Saint-Martin-de-Valgalmgues is accessible.<sup>72</sup> The minutes begin with an overview of the representatives from different pits, which demonstrates a formalised system of representation of migrant workers (Figure 5-1). While French delegates were named, migrant workers remained anonymous, likely a mechanism to protect those migrant representatives from potential surveillance of postal correspondence between the Gard and union headquarters in Paris. Their nationality was also not listed – perhaps indicative of an approach that cast migrants as a unified group with shared issues, as well as another feature of anonymisation. It should be noted that the proportion of migrant delegates never matched their relative composition in the workforce of a pit. When the motions of the meeting were being passed, a Polish activist spoke in ‘his mother tongue’ to ‘translate the vote and its consequences’.<sup>73</sup> Migrant delegates participated in the vote, and at least Polish migrant workers were present in the audience. This is significant because it indicates an active interest in trade union politics beyond a few highly engaged individuals. By the same token, this recognition of practical and programmatic migrant specificity from the union that had conducted the campaign around Dermidor Brados’s death indicates a net shift in their approach. In turn, and in important ways, this questions Janine Ponty’s narrative about the mass unionisation of Poles in the heady days of May-June 1936, that ‘the joy of other workers seized them’, suggesting instead that migrants were in fact part of the process of unification.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Grand’Combe special commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 23 Sep. 1935.

<sup>72</sup> IHS-CGT 71/1/10, Minutes of merger meeting of the miners of Alès, 20 Oct. 1935.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, 323.

Pit	Delegates
Fontanes	Henri Mazoyer, Henri Clap, François Alaine, Bonivel, Fournier, one immigrant comrade
Tamaris	Milevieille, Griffon
Rochebelle	Georges Dupuy, Raymond Lacroix, Paul Planque, Fernand Dumazert Teissierl, Laurent Hebard, Buisson François, one immigrant comrade
Pyrite mines of Soulier	Pierre Savignon, Arthur Vigne, Robert, Bonicel
Saint-Martin-de-Valgagues	Emmanuel Layre, Antoine Mercier, Belin, Malavieille, Gasque, Plagne, two immigrant comrades
Retired activists	Louis Chapon, Casimir, Victorin, Marius Labaume, Joseph Loyer, Termes

*Figure 5-1 IHS-CGT 71/1/10, Table of representatives, Minutes of merger meeting of the miners of Alès, 20 Oct. 1935.*

Alongside this recognition, the meeting emphasised workplace risk as a central axis of mobilisation against the companies. Retired delegate Louis Chapon's closing speech evoked accident statistics at the Rochebelle company as an important mobilising force. It was with 'the blood of the miners' that the companies had made such large profits: the number of days lost to injury per worker per year had risen from 18 in 1930 to 21 in 1934.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, this 'misery' fuelled to the 'hope and faith' of miners in the union. This meeting, then, reflected a shift in union approach to particular demands that migrants might have, while maintaining a focus on the worsening and universalising misery of mining injury. More broadly, this represents a formalisation of a mutually reinforcing relationship between recognition of specificity and emphasis on universal working-class exposure to risk that was central to the construction of the Popular Front locally.

Such formalised representation of migrants by migrants and the incorporation of their demands equally characterised the departmental unification meeting of mining

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<sup>75</sup> IHS-CGT 71/1/10, Minutes of merger meeting of the miners of Alès, 20 Oct. 1935.

branches in November. In *Le Cri*, Emmanuel Layre reported that on 17 November, fifty-two delegates representing ‘adults, youth, and the foreign workforce’ as well as all the mining-delegates enacted union unity.<sup>76</sup> This departmental-level gathering confirmed the dynamic of previous local meetings, and elected a Regional Federal Commission of seventeen members, including eleven ex-CGTU, five ex-CGT, and one immigrant delegate.<sup>77</sup> Again, this migrant representation hardly matched the proportion of the workforce that they constituted. Rather than a total separation of migrants from the French population in terms of representation, then, this can be read as an extra formal representation to raise issues specific to the migrant experience.

The CGT’s archives reveal that this was reflected in the agenda at the Gard Merger Congress. Alongside a defence of working-time practices, condemnation of the non-payment of accident damages and for a rewriting of the 1898 accident law, and opposition to local and international fascism in the local Croix-de-Feu and the Ethiopian invasion, the Congress supported the ‘freedom of movement for all immigrant workers within the country, the delivery of identity cards, and the same rights and advantages’ for migrant populations.<sup>78</sup> Here, the institutionalised presence of migrant representatives was accompanied by the commitment to advocate for migrants, especially on legal issues concerning social rights, as part of a broader programme that blended health-politics and international solidarity. At a further local merger meeting at Saint-Martin-de-Valgalmgues, this link between migrant-specific issues and questions of health as central to Popular Front politics was cemented through a significant local actor. When reporting on the composition of the ‘*conseil syndical*’ to Paris, Emmanuel Layre indicated the presence of

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<sup>76</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 23 Nov. 1935.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/5, Order of the day of the Gard Miners’ Merger Congress, 17 Nov. 1935. This shows that issues of occupational health were indeed present during local experiences of union reunification.

‘two immigrant comrades’ who again remained anonymous.<sup>79</sup> As general secretary, Layre nominated his own postal address as the destination for immigrant-specific correspondence or propaganda in Spanish or Polish.<sup>80</sup> As demonstrated in Chapter Two, Layre was also an important figure in the union’s legal counsel. In that role, he encountered on an everyday basis the plight of migrant workers.

The merger process formalised an inclusive form of union solidarity. Structures of representation recognised the differences of experience faced by migrants, and assured their inclusion in decision making. Employers in the Gard also sought to politicise diversity in a diametrically opposed fashion. In late 1935, the Grand’Combe company subscribed to the extreme-right publication *Espoir français* as a response to the rise of the Popular Front locally, with the intention of distributing it in cafés, medical facilities, and among the ‘chiefs of the national groups’.<sup>81</sup> In an example copy printed in November 1935, the newspaper mocked the gap between the PCF’s internationalist ‘theory and practice.’<sup>82</sup> It accused the party of incoherence between its lofty ideals and local realities of xenophobia. While this view might have had some basis in other contexts, it lacked purchase in the Gard, where inclusion and recognition had been practically institutionalised. While not majoritarian, the interactions between radical Polish men and women in Le Martinet and local communist trade unionists gave rise to a development of practices and rhetoric that formalised and instituted a solidarity culture and politics that simultaneously held a recognition of migrants’ specific struggles and a commitment to worker-universalist politics. This remained a male-dominated, European sphere, with women and colonial workers excluded from decision-making structures.

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<sup>79</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/10, Letter Layre to secretares of mining CGT and CGTU, 25 Nov. 1935.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> ANMT 90/AQ/136, Letter *Espoir français* director to Grand’Combe company, 22 Nov. 1935.

<sup>82</sup> *Espoir français*, Nov. 1935.

### **The Labour Milieu and Migrants in the Tréllys Dispute, Early 1936**

Migrants played an active role in the heightening tensions that marked the year of 1936 in the Gard coalfield. Rather than a ‘social explosion’ in the months of May and June, the Front emerged in the Gard out of a process of solidarity construction that saw migrants play a central role in shifting the balance of forces in the coalfield.<sup>83</sup> At the beginning of 1936, a dispute broke out in Le Martinet that was not only about wages or social rights. Rather, the focus was on safety, hygiene, and control of the product of extraction, alongside a critique of the means by which companies subjected migrants to specific work-related embodied suffering. Crucial to this conflictual atmosphere that characterised the Popular Front’s ascendancy was a focus on the sensory and divergent experiences of the labour milieu. By posing the question of how working-class actors constructed and conceived solidarity politics, this case suggests that migrant agency and a sensitivity to embodied injustice underpinned the Popular Front mobilisation in the Gard.

The labour movement of Le Martinet put the newly institutionalised politics of migrant solidarity into conflictual practice. On 9 November 1935, *Le Cri du Gard* published a long article denouncing the Polish ‘snitch interpreter’. This ‘*faux-frère*’ assumed the role of the doctor, ‘inviting the injured to go back to work before being cured so that the company is no longer obliged to pay the half-wage.’<sup>84</sup> This amounts to nothing less than an overt and specific politicisation of the particular oppression of migrants in the realm of workplace accidents. Moreover, the interpreter played a similar role ‘in the workplace, and anywhere that he can serve the interests of the company against the interests of his Polish compatriots’, standing accused of telling ‘certain underground workers that they must always be submissive to the supervisors, never protest about work

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<sup>83</sup> A vast literature exists on the ‘social explosion’, see Prost, ‘Les grèves de mai-juin revisitées’, 33-54.

<sup>84</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 9 Nov. 1935.

and wages'.<sup>85</sup> In response, the author of the article addressed the interpreter directly, stating 'Mr. Interpreter, here, there are no foreigners, there are only the exploited who defend their common interests together'. Insisting again on working-class unity in the face of differential exploitation, the article concluded by calling upon the workers of Le Martinet to demand 'the deportation of the interpreter'.<sup>86</sup> This is an example of a key communist vector of communication expressing sensitivity to the ways in which the embodied labour experience of the Poles of Le Martinet was mediated through linguistic difference.

The problem of the Polish interpreter was part of a longer history and a broader set of demands that fused issues of the local labour milieu with national political dynamics. After joining the CGTU at the age of sixteen in 1921, Aimé Giraud became a mining-delegate before eventually being elected at the head of the unified CGT in Le Martinet in late 1935. On assuming this position, he sought to provide impulse to the struggle against the Trélys company.<sup>87</sup> In February 1936, he wrote a tract that sketched out the history of the campaign from an original campaign around coal allocations through to the demands of the moment.<sup>88</sup> In 1933, the local union movement pre-empted the Popular Front by forming a joint campaign committee composed of CGT and CGTU to organise a 'large petition' calling for an increase in coal allocations. In accordance with this dynamic, the 12 February 1934 saw 'a large meeting and a powerful street demonstration' in Le Martinet, at which the population reaffirmed its demands for coal

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> In his autobiography written in the mid-1970s, Giraud did not elaborate in detail on this episode. His commentary on 1936 mostly considers the Popular Front through a national lens, while mentioning the birth of a daughter. Elsewhere, he writes of how the Poles of Le Martinet quickly absorbed the class consciousness expounded by the French and Spanish population. It seems, however, that their mobilisation here was not motivated uniquely by an ideological engagement with French and Spanish communists, but from a specific situation of health-related particular oppression. See Aimé Giraud, *Ma vie, mes lutttes* (Juan-les-Pins: Editions Alma, 1995), on Poles, 33, on 1936, 38-9.

<sup>88</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Tract 'Aux ouvriers mineurs & similaires', Feb. 1936.

allocations as part of the nascent anti-fascist movement.<sup>89</sup> At least in Giraud's analysis, the local and the national, the material and the ideological, were intimately interlinked. Carried by this historical narrative of struggle, Giraud then detailed the demands of the united union's 450 members.

The set of demands interwove a series of issues related to energy access, workplace cleanliness, and migrant-specific precarity. A careful inspection of their articulation confirms that a sensitivity to the embodied injustices and inequalities of the labour milieu was central to the labour politics of the local Popular Front. First came demands around coal allowances. Giraud repeated the demand for an increase in allocations, adding appeals for the improvement in the quality of coal, the allocation of coal to *célibataires*, and to 'unwell workers for the duration of their illness'.<sup>90</sup> This demand represented an open critique of company domination and an assertion of the same moral economies of energy access that had been gestating in the coalfield for over a decade and that we encountered in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Moreover, the demands nodded to other injustices of the labour milieu by highlighting the specific energy precarity of injured workers and single men, most likely to be migrants.

In an article on the dispute, the regional socialist newspaper *Le Combat social* wrote that 'in the French labour movement, never before has there been a strike for a demand of this nature. Never before has a company allocated its mineworkers such a meagre coal ration.'<sup>91</sup> Notwithstanding the journalist's rhetorical flourish, the demand was indeed an innovation compared with previous strikes in the coalfield, which had focused upon pay and discipline. Furthermore, to justify the demand, the newspaper

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<sup>89</sup> On this demonstration, see Antoine Prost, 'Les manifestations du 12 février 1934 en province', 18-23.

<sup>90</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Tract 'Aux ouvriers mineurs & similaires', Feb. 1936.

<sup>91</sup> *Le Combat social*, 14 Mar. 1936.

invoked the toxicity and dangers faced by the miner: ‘exposed to deadly accidents, he persistently faces these dangers: firedamp, acid, bad air eats away at his lungs, water brings him pain and stiffness, his sight weakens, his hearing loses sharpness, his health becomes precarious’.<sup>92</sup> By establishing this link between the embodied and sensorial degradation that derived from the harsh working environment of the pit and the worker’s right to its product, the newspaper brought these issues onto the terrain of open labour confrontation.

The appeal for workers’ control also coloured the articulation of the demand about the Polish interpreter. Invoking a language of routine humiliation under the title of ‘*brimades* [bullying]’, Giraud called for the ‘removal of the Polish interpreter, whom the great majority of his compatriots accuse of taking responsibility for questions completely foreign to his function and absolutely contrary to their interests’, followed by an appeal for the ‘designation’ of an interpreter by the Polish workers themselves.<sup>93</sup> In evidence, this framing abandoned the earlier focus on workplace accidents and the demand for the interpreter’s deportation. Nevertheless, the incorporation of this specific demand within the programme of broader claims represents a significant moment in the history of the development of the labour politics of solidarity of the Popular Front in the Gard. This is a marked departure from what Ralph Schor has identified as the PCF’s position, that he summarised in Maurin’s 1932 assertion that ‘the question of nationality plays no role at all in class relations.’<sup>94</sup> In denouncing migrant discrimination by companies in the labour process, the union recognised that national, and in this case linguistic, difference did indeed weigh upon class experience. This marks a progression from campaigning over the legal and administrative difficulties that had characterised the previous years.

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Tract ‘Aux ouvriers mineurs & similaires’, Feb. 1936.

<sup>94</sup> Schor, *L’Opinion française*, 248.

Moreover, rather than a simple case of the union doing unidirectional, paternalistic advocacy work for the Polish population, that this demand was codified in a broader programme in the pit village notorious for its Polish radicalism was no accident.<sup>95</sup>

Hygiene constituted another dominant issue in the movement that went beyond wages and encompassed the everyday embodied experiences of workplace facilities. Seven hygiene-related demands appeared, suggesting the significant local importance of the question.<sup>96</sup> They began with an appeal for a shorter working day for those ‘obliged to work in water’. The next five demands addressed the *lavabos* – the workplace shower facilities. Although the archive is silent about the process of putting together the demands, the evocative, sensorial language suggests that the company’s neglect of the *lavabos* was a subject of daily disgust. Insufficient maintenance personnel responsible for questions of hygiene were blamed for a lack of hot water during the nightshift in winter, and for the following scene of neglect in one particular *lavabo*:

the floor is always covered by a layer of water, a layer of coal dust at least one centimetre thick covers the walls, most of the windows close badly and lack glass, the door does not close, the taps of the radiators let vapour escape, adding to the humidity of the *lavabo*, also the clothes are constantly soaked, the corners are strewn with cobwebs.<sup>97</sup>

The workers’ exposure to damp, coal dust, and cobwebs in the washrooms was thus not a natural consequence of minework, but was the responsibility of the employer. This refusal to naturalise poor hygiene reflected a similar logic to the denunciation of the Polish interpreter: both critiques pointed to how employer choices heightened workers’ exposure

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<sup>95</sup> Through this reading, I attribute considerably amount agency to migrants in the development of this solidarity politics than other scholars of migrant mobilisations and solidarity in France. This is also a great deal more agency than Edouard Lynch accords to the Algerian, Polish, and Czech sugar-beet workers who he sees as being caught up in a bloody battle rather than being political subjects, see Edouard Lynch, ‘Une grève à la campagne sous le Front populaire’ *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire* 67 (2000), 86.

<sup>96</sup> Compare this with the absence of issues of hygiene from the *convention collective* of 12 June 1936 in Parisian metallurgy, see: Laure Machu, ‘L’impact des conventions collectives sur la condition ouvrière et les relations industrielles: l’exemple du Front populaire’ *Parlement[s]* 33.1 (2021), 293.

<sup>97</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Tract ‘Aux ouvriers mineurs & similaires’, Feb. 1936.

to embodied problems. By the same token, the union decried the toilets as ‘very dirty’, often blocked due to the insufficient size of the pipes, and lacking in running water, all resulting in a ‘manifestly anti-hygienic state of affairs’. In Belgium during the same period, Sophie Richelle has demonstrated that washing facilities increasingly featured heavily in local demands in the 1930s, seeing in them an affirmation of the ‘right to cleanliness’.<sup>98</sup> At Trélys, the state of the *lavabo* too reflected a quotidian moral economy of dignity, but also of health.

This class politics of hygiene also demonstrated a limited but real awareness of the role of environmental contamination. Giraud railed against the non-filtration of shower water that was drawn directly from the Auzonnet river, writing that the ‘state of pollution of these waters is such that it constitutes a certain danger for the users of the *lavabos*.’ Here, Giraud directly recognised that the health and safety of Trélys’ workers was conditioned by the broader, polluted labour milieu beyond the workplace. Although this is coherent with the washerwomen’s denunciation of river pollution elaborated in Chapter Three, the unified CGT of Le Martinet did not allude to their petitions, nor did they throw into question the original act of pollution of these waters by the companies. For all the analysis’ environmental awareness, the demand remained firmly limited to the productive workplace.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, this provides a precious example of a socio-environmental critique of the labour milieu that stemmed directly from workers’ everyday experiential complaints to form a central element of union demands. Giraud explicitly stated that he was aware that these hygiene concerns could instead be addressed to a *Service d’Hygiène* according to the *Code du Travail*, but that the union chose to address

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<sup>98</sup> Sophie Richelle, ‘Ce que « se laver » signifie: histoire de pratiques et d’expériences. Le cas des bains-douches des charbonnages belges (1911-1950)’ *Le Mouvement social* 275 (2021), 86-7.

<sup>99</sup> Bécot, ‘Les murs de l’usine et le dilemme syndical’, 355-65.

the employer directly.<sup>100</sup> This reinforces the class confrontational character of this politics of hygiene. More broadly, these thick and sensory descriptions suggest an institutional reflection of the sensory solidarities and disobediences that workers constructed under and against company domination of and damages to their bodies and lives.

A twenty-four-hour strike was sufficient to deliver these demands. On 24 February 1936, 742, and therefore 86%, of the company's workforce were absent from Trélys.<sup>101</sup> In his report on the event, gendarme Barnouin chose to identify pay as the central element of the strike despite wages occupying a marginal place in the union's letter, while he briefly cited 'questions relative to hygiene on the workstations' and completely omitted any mention of the Polish interpreter.<sup>102</sup> Following this 'calm' day of action, the Alès Sub-Prefect wrote to the Prefect, who transferred the sentiments onto his superiors in Paris, informing him of the possibility of an occupation of the pits in the event that the coal allocation issue was not resolved.<sup>103</sup> The archival record is somewhat cloudy on what happened next, but *Le Cri du Gard* soon rejoiced the victory of the 'workers of the *cit  rouge*' of Le Martinet, who had won increased access to coal, 'the right to take home old wood for heating', wage increases, and 'partial satisfaction regarding the Polish interpreter'.<sup>104</sup> *Le Travailleur du Sous-Sol* – the mining CGT's national publication – added that Poles would now 'be accompanied in all interactions with the company or doctors by a comrade of their choice', and that the company had agreed to filter the water used in the washrooms.<sup>105</sup> This success evinces that combining issues related to hygiene,

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<sup>100</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Tract 'Aux ouvriers mineurs & similaires', Feb. 1936.

<sup>101</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Report Lieutenant Barnouin, 25 Feb. 1936.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 6 Mar. 1936; ADG 1/M/799, Report Prefect to Interior, Public Works, Labour, 7 Mar. 1936.

<sup>104</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 21 Mar. 1936.

<sup>105</sup> *Le Travailleur du Sous-Sol*, Apr. 1936.

access to energy resources, and migrant experiences of workplace injury was a potent recipe for labour conflict.

The importance of the Trélys strike went beyond the inhabitants of Le Martinet, permeating local mentalities with respect to labour disputes. On Tuesday 25 February, Arthur Vigne, federal secretary of the FNTSS-CGT, warned the Gard Prefect that the events were an expression of the generalised ‘discontent’ of the workforce in the face of employers’ denials to meet with regional union representatives on demands around ‘wages, bullying, vexations, lack of security’.<sup>106</sup> In so doing, he sought to instrumentalise the fear brought about by the Trélys strike to push for broader claims across the coalfield. Such a threat prompted the Alès Sub-Prefect to express concerns about the possibility of large strikes on 1 May just two days prior to the Popular Front’s victory in the national legislative elections.<sup>107</sup> This led to the signature of a *convention collective* on 30 April 1936 by the Prefect, employers, and CGT representatives.<sup>108</sup> Instead of the local issues addressed at Trélys, this collective bargaining agreement established role categorisations, pay scales, a promise to facilitate team-based work, further protections for workers against punishment, and an increased coal allocation for pensioners. These resolutions mirrored those signed by the CGT of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais one week before.<sup>109</sup> While key to tipping the balance of power, the issues of the Trélys strike were submitted to other, national agendas that addressed more classic labour demands.

During these same months, the issue of foreigners’ rights continued to occupy a preponderant position in the coalfield’s trade-union politics. On 18 April, Arthur Vigne wrote in *Le Cri du Gard* appealing for equal rights for foreign and French workers

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<sup>106</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Letter Vigne to Prefect, 25 Feb. 1936.

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, the Sub-Prefect’s warnings about the possibility of a strike on 1 May. ADG 1/M/799, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 16 Apr. 1936.

<sup>108</sup> ADG 1/M/799, *Convention collective*, 30 Apr. 1936.

<sup>109</sup> Hainsworth, ‘Les grèves du Front populaire de mai et juin 1936’, 12-23.

spanning elections of union representatives, an extension of the duration of identity cards, free transport, an end to *refoulement* and punitive deportations, the ‘right to work and to stay’, unemployment payments, and freedom of movement within France. Posing the rhetorical question of whether the demands were ‘exaggerated’, Vigne replied ‘no!’, insisting on their modesty and on the scale of discontent among the workforce.<sup>110</sup> Unlike *L’Humanité* which reduced its coverage of migrant issues by ten times from 1934 to 1936, the Gard communists retained migrant rights as a central facet of their politics.<sup>111</sup> The absence of migrant issues from the *convention collective* might be explained by the fact that these demands concerned the political relationship between subject and state, instead of socio-economic relations with employers. The persistence of migrant issues in the Gard is interesting because it contradicts the analyses of some historians who adjudge that national-level communist rhetoric of solidarity was met with indifference or hostility at the local level.<sup>112</sup> Here, quite the opposite was the case. Migrant rights alongside occupational risk and health concerns were at the centre of the local construction of the Popular Front. And rather than foreigners and non-unionised French workers simply flocking to the union, they shifted the balance of power by participating in the struggle at Le Martinet.

The Gard coalfield did not see any of the sit-in strikes emblematic of May-June 1936, but this did not mean that the political phenomenon was non-existent. Having already won their favourable *convention collective* in April, the workers of the coalfield were adjudged to hold ‘little enthusiasm’ for strike action by the Sub-Prefect on 6 June.<sup>113</sup> But this sentiment was not homogeneous across the coalfield: he singled out the workers

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<sup>110</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 18 Apr 1936.

<sup>111</sup> Harouni, ‘Le débat autour du statut’, 68.

<sup>112</sup> Rainhorn, *Paris, New York, des migrants italiens*, 147-54.

<sup>113</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Report Sous-Prefect to Prefect, 6 June 1936.

of Le Martinet as a potential source of trouble, underscoring the notoriety of the winter's strike.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, the newfound power of organised labour that the strike incarnated extended beyond Le Martinet. On 8 June, the local police commissioner at Rochebelle recommended that the Sub-Prefect intervene to stop a collective sacking of twenty workers on the account that it might constitute the 'starting point' of a movement that the authorities had 'all reason to avoid'.<sup>115</sup> Unlike the Sub-Prefect's initial relative calm on the matter, this indicates that locally informed agents of the state perceived a tension among the workforce that needed only a spark. It is difficult to disentangle the influence of national dynamics of mobilisation from local events. Nevertheless, the role of the recent experience of January-February 1936 and the material consequences it had for labour relations played a significant role in the concerns of local officials.



Figure 5-2 AMA 5/Fi/575, *The Popular Front of Alès, 1936*. Arthur Vigne is the moustached, white-collar wearing man between the fourth and fifth panel of the right-hand door.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Letter Rochebelle special police commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 8 June 1936.

### Defending Migrants with the Popular Front in Power

In the wake of the national events that saw the Front come to power, labour politics in the Gard continued to be characterised by a concern for the precarity of migrants in the labour milieu. Death has long constituted a focal point for political mobilisations in coalfields, and has been shown by Samra Saramo to represent a potential rallying point for blending the politics of class and ethnicity.<sup>116</sup> In July 1936, the Gard coalfield's population mobilised in a great symbolic politicisation of the physical dangers faced by migrants.

On 9 July 1936, a mass protest of two thousand accompanied the funeral processions of a Pole and an Algerian at Rochebelle cemetery, both of whom had both been killed in a collapsed mine the previous day. Socialist newspaper *Le Combat social* denounced how companies 'feverishly pierce[d] the coalface without concern for structural fragility', which increased the risk of mortal accidents. In response, it called for greater security measures in order to prevent such collapses, insisting that 'human lives are worth more than a few wagons of coal.'<sup>117</sup> This statement printed in the wake of May-June 1936 suggests the significant local presence of sentiments rejecting extraction at the cost of human lives in a similar vein to that adopted around Brados' death.<sup>118</sup> The communist *Le Cri du Gard* went further. In its description of events, intended as much to generate feelings of solidarity as it was to reflect the political mood of the funeral, *Le Cri*

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<sup>116</sup> In France, the paradigmatic mining disaster was Courrières in 1906, see Robert G. Neville, 'The Courrières Colliery Disaster, 1906' *Journal of Contemporary History* 13.1 (1978), 33-52. In the Gard, 106 miners died in a mine flood at Lalle in 1861, see Bernard Collonge, *Mourir pour les Houillères* (Brignon: Editions de la Fenestrelle, 2017). For a recent study of how mass death intersects with migration, see Samra Saramo, 'Capitalism as Death: Loss of Life and the Finnish Migrant Left in the Early Twentieth Century' *Journal of Social History* 55.3 (2022), 669.

<sup>117</sup> *Le Combat social*, 18 July 1936.

<sup>118</sup> If it falls short of a critique of the 'monetisation of health', this at least represents a denunciation of profit and production at the expense of human life. On monetisation of health, see Bastien Cabot and Elena Davigo, 'Du « compromis réparateur » au refus de la « monétisation de la sante ». Mouvement ouvrier et environnement de travail en Italie (1880-1980)' *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 41 (2023), 139-66.

reported that the crowd of men and women was composed of ‘French, Algerians, Polish, Spanish, etc., united’, emphasising that the event had prompted a convergence of the coalfield’s different nationalities.<sup>119</sup> Here, *Le Cri* highlighted the unifying potential of death: through the act of coming together, people of different origins enacted a politically symbolic solidarity. While emphasising the shared proletarian sensitivity towards death, *Le Cri* equally placed importance in this creation of unity in diversity. Those present in the procession lived in daily proximity to accidents – either at work or through family members – that could result in death. It was in the context of the mobilisation around the Popular Front that the infra-political affinities and actions of solidarity between workers of different origins in the face of occupational danger explored in Chapter Two took a central public role that the PCF locally saw worthy of highlighting.

*Le Cri*’s account of the speeches given following the procession unmask a complex mediation of the relationship between danger, unequal treatment, and solidarity. When the Algerian worker was buried, an Algerian ‘intellectual’ gave a speech that ‘made a great impression among the miners.’<sup>120</sup> Although the newspaper did not reproduce the Algerian’s speech in full, the implicit dialogue between his reported speech and the communist journalist elucidates the complex participation of non-union colonial subjects in the Popular Front’s politics of solidarity. First, the ‘intellectual’ appealed for Algerians no longer to be considered of an ‘inferior race’, to which the journalist replied that it was ‘only in the spheres of the *patronat* [employer class], among their loyal servants, that such things are thought.’ When the intellectual next called for equality of access to social rights for Algerians, the communist journalist highlighted that the ‘legal counsel knows the extent to which [their] Algerian comrades [were] treated as “inferior”.’ By this, the

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<sup>119</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 11 July 1936.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

journalist alluded to the legal aid provided by the CGT, explored in Chapter Two. Here, the practical support structures provided by the CGT were explicitly cast as a political response to the specific discrimination of Algerians, that also meant that the CGT needed no lectures on Algerian disadvantages. It is important to highlight the tensions between the Algerian speaker and the communist journalist, who appeared keener to underscore the CGT's practical defence of the working class than they were to address the question of racism. If for the union solidarity was evinced through action, it is evident that the place of colonial oppression in class relations was not wholly resolved.

The homage to the perished Pole posed fewer problems for the communists. A speech given by mining-delegate Dupuy critiqued the labour milieu exposure of migrants, as well as making a broader point about employer negligence. First, he gestured to an understanding of the transnational repercussions of mining risk, with the Pole having died 'far from his loved ones'. Second, Dupuy charged Rochebelle as responsible for the deaths, given that the required 'measures of hygiene and security' were 'insufficiently applied'.<sup>121</sup> Before this funeral crowd, Dupuy sought to convey the preventable, and therefore socio-political, exposure of workers to risk underground, while emotively evoking the specific suffering of migrants in this regard. Manifest in this scene was thus an example of how a rejection of the naturalisation of risk by the 1898 accidents law was an active feature of local Popular Front politics.<sup>122</sup> The amount of space dedicated to this funeral in the pages of *Le Cri*, brimming with political symbolism and presenting the population's shared sensitivity to danger as central to generating solidarity in diversity, is indicative of the significance of these questions to local dynamics of mobilisation.

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> This indicates that Ewald's interpretation of the law does not hold when approached in the context of the Popular Front from a critical social history perspective. In turn, this lends more credence to Pascal Marichalar's encouragement to scholars to continue to question Ewald. See Marichalar, 'La violence légitime'.

Funeral processions continued to bear out political symbolism throughout the year 1936. In October, a procession formed between Rochebelle's company hospital and the local church for the funeral of Polish miner Chodan Piotz. In the crowd, *Le Cri* explained, were 'a strong delegation of mining trade-unionists' and 'of immigrant workers', together with local communist deputies Bechard and Valat, and Louis Chapon, the new mayor of Alès.<sup>123</sup> The newspaper's evocation of this diverse and distinguished multitude underscores again the symbolic importance of funerals for the local politics of differential unity. When the 'convoy' arrived at the church, the clergy demanded that the family remove the 'red flag of the union' from the procession, or so *Le Cri* reported. The family refused – with the newspaper highlighting their agency in electing worker unity over the religious ceremony – and went directly to the cemetery. In contrast with the clergy, the union defended 'without any distinction, all the exploited of the mine', protecting their 'proletarian dignity' in the face of difficult working conditions. In line with and reinforcing the labour activist tendencies of the time, the eventual funeral was spoken at by a Polish 'comrade', a mining delegate, and Arthur Vigne. Gaps in the archival record prevent the verification of this stirring scene. At the very least, this emphasis in *Le Cri* shows that the dissemination of such symbolic scenes of solidarity was considered fundamental by local communists.

The fusion of occupational risk and migrant specificity went beyond the symbolics of funerals. Indeed, the same issue of *Le Cri* that publicised the Pole's funeral published an extensive article on the 'exploitation and demands of the immigrant workforce.'<sup>124</sup> The article itself was split between 'exploitation' and 'demands', with this structure marking a sharp chronological break, with the Popular Front as the turning point.

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<sup>123</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 24 Oct. 1936.

<sup>124</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 24 Oct. 1936.

Writing in the past tense, Paul Richard, the mining-delegate who authored the text, described how companies used a combination of exploitative contracts, a lack of support from French colleagues, deportation, and ‘devoted interpreters’ to put migrants in the ‘worst difficulties.’<sup>125</sup> But trade-union unity made French and foreign workers alike understand that they were ‘brothers of misery’, and that unionisation would enable them to pursue demands, ‘even those particular to them’.<sup>126</sup> Proletarian unity and specific demands thus went hand-in-hand. Richard declared that it was the Popular Front that enabled the ‘immigrant workforce’ to form ‘powerful union sections’ who ‘discussed their very justified demands.’ This is a crucial point, because it locates the institutionalisation of migrant representation in working-class politics as inherently interwoven with the Popular Front dynamic, and accords them agency in the process.

The rest of the article listed their demands: the right to vote in union elections; the payment of family allowances for children who resided outside of France; the payment of accident damages, even when migrants returned to their country of origin; death compensation for widows who had remained in their own countries.<sup>127</sup> Again, this set of claims lays bare a critique of the imbrication of unequal social and political rights with labour-milieu dangers, as well as campaigning on behalf of migrant families physically distant from the Gard. As well as the inclusion of migrant-specific demands in union programmes, Richard concluded by highlighting the legal counsel as a key institution for forging solidarity, highlighting that ‘not a day goes by when aid [was] not given. It is by acting like this that we will bind the bonds that must unite us, union of all the workers of all nationalities.’ While the structure of the article indicated a trajectory from migrants as

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* This emphasis on the demands of migrant workers is markedly different from the experience of Poles in the potassium mines of Alsace, where they were excluded from union developments, see Frey, *Polonais d’Alsace*, 349.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 24 Oct. 1936.

separate and overexploited to included and recognised by the workers' movement, the language here sought to encourage and generate forms of practical solidarity. Finally, it is notable that the same article appeared in *Le Combat social*, the socialist newspaper that had not previously shown the same zeal in solidarity with foreign workers.<sup>128</sup> Taken together, this indicates that the question and practice of migrant solidarity shaped Popular Front unity in the Gard.

Migrants were therefore part of the broader process of unionisation that developed during 1936. Given the lack of membership lists, it is difficult to ascertain specific figures on migrant union participation. State documentation on the registration of union groups say nothing of nationality and even if they did the persistent spectre of deportation gives reason to believe that these statistics would be untrustworthy.<sup>129</sup> In the absence of comprehensive evidence, a range of elements beyond the inclusion of their demands explicitly suggest that migrants did unionise. For example, Emmanuel Layre reported in *Le Paria de la Mine* representing the workers of the Nord d'Alais company, living mostly in Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues, that the membership of the union had increased by 140 from June to July, bringing it from 260 to 400.<sup>130</sup> The hyper-local nature of this publication means that Layre would have served little purpose by inflating the figure. Concerning the newly joined, Layre wrote 'these French, foreign, and colonial comrades, we welcome them fraternally, they are and will be defended, aided, and advised by all the organisms of the union.'<sup>131</sup> Rather than migrant unionisation being purely about the ephemeral elation of the strikes of May and June or being caught up in 'the joy of other

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<sup>128</sup> *Le Combat social*, 24 Oct. 1936.

<sup>129</sup> See the box on 'syndicats Alès', ADG 1/Z/55.

<sup>130</sup> *Le Paria de la Mine*, Aug. 1936.

<sup>131</sup> *Le Paria de la Mine*, Aug. 1936.

workers', Layre's emphasis on defence, aid, and advice points suggests the importance of deeply union work amongst the workforce in motivating migrants to join.<sup>132</sup>

Moreover, this period of mass unionisation not only of migrants but also of unorganised French workers indicates an absence of active xenophobia. The archives of the region contain very few examples of popular xenophobia.<sup>133</sup> When the PCF embraced a newfound French nationalism, evinced in General Secretary Maurice Thorez signalling his support of 'France for the French' at a meeting in Paris in October 1937, a similarly ambivalent attitude towards migrants did not feature in the Gard's communist discourse.<sup>134</sup> It would thus appear, then, that the French who joined alongside their migrant colleagues did not perceive the particularist policies, discourses, and institutions of migrant solidarity to infringe on the universal goals of the union.

Local appeals continued to voice an opposition to the subordinate social and legal situation of migrants despite the national-level government relegating the issue in its list of priorities. In May 1937, a communist cell in Alès heard 'a representative of the immigrant workforce' call first for migrants to receive the same reduced rail tariffs as the French for their newly won paid holidays, before denouncing 'the differences in legal treatment between French and foreign workers in workplace accidents'.<sup>135</sup> While the first demand indicates a critique of the unequal distribution of benefits of the Popular Front by the state, the second challenges actions of the state, employers, doctors, and lawyers. In this way, one of the more 'joyous' elements of the Front period in the form of holiday legislation blended with a more longstanding and deeply rooted struggle against injustice.

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<sup>132</sup> Ponty, *Polonais méconnus*, 323.

<sup>133</sup> This was rife in other parts of the country, see: Meriggi, *Entre fraternité et xénophobie*, Ch.2.

<sup>134</sup> Cabot, *La gauche et les migrations*, 230.

<sup>135</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 15 May 1937.

Their reproduction in *Le Cri* encapsulates the recognition of migrant-specific struggles as essential to the development of the labour movement locally.

The Gard Popular Front's migrant solidarity was political, and not purely humanitarian. On occasions, Front actors sought to compel the state to use its exclusionary powers against migrants hostile to their cause. This was the case in November 1937 when the PCF, SFIO, Secours Populaire, CGT, and Libre Pensée of Molières-sur-Cèze petitioned the Prefect to expel a Pole and an Italian whom they accused of troubling the coalfield's 'peace and calm' by their '*mouchardage* [snitching]'.<sup>136</sup> Neither of these migrants were expelled, which served to feed the 'indignation' expressed by the CGT regarding the deportation of Le Martinet resident Joseph Jusezyk on the basis of a 'dishonest report' by the Polish consul.<sup>137</sup> The Gard Miners' Federation's Administrative Commission noted in its complaint to the Prefect that 'foreign workers' were being subjected to 'arbitrary measures' while 'factious agents' were left to plot against them.<sup>138</sup> Faced with a state still hostile to politically subversive foreigners, the local Popular Front sought – broadly unsuccessfully – to defend these migrants by turning the state's repressive powers against those who threatened the Front's project.

The national government's support for migrants was weaker. As the period drew on and the Front government crumbled, a special legal status for immigrants had not been codified.<sup>139</sup> Local communist politicians did attempt to represent their non-citizen and thus non-voting migrant constituents. For example, in February 1938 local PCF deputy Fernand Valat 'on the demand of the Polish comrades of Le Martinet' put a question to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning the rents paid by Polish workers.<sup>140</sup> The

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<sup>136</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Petition Molières Popular Front to Prefect, 5 Nov. 1937.

<sup>137</sup> ADG 1 /M/799, Order of the day of the Administrative Commission, 20 Dec. 1937.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Harouni, 'Le débat autour du statut'.

<sup>140</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 5 Mar. 1938.

publication of this interaction stems from a desire to demonstrate the solidarity shown by the PCF with foreigners on issues affecting only them. Despite these continued efforts, it is important to highlight their limitations. These articles never went so far as to critique explicitly the Blum government, and the focus on migrants became scarcer in the pages of local newspapers as the Front encountered increasing political difficulties in Paris.

During the broadly unsuccessful national strike of 30 November 1938 against Daladier's decrees that followed the Front's fall from power, the migrant question persisted in the Gard. A tract published by the local *Comité de défense républicaine et française* deplored the differential treatment of foreigners depending on class and political engagement. It denounced that while foreign businessowners and bankers had every right to make fundamental decisions about the French economy, Daladier's decrees deprived foreign workers of the right to sit on the Administrative Council of unions.<sup>141</sup> While certainly not the strike's principal claim, the local circulation of this critique indicates that the protection of migrants' rights continued to hold some purchase in the Gard coalfield, even if much of the political impetus that had driven the Front had entered into decline.

The era of the rise of the Popular Front was characterised by an increasingly coherent articulation of migrant-specific issues within the universal cause of labour. Constitutive of and concomitant to this discursive, programmatic, and institutional incorporation of migrants was an overt politicisation of deep-seated concerns rooted in the embodied experience of the labour milieu. First among these was resistance to migrants' unfair treatment after workplace accidents, which sat alongside demands over hygiene and access to coal. In its most formidable moment, the newly unified CGT practised

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<sup>141</sup> ADG 1/M/790, Tract by *Comité de défense républicaine et française*, undated.

representation of migrants within their structures, defended their ‘right to life’, and incarnated an offensive against employer and state domination that incorporated issues beyond the pay, holidays, tribunals, and working hours usually regarded as emblematic of the Popular Front. This solidarity politics was characterised by a tentative and unstable but increasingly productive negotiation of the binary between worker-universalism and particularist demands of specific migrants.

What was meant by ‘the right to life’, at least to some communists in the Gard, can be traced from the movements against migrant deportation from 1934 through the politicisation of contesting migrant experiences of workplace accidents seen in resistance to the Polish interpreter at Le Martinet. It was therefore about a right to protection against work-related health risks and to the social and political protections and freedoms that they were denied. The incorporation of these demands into broader union programmes, and the active participation of migrants therein, are of fundamental importance for understanding how solidarity was developed, negotiated, practised, and mobilised. That this occurred *before* the ‘social explosion’ of May-June 1936 suggests that migrants were not merely ‘seized by the joy of others.’ Rather, they actively participated in and constructed a movement that recognised their different demands, and formalised their representation. These structural dimensions of migrant involvement assured that when the excitement of the political moments of early 1936 calmed somewhat, the issue retained local pertinence.

Le Martinet was the epicentre for the development of this form of solidarity. It was there where Polish subjects were most actively engaged in class struggle, where they were most threatened with deportation, and where in early 1936 issues of hygiene and access to coal were articulated with effective migrant solidarity. This chapter’s focus on Poles derives principally from the different administrative arrangements under which they

were in France, which made repatriation an easier process. It also stems from Le Martinet's communist political culture, in which many Poles played a significant role. Rather than this chapter representing an excessive focus on the experience of one exceptional place, the development and spread of similar forms of migrant solidarity politics across the coalfield demonstrate Le Martinet's broader significance. Through a process stemming largely from Le Martinet, solidarity was no longer a discursive affirmation that all workers were the same, but had become about developing a bloc, based on programmatic expansiveness and practical aid that was sensitive to and accounted for difference.

While fundamental to understanding the Popular Front in the Gard coalfield, the developments presented in this chapter leave the picture incomplete. The pit villages and towns of Alès did not exist in a vacuum. And it was not only labour politics that mattered. Equally fundamental to the development of solidarity was the response of these new formations of labour solidarity to the Civil War occurring south of the Pyrenees. Further still, solidarity was not a stable, fixed idea. Largely absent from the years of gestation of union solidarity addressed in this chapter, Algerian workers and their specific multidimensional oppressions would come to question the limits of union solidarity on the grounds of colonialism and race, in a political critique presaged by the Algerian 'intellectual'. The ways in which the concept of solidarity developed in the community, and had its boundaries pushed and contradictions teased is the subject of the next, and final, chapter.

## Ch.6. ‘An empty word’? Solidarity Action with the Spanish Republic and Colonial Workers

In early 1938, Communist trade unionist Arthur Vigne’s actions transcended the immediate confines of the local labour milieu. As general secretary of the *Comité d’Aide au Peuple Espagnol* he led a delegation to deliver everyday goods and money to Jaén in Andalucía. They were vociferously thanked by local representatives for their ‘solidarity’ in an address reproduced in the Gard press.<sup>1</sup> In late March, during the National Congress of the *Fédération nationale des travailleurs de sous-sol de la Confédération générale du travail* (FNTSS-CGT) that was held in Alès, he intervened on several occasions during debates on colonialism, encouraging his colleagues to support the ‘well-being’ of the ‘more odiously exploited’ Algerians.<sup>2</sup> In different ways, these activities blended the labour politics of solidarity constructed in the Gard during the Popular Front with issues that crossed the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean, challenging oppression and injustice rooted in fascism and colonialism. This final chapter is about the broader community dynamics that played into the complex, tentative, and often contradictory practice of solidarity that developed in relation to the Spanish Civil War and the treatment of Algerians in the Gard. It exposes a hierarchy of solidarities that privileged European anti-fascism, while revealing increasing challenges to this hierarchy by the autonomous organisation of Gard-based colonial subjects.

This chapter investigates the negotiation of local and broader politics of solidarity by focusing on two major political challenges for the Popular Front of international dimensions. Both the outbreak of civil war in Spain following the generals’ coup and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 26 Mar. 1938.

<sup>2</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Vigne, *Congrès*, 1 Apr. 1938.

question of Algeria posed problems for Communist adherents of the Front. While the PCF publicly dissented against the non-intervention line adopted by the Socialists and Radicals who composed the Popular Front government, it reneged on its former explicitly anti-colonial line, going so far as to suggest that colonialism had become an anti-fascist endeavour.<sup>3</sup> The national situation in France with regard to Spain and Algeria mirrored the European Left's preference for anti-fascism over anti-imperialism.<sup>4</sup> While the PCF's support for the Spanish Second Republic and its relative abandonment of anti-colonialism vis-à-vis Algeria held significant purchase in the Gard, the fate of these issues was mediated through, shaped by, and contested in local dynamics of political engagement.

Under investigation in this chapter are the points of divergence and convergence between the practice and meaning of solidarity in these two cases. By the latter 1930s, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the word had become almost synonymous with the Popular Front locally. Whether referred to as a 'spirit' or as a 'gesture', 'solidarity' could operate at numerous scales and be practised by a range of actors across the community. In the case of Spain, invocations of solidarity with the besieged Republic were a frequent theme in the pages of regional, local, and pit-level newspapers. The first half of this chapter uses these newspapers to uncover the construction of consensual solidarity with the Spanish Republic. This process was one of dispersed agency, characterised by moments of contradiction, discursive efforts to articulate the links between capitalist exploitation in the Gard and fascist violence in Spain, the mobilisation of Popular Front institutional structures and spaces that facilitated migrant involvement in fundraising, and the infrastructures of mobility that gave the movement its practical and affective sense.

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<sup>3</sup> An abundant literature exists on Communists and the Civil War, but the foundational text is Carlos Serrano, *L'enjeu espagnol: PCF et Guerre d'Espagne* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1987). On the PCF and Algeria during the Front, see Alain Ruscio, *Les Communistes et l'Algérie: Des origines à la guerre d'indépendance, 1920-1962* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 80-107.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Buchanan, "The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged": Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s' *Contemporary European History* 25.4 (2016), 665.

While these dynamics of consensual solidarity populated the pages of the local communist newspapers, the Algerian cause was almost entirely absent from the local press. By consequence, the second half of the chapter analyses state surveillance of an Algerian movement under the banner of the *Union Fraternelle des Musulmans du Gard* (UFMG) in January 1937 and its campaigns for recognition by and support from local Communists, as well as the minutes of the Congress of the FNTSS-CGT that became a site of debate on the place of coloniality in labour relations. While the UFMG gradually attracted practical yet distanced support from the local Communist movement, the Algerians it grouped continued to mobilise autonomously, critiquing in solitude the colonial roots of their labour milieu position and racial discrimination on the part of the authorities.

Through this analysis, the chapter contributes to a more complex understanding of internationally facing political solidarities in 1930s France by studying them from the perspective of actors as they constructed, negotiated, and challenged meanings. Following David Featherstone's labour geography, the approach here sees these processes of internationalist solidarity as embodied and concrete, rather than 'disembodied or abstracted'.<sup>5</sup> This means rooting them in the local structures that conditioned the possibilities for solidarity, and centring the actors who negotiated and refashioned these structures. This local approach uncovers how various actors – trade unionists, Spanish residents, Polish women, Algerian mineworkers and *cantiniers*, labour delegates from North Africa, and policemen – combined and interacted with each other over the issues of Spain and the local oppression of Algerians to engage in the political work of articulating analyses and action, to varying degrees of success, between seemingly disparate social phenomena. Through their actions and words, this chapter analyses how

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<sup>5</sup> Featherstone, *Solidarity*, 50.

contemporaries sought to ‘work through’ potential difficulties and contradictions in constructing solidarity and forging a ‘differential unity’.<sup>6</sup> By extension, the chapter explores not only the existence of a seeming hierarchy between an ideal type of international solidarity and the inequalities of the colonial relationship, but also the contestation of that hierarchy. For all their differences, both solidarity campaigns mobilised the discourse and institutions of the defence of working-class life and of sensitivity to specific oppressions, and were thus firmly rooted in the Gard labour milieu.

### **Asturias, Anarchists, and the Popular Front**

There was nothing predetermined about the consensual solidarity movement that emerged in the Gard in response to the Spanish Civil War. If Spaniards consistently played a role in local political developments, as demonstrated in particular during the strikes, they acted at a certain distance from French organisational structures. From the beginning of the 1920s, certain Spanish inhabitants were flagged by the authorities for their anarchist sympathies.<sup>7</sup> In the middle of the decade, local officials clamoured over the suspected departure of Spanish anarchists to participate in uprisings in northern Spain.<sup>8</sup> An international meeting of the Young Communists in Alès attracted a ‘great number of Spaniards and Italians’, keen to meet delegates from their countries and uncover news about developments at home.<sup>9</sup> Such manifest separation, displayed by many radical

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<sup>6</sup> Gary Wilder calls on scholars to consider how historical actors engaged in ‘immanent critique’ in attempting to ‘work through’ apparent contradictions between universalism and particularism in the French empire, see Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 9. The latter term comes from the same author’s writings on solidarity, see Wilder, ‘Solidarity’, 265.

<sup>7</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Report Prefect to Interior, 4 Jan. 1922.

<sup>8</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Report Prefect to Interior, 13 Feb. 1925; ADG 1/M/727, Report Prefect to Interior, 13 Feb. 1925.

<sup>9</sup> ADG 1/M/727, Report Prefect to Interior, 3 Sept. 1925.

migrants, was a constant source of dismay for French communists throughout the interwar period.<sup>10</sup>

This ideological and organisational distance impacted trans-Pyrenean matters. With the arrival of the Second Spanish Republic, non-Spanish Gard residents took a keen interest. By 1934, the Spanish socialist and republican parties had lost power to a right-wing coalition, which was responded to by a generalised uprising that broadly failed but was sustained between 4 and 15 October in the Asturian coalfield. Matthew Kerry argues that the dynamics of radicalism that saw the working class seize power in Asturias had as much to do with community politics of radicalisation as it did national-level events.<sup>11</sup> In similar fashion, local political cultures of the Popular Front in Alès coloured the response of its population to developments in Spain. First, it appears that the presence of an important and politicised Spanish population prompted activity in the coalfield; other movements to support Asturias occurred in Paris and the borderlands of the Pyrenees, also host to significant populations of Spaniards.<sup>12</sup> In its report on a PCF-called meeting following the fall of the Asturias revolt on 24 October 1934 on how best to support the victims of repression, *Le Cri d'Alès* revealed divergences in political analysis between French Communists and Spanish Anarchists. After a presentation by PCF activist Etienne Fajon, an 'anarchist comrade then tried to justify the attitude of the CNT and the FAI' – anarchists blamed by the communists for the uprising's failure – who was in turn 'fraternally refuted' by Fajon.<sup>13</sup> Following this spirited debate, the newspaper reported that 'another Spanish worker' – suggesting therefore that Fajon's interlocutor had been

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<sup>10</sup> Manassis and Vigreux, *Avec tous tes frères étrangers*, 30-6.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Kerry, 'Radicalisation, Community and the Politics of Protest in the Spanish Second Republic: Asturias, 1931-34' *English Historical Review* 555 (2017), 318-43.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Ceamanos Llorens, 'Solidaridad antifascista francesa y Octubre de 1934' *Cahiers de civilisation espagnole contemporaine* 3 (2020), 1-29.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 31 Oct. 1934. Such disagreements could also be found in Agen, Ceamanos Llorens, 'Solidaridad'.

Spanish – ‘formulated interesting suggestions to support the victims of fascism’. While neglecting to mention the details of the propositions, the article finished by indicating that the communists of Alès would follow the examples of those in Toulouse, Perpignan, and Narbonne by organizing ‘demonstrations of solidarity’. It was through politically confrontational occupations of public space that they would first support the Spanish.

These demonstrations made material contributions. On 31 October, reported *Le Cri*, a meeting that attracted ‘more than 100 Spaniards and other immigrants’ decided on the organisation through the Secours rouge international of a ‘fête franco-espagnole’ with dance performances from Spanish and French groups to be held on 11 November.<sup>14</sup> While the evocation of the presence of Spaniards at the organising meeting might appear to have been a means of legitimising the decision taken, it is equally possible that they had led the action. Moreover, the indication of the presence of ‘other immigrants’ is testament to how the gestation of migrant centrality to labour politics extended beyond events in the coalfield itself. Another important actor in this process was the communist-controlled municipality of Alès, which granted usage of the municipal theatre and whose mayor, Fernand Valat, made a speech emphasising how the PCF was ‘with all of the oppressed without distinction of nationality.’ The deployment of this motto actively sought to link specific events in Asturias to the universal condition of the oppressed, chiming with ideas uncovered in the previous chapters. The meeting raised 580fr, to which the local branch of the Secours rouge international contributed another 420fr, resulting in 1000fr for the ‘Spanish revolution’.<sup>15</sup> This coming together of PCF organisation, migrant participation,

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<sup>14</sup> *Le Cri d’Alès*, 14 Nov. 1934.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* See Corentin Lahu, ‘La solidarité comme arme: le Secours rouge international, une organisation de défense face à la répression du mouvement communiste (1918-1934)’ (PhD Dissertation, Université Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, 2022), 667-9.

discursive solidarity, and financial aid demonstrates the 1934 solidarity campaign as an important vector of solidarity.

This image of unitary solidarity could not mask divisions. *Le Cri*'s journalist recorded 'with regret' that the 'anarchist group' did not participate.<sup>16</sup> Instead, in continuity with the discord of the meeting of 24 October, the group held its own meeting, that *Le Cri* encouraged its readers to attend. This is demonstrative of fractures within the community, and disputes over how to supply solidarity, and who, indeed, should have control over it.<sup>17</sup> The following week, a correction from the Spanish 'anarchist' group was published, contesting its political characterisation, instead emphasising that it was a 'recreational and educational society open to all' (as the statutes that permitted it to exist as an association under French law required).<sup>18</sup> Police surveillance from 1937 appears to corroborate this, but notes the continued presence of anarchists, who had not operated in an explicitly anarchist organisation since a number of high-profile deportations in the early 1930s, in its ranks.<sup>19</sup> The question of control over the organisation and provision of solidarity, and tensions between the PCF and political rivals of foreign origin emerge as important. In any case, by the end of 1934, discussions of solidarity with the Spanish revolution had disappeared from the pages of the local communist press, leaving a precedent for the participation of migrants in transnational movements that could have a largely synergetic but complex relationship with local solidarities.

Not all politically engaged Spaniards were anarchists. In June 1935, the local Sub-Prefect signalled Asturian Ulpiano Alvarez, his daughter Camelia, and friend Raphael Romero for deportation for 'frequent[ing] the communist *milieux* of Alès', and actively

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> This type of conflict is not a contradiction, but rather Nathan Rochelle Duford argues that it is often a constitutive condition for solidarity politics, see Duford, *Solidarity in Conflict*.

<sup>18</sup> *Le Cri d'Alès*, 21 Nov. 1934.

<sup>19</sup> ADG 1/M/801, Report Prefect to Interior Ministry, 7 Jan. 1937.

spreading ‘subversive propaganda in the foreign *milieux* or during communist party or related meetings’ according to the police.<sup>20</sup> According to Camelia’s brother Ange Álvarez’s memoirs, this deportation order came after they spoke at a Secours Rouge meeting, after which schoolteacher Gaby Bastide hid them from the authorities at his home.<sup>21</sup> While Camelia was able to remain in the Gard by virtue of her marriage with Rochebelle communist mining delegate and French citizen Paul Planque, Ulpiano returned to Asturias before being readmitted to Alès after convincing the police that he had ‘abandoned the ideas that he formerly professed’.<sup>22</sup> Evidently this was not the case, as both his house and that of newlyweds Camelia and Paul served to accommodate Polish and Russian volunteers on their way to Spain.<sup>23</sup> On 19 October 1936, Ulpiano was killed at the head of a battalion of ‘*dynamiteros*’ in the Spanish Republican army.<sup>24</sup> Camelia would subsequently become active in the resistance, organising housewives’ demonstrations in 1941-42 and joining the *Francs tireurs et partisans français* in 1944.<sup>25</sup> This late 1930s family history reveals a greater extent of interaction between some Spaniards based in Alès and the local PCF. The Spanish population of the Gard coalfield was neither uniquely anarchist nor locked in contention with PCF political hegemony. In this case, the boundary between political solidarities and interpersonal relationships was blurry, very much in line with the experience of communism in twentieth-century France.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> ADG 4/M/603, Álvarez Dossier, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 9 Apr. 1936.

<sup>21</sup> Álvarez, *Mémoires de Résistances*, 36-7.

<sup>22</sup> ADG 4/M/603, Álvarez Dossier, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 9 Apr. 1936.

<sup>23</sup> Álvarez, *Mémoires de Résistances*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> ADG 4/M/603, Álvarez Dossier, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 2 June 1938.

<sup>25</sup> Maitron note, ‘Camelia Alvarez’, Fabrice Sugier and Jacques Brès. <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article210668>, accessed 13 Sept. 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Julien Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: Sociabilités militantes au PCF* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

Ulpiano Alvarez's fate also indicates the intimate links which developed between the population of the Gard coalfield and the Spanish Civil War. Fabrice Sugier indicates that on 18 November 1936, forty Spanish miners left the coalfield to cross the Pyrenees and fight for the Spanish Republic, followed by a band of Italian, Czech, and French, and on 3 February 1937, another 103 Spaniards made the same move.<sup>27</sup> Alongside this reflection of foreign implication in Communist union structures, the Spanish Civil War came to occupy a central role in the everyday culture of solidarity of the coalfield. The aid supplied by the Gard population to Spain reflected some of the specificities of the local politics of solidarity, while also feeding into that same culture.

### **Discourses of Local Politics and International Solidarity**

The specific dynamics of solidarity in Alès sought to situate a discursive critique of fascist violence in a broader understanding of capitalism grounded in capitalist exploitation in the Gard labour milieu, to mobilise structures of Popular Front labour politics, and to render fundraising a fundamental feature of daily life. The local communist press was essential to generating this movement, and thus provides an opportune insight into the ideal type of internationalist solidarity as understood by local communist actors, as well as shedding empirical insights into practice. Historians have investigated the organised efforts that developed in a number of localities to support the Republic, focusing on either discourse, practice, or institutions. Samuël Kruizinga and Miriam van der Veen have recently analysed the discursive role of newspapers in making links between the War and domestic politics, and using strong imagery to conjure 'glocal' affective links between Britain, the Netherlands, and the Paris-based German diaspora and Republican Spain.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sugier, 'L'immigration européenne', 271.

<sup>28</sup> Samuël Kruizinga and Miriam van der Veen, 'Sketches of Spain: The Role of Left-Wing Press in Britain, the Netherlands, and amongst Exiled Germans in Recruiting Volunteers for Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War' *Contemporary European History* 33 (2024), 430.

As well as sending fighters to join the International Brigades, working-class communities from Durham and South Wales to Neuchâtel initiated grassroots fundraising initiatives, while mining trade unions in Britain and France organised the reception of child refugees.<sup>29</sup> The present dissertation offers an opportunity to consider how the solidarity movement in the Gard coalfield flowed from and was articulated with the specificities of the mining labour milieu.

The pages of *Le Cri du Gard* sought to shape solidarity practices through discursive methods from the outbreak of the Civil War. After covering the first weeks of fighting after the generals' coup of 17 July 1936 and the popular uprising that prevented it from taking power, the weekly *Le Cri du Gard* recorded a display of solidarity in La Grand'Combe. On 1 August, it reported how a meeting had attracted 2,000 attendees, at which local politicians made attempts to fuse the situation in Spain with the threat posed in France by the richest 200 families and 'fascist elements' in the police and administration. It was for this reason that Leon Castanet, a former socialist deputy, declared that anti-fascist 'solidarity and sympathy must unite the Spanish and French peoples'.<sup>30</sup> This discursive evocation of the political 'solidarity' was based on the common interests of Spaniards and French at the national level. It was accompanied by attempts to raise affective empathy and disgust. In May 1937, *La Gueule Noire*, the pit-level communist newspaper of Rochebelle, invoked in distinctly gendered terms the 'cowardly' assassination of 'women, children, and old people' by Nationalist forces

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<sup>29</sup> Luc van Dongen, 'Solidarité ouvrière et antifascisme: les amis de l'Espagne républicaine à La Chaux-de-Fonds (1936-1939)' *Cahiers d'histoire du mouvement ouvrier* 13 (1997), 25-48; Lewis Mates, 'Durham and South Wales Miners and the Spanish Civil War' *Twentieth Century British History* 17.3 (2006), 373-95; Danielle Sidic, 'L'aide à l'Espagne républicaine des Fédérations des mineurs britanniques et français et de l'UD CGT des Hautes-Pyrénées étudiée à partir d'une action spécifique en Bigorre' in Sylvie Caucanas and Jean Sagnes (eds.), *Les Français et la guerre d'Espagne* (Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2008); Celia Keren, 'Quand la CGT faisait de l'humanitaire: l'accueil des enfants d'Espagne (1936-1939)' *Le Mouvement social* 264 (2018), 15-39.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 1 Aug. 1936.

calling upon the miners of the company to ‘think about the sufferings of our Spanish brothers’ and to provide ‘support’ and ‘solidarity’ to get rid of the ‘fascist hordes’.<sup>31</sup>

If these national-level techniques were a common feature of the campaign across Europe, pit-level communist newspapers sought to articulate discursive and affective links between the local solidarities of the labour milieu and support for Republican Spain. In Nord d’Alais newspaper *Le Paria de la Mine*, edited by Emmanuel Layre, direct connections were drawn between Republican victims of the Civil War and victims of workplace risk. In the edition from March 1937, a first paragraph under the title ‘SOLIDARITY’ first praised ‘collections for international solidarity’ before a second paragraph exalted those for the injured, the sick, and the families of the dead, concluding that ‘solidarity has constantly developed, showing the extent to which the spirit of solidarity and camaraderie has grown among the workers.’<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, Layre drew links between the assistance that the union offered in the case of workplace accidents, collections in favour of the sick or for the families of the dead, and support for the ‘victims of Franco’, that encompassed a ‘human solidarity that must unite all the workers’.<sup>33</sup> Layre here embarked upon a discursive exercise that sought to define solidarity itself. In the face of oppression by capitalist extraction and fascist war, ‘solidarity’ was a locally rooted and ‘constantly developed’ relation that could also transcend boundaries of ‘here’ and ‘there’ and between different dimensions of a destructive system.<sup>34</sup> Unlike the focus on national politics identified by Kruizinga and van der Veen, Layre’s article articulated

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<sup>31</sup> *La Gueule Noire*, May 1937.

<sup>32</sup> *Le Paria de la Mine*, Mar. 1937.

<sup>33</sup> *Le Paria de la Mine*, Mar. 1938.

<sup>34</sup> Gary Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 18.

ideological and systemic links between local material experiences of capitalist exploitation and the suffering of Spaniards facing fascism.<sup>35</sup>

Local organisers employed other strategies that consciously mobilised local identities of mining and migration. On 15 January 1938, *Le Cri*'s front page announced that Gonzales Peña, secretary of the Asturian miners' section of the UGT, would visit the coalfield the following week. Calling upon the attendance of locals to show 'solidarity' with their 'Spanish brothers', the newspaper drew attention to the invited speaker's mining background. At the meeting itself, Arthur Vigne made an announcement declared that a wagon of food and other essential items would be sent to Spain on 15 February to evince the local 'spirit of solidarity'.<sup>36</sup> The presence of a key Spanish mining trade-union figure sought to stir affective bonds based on mining so as to propel an initiative of effective solidarity.

But with the Asturias coalfield already under the generals' control, the destination of this translocal action was the Andalusian town of Jaén, still under the control of the Republic.<sup>37</sup> After Arthur Vigne led the delegation to deliver the material aid in March 1938, *Le Cri du Gard* printed a response of gratitude from the municipal politicians of Jaén. 'Today, our mountains and our olive trees echo the saintly word solidarity, saturating the people of Jaén with magnificent emotion. Solidarity! Solidarity! A magnificent word that the proletarians abroad write in sending aid to their Spanish comrades'.<sup>38</sup> In response, the Gard's communist weekly insisted that the aid sent was 'modest individual donations of thousands of humble Gard families who wanted to show their solidarity with the

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<sup>35</sup> Kruizinga and van der Veen, 'Sketches of Spain', 438.

<sup>36</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 15 Jan. 1938.

<sup>37</sup> On translocal identity and activism, see James Yeoman, 'Salud y Anarquía desde Dowlais: The translocal experience of Spanish anarchists in South Wales, 1900-15' *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 29.3 (2016): 273-89.

<sup>38</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 19 Mar. 1938.

Spanish people who struggle for the liberty of the world by fighting the oppression of global capitalism'.<sup>39</sup> Solidarity was thus an emotional bond forged in supplying material aid across space in the struggle against oppression, while the Spanish voice of gratitude sought to reinforce these emotions.

The following week, *Le Cri* reported another detail on the visit to Jaén that sought to strengthen these localised affective bonds further. The delegation's guides had brought them to a local school, where they reported having met a 'young Alésian girl, who had lived in the Faubourg de Rochebelle.'<sup>40</sup> This rather remarkable (and unverifiable) connection sought to tap into Alès's status as a site of Spanish immigration to develop translocal solidarity through affective links between its population and that of a specific place in Spain.<sup>41</sup> What the publication of this interaction proves is a conscious embracing and mobilisation of diversity as part of the coalfield's identity as a means to strengthen affective bonds between the Gard's population and those suffering in Spain.

### **Migration and Material Aid**

The organisational dynamics of the support campaign in the Gard were also profoundly local, and testify to the dispersed agency involved in constructing solidarity. Members of the Spanish community were fundamental to coordinating fundraising. A key figure in this effort was one 'Fernandez Ferragut', who directed the *Comité Antifascista Española* from his home in Rochebelle. In a letter addressed to the Spanish community of Alès, published in Spanish in the pages of *Le Cri du Gard* on 30 January 1937, Ferragut highlighted the work of the committee, whose members accepted the 'duty' to 'sacrifice

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 26 Mar. 1938.

<sup>41</sup> Jaén was also a mining region, though this was not picked up on by the Alès communists. See Agustín Molina Vega, *Minería y actividades Empresariales en el Distrito minero Linares-La Carolina: La Sociedad Minera "El Guindo" (1899-1920)* (Jaén: Cámara Oficial de Comercio e Industria de la Provincia de Jaén, 1987).

their hours of rest to serve the antifascist cause.’ Here, Ferragut addressed a readership literate in Spanish, highlighting that a key feature of the support effort implied a dedication of time. Furthermore, Ferragut suggested that the Republican government had held back from conscripting Spanish migrants in France due to the ‘great moral and material support’ that they could provide.<sup>42</sup> These arguments and the practical mechanics that they imply demonstrate a far greater role for Spanish migrants in Civil War solidarity in France than the historiography that has focused on the French Communist Party’s contribution has recognised.<sup>43</sup>

Regular reports of donations published in *Le Cri du Gard* demonstrate that migrant groups participated in transnational aid. On 15 August 1936, ‘the example of solidarity was given’ by a series of groups and individuals donating sums to the cause. Among them were two groups of Spaniards that donated 378fr25 and 134fr50 respectively.<sup>44</sup> But it was not only Spaniards who donated. Alongside the municipal workers’ trade union and private individuals, the ‘Czechoslovak group of La Royale’ and the ‘Polish group’ contributed 50fr each. This indicates that language groups central to the local articulation of Popular Front labour politics practised internationalist solidarity by the summer of 1936. In turn, *Le Cri*’s emphasis on the origins of the contributions is equally demonstrative of a recognition on the part of the paper’s communist editors of the new political reality in the coalfield. This is a concrete example of the recognition of difference reinforcing the strength of solidarity.

Donations from the Polish community in early 1937 reveal how the initiative of migrants could mobilise spaces and people beyond the Communists’ usual sphere of

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<sup>42</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 30 Jan. 1937.

<sup>43</sup> This role was not mentioned in the classic work on the movement, Serrano, *L’enjeu espagnol*.

<sup>44</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 15 Aug. 1936.

action. A collection during a Polish dance in February 1937 at the ‘Abbaye-Cendras’ amassed 25fr15.<sup>45</sup> This church was in fact property of the Rochebelle company that had been restored by the Polish community in the mid-1920s, and was where the Polish priest of the coalfield said his mass each Sunday.<sup>46</sup> Given the stern divisions drawn between Communist politics and religion during the interwar period, and Rochebelle company’s public image as a highly disciplinarian employer, this function of the Abbaye as a site for raising funds for the Republic appears surprising. It implies some level of autonomy over the company-owned space, that was used for a materially modest but symbolically significant collection. This was confirmed on 1 May of the same year when a ‘group of Polish women of the Abbaye-Cendras’ donated 86fr25, a sum greater than that contributed by some communist cells during the same week.<sup>47</sup> Such a revelation is particularly striking because Polish women and their associations in interwar France were particularly Catholic, less likely to have republican sympathies given the news of anticlerical violence that abounded in France by early 1937 and the stern opposition of the Polish Catholic hierarchy to the Republic.<sup>48</sup> This reinforces the importance of semi-autonomous spaces for fundraising, while suggesting that Bronisława Zyk – the expelled Polish woman who had spoken at a communist unemployment meeting whom we met in Chapter Five – might have represented a broader tendency. Collections by the Polish community

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<sup>45</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 27 Feb. 1937.

<sup>46</sup> ADG 1/M/801, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 29 Dec. 1936.

<sup>47</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 1 May 1937.

<sup>48</sup> On Polish women’s associations, see Janine Ponty, ‘Des Polonaises parlent : mémoires d’immigrées dans le Nord/Pas-de-Calais entre les deux guerres mondiales’ *Revue du Nord* 63.250 (1981), 734-5. On the partisan position of the French Catholic hierarchy vis-à-vis the Spanish Civil War before February 1937, see Paul Christophe, *Les catholiques et le Front populaire* (Paris: Les Editions ouvrières, 1986), 278-81. The position of the Polish Catholic Church was even more unequivocally anti-Republican, see Dawid Kabaciński, ‘The Attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)’ *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 124 (2017), 79-109.

continued throughout the war: in April 1938, the ‘Polish group of Alès’ delivered a sum of 734fr40, a ‘beautiful act of solidarity’ for which *Le Cri* expressed its gratitude.<sup>49</sup>

Donations were also reported as coming from the ‘foreign workforce’ as a unified group. If reading working-class migrant consciousness into this formulation might be a stretch, it is at least proof of shared political spaces. At Taillades, a northern neighbourhood of La Grand’Combe, the newspaper’s ‘Polish comrades’ were noted as having collected 298fr ‘among the immigrant workforce’ in late October 1936.<sup>50</sup> Again demonstrating the active participation of certain politically active Polish people, this report also emphasised proximity and cooperation between migrants of different origins that could be mobilised against fascism. More broadly, the publication of this interaction ties into the idea that the Popular Front in this area was built upon cooperation between diverse sections of the working class, a fact of which the communists were aware and actively promoted in their newspaper as central to solidarity with Spain. This kind of collective migrant action was again publicised in April 1938, when the treasurer of the *Comité d’Aide au peuple espagnol* wrote in *Le Cri* to thank the ‘foreign workers’ group’ of La Grand’Combe for their ‘gesture of solidarity’ in donating 510fr along with three parcels of tobacco and soap.<sup>51</sup> This is significant because it demonstrates the persistence of migrant-only institutions and spaces even when the programmatic pro-migrant politics observed in Chapter Five of this thesis had receded from the pages of *Le Cri*. Rather than emphasising the uniquely proletarian character of fundraising, the Gard’s communist publication rooted material support for Spain in local practices of solidarity in which an institutionalisation of migrant separateness was constitutive of working-class strength.

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<sup>49</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 30 Apr. 1938.

<sup>50</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 31 Oct. 1936.

<sup>51</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 23 Apr. 1938.

It is worth dwelling on the materiality of the donations made by locals. Alongside what they imply about the connections between local and international solidarities, donations in a context of general material lack have meaning in a very concrete sense. Gender was a factor that determined inhabitants' capabilities to donate. *Le Cri* highlighted how the 'mother of a large family' had donated 30fr in September 1936, emphasising her contribution of the fruits of pro-natalist policies to the benefit of those suffering in Spain.<sup>52</sup> This donation snatches an insight at the communists' valorisation of grassroots women's contributions to the effort.<sup>53</sup> Other members of the community contributed according to their own means. On Saturday 22 January 1938, the Communist group of the Faubourg du Soleil on the left bank of the Gardon organized a collection of goods: haberdasher Fabre donated fifty kilogrammes of potatoes; shopkeeper Laupie supplied a box of tuna pâté and a bar of chocolate; butcher Chamborderon gave 350 grammes of bacon; the shoemaker 'Dilucianno' contributed a pair of shoes [*souliers*], one pair of clogs, and a pair of slippers.<sup>54</sup> While these donations may seem small in the face of the scale of the war and the belligerent forces, their publication sought to evince a very material and specific form of solidarity whereby women and local shopkeepers organized and mobilized their limited resources.

Rail infrastructures meant that such material support for Republican Spain could also be delivered in Alès, by allowing for fleeting encounters with refugees as they fled Francoist oppression. Originally built to transport coal to surrounding regions, the railway system of the Gard and beyond established Alès as a regional node.<sup>55</sup> By consequence, on Sunday 1 August 1937, one hundred Spanish refugees – mainly women and children

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<sup>52</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 19 Sep. 1936.

<sup>53</sup> On more politically influential women's participation, see Laurence Brown, "'Pour aider nos frères d'Espagne': Humanitarian Aid, French Women, and Popular Mobilization during the Front Populaire" *French Politics, Culture and Society* 25.1 (2007), 30-48.

<sup>54</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 19 Feb. 1938.

<sup>55</sup> See Gaillard, 'Un exemple français', 28-31.

– bound for Le Puy arrived in Alès at 2.45pm, where they would change onto another train an hour later. Alert to their arrival, local communist municipal representatives greeted them with bread, sausage, gruyere, bananas, chocolate, and wine. According to Mejean of the *Comité d'Aide au peuple espagnol*, on departure the refugees had indicated that they would retain the ‘best memories’ of the town.<sup>56</sup> With the escalation of departures over the Pyrenees, *Le Cri* reported how, in February 1939, 500 refugees were met by local municipal politicians who distributed chocolate, bread, and coffee for an hour before the Spanish were redistributed into trains and coaches for onward transportation.<sup>57</sup> Brief though these encounters were, they show how infrastructures of mobility enabled locals to offer material forms of aid and, given the nature of the items, moments of comfort to refugees. This chimes with Diarmaid Kelliher’s indication regarding the importance of infrastructure and the materiality of networks in solidarity construction, especially in the scaling-up of local initiatives.<sup>58</sup> The site of the Alès train station was thus a site for the expression of internationalist solidarity with the displaced.

While a full investigation of the longer sojourns spent by Spanish refugees in the Gard would require a dedicated study, a presentation of some elements here appears to reinforce the image of consensual solidarity. A handwritten report from the commissariat of Bessèges to the Sub-Prefect of Alès on 15 October 1938 reported on the ten women and two men present in the town as refugees. Two young women worked in the filature of Bessèges, while the rest were lodged and fed by ‘diverse inhabitants of the town’, in exchange for ‘their aid in the household’s upkeep’, or even ‘in recognition of the company that they offer’.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, their presence in the town beyond the households that lodged

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<sup>56</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 7 Aug. 1937.

<sup>57</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 11 Feb. 1939.

<sup>58</sup> Kelliher, ‘Historicising geographies of solidarity’, 4.

<sup>59</sup> ADG 8/M/648, Report Bessèges police commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 15 Oct. 1938.

them had ‘always solicited general sympathy’.<sup>60</sup> While the comments on ‘company’ may euphemise the sexual exploitation of refugees, the broader point here is that the mood of acceptance that appears to have prevailed, which in turn suggests that the solidarity printed in the pages of *Le Cri* was not mere communist fabulation. This was a mood that persisted into the Second World War, as the account of Catalan refugee Remei Oliva demonstrates. Separated from her husband Joan in exile, Remei was reunited with him in La Grand’Combe where he had been enlisted as a mineworker in 1939. It was in the Gard that Joan first met their child Rubèn, to whom Remei had given birth since their separation. After Joan left early for the morning shift following the nocturnal arrival of his wife and child, Remei was awoken by knocking at the door. A woman, her neighbour, offered her powdered milk after having heard the baby cry during the night. Next, she showed Oliva to the company store and helped her make purchases on credit, acting as linguistic mediator.<sup>61</sup> This form of practical, gendered solidarity was brought about by the proximity entailed in company housing. It was also structurally conditioned by the gendered division of labour. Following this initial encounter, Remei described the support of neighbours in the face of a hostile police commissioner who threatened the family with deportation.<sup>62</sup>

Among the coalfields of France, Alès appears to have distinguished itself by the scale of its efforts in support of Republican Spain. At the National Mining Congress held there by the FNTSS-CGT in March-April 1938, Arthur Vigne dedicated part of an intervention before the three hundred delegates to the magnitude of local solidarity. Vigne highlighted that he ‘would have liked for all the coalfields to take inspiration’ from the Gard’s organisation, where the population had gone beyond the union’s stamp sales to

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Remei Oliva, *Exode. De l’Espagne franquiste aux camps français* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010), 151-2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

send seventy tonnes of ‘provisions, clothes, and medicines’ to Spanish Republican civilians in the hope that this ‘material solidarity’ would ‘lighten their suffering’.<sup>63</sup> While it is difficult to grasp the real extent of sentiments of solidarity across the coalfield, the pages of *Le Cri du Gard* suggest that communists saw real value in attempting to foster the discursive articulation of oppression between local conditions of exploitation and European fascism and in the broad-based participation of all coalfield inhabitants, but particularly migrants as institutionally separate from but a fundamental part of the trade-union movement. This was the ideal type of consensual internationalist solidarity.

### **The Union Fraternelle des Musulmans du Gard, Labour, and Colonialism**

Where internationalist solidarity with Republican Spain permeated all manner of social groups and held pride of place in the communist press, the Algerian population of the coalfield’s own struggle against an internationally structured oppression did not experience the same broad-based support. The second half of this chapter examines the rather less consensual process of solidarity construction with respect to this Algerian population between the beginning of the Popular Front and the outbreak of the Second World War. With the PCF’s shift away from critiquing colonialism during the Popular Front, previous anti-colonial radicalism, such as the denunciation of the Indigeneity Code that emerged during January 1929 strike, dissipated.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, this very same population began to form its own autonomous institutions that made explicit links between their labour-milieu experience and the broader, imperial questions of race and colonialism. What follows is an analysis of how the collective political expression of this Algerian population critiqued, tested the limits of, and ultimately expanded visions of working-class solidarity in the Gard coalfield. Above all, the historical experience of this

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<sup>63</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Vigne, *Congrès*, 31 Mar. 1938.

<sup>64</sup> Ruscio, *Les Communistes et l’Algérie*, 80-107.

movement complicates the ideologically coherent and communitarian image of consensual solidarity conveyed in support for Spain, revealing the pragmatic dimensions, the dispersed agency, and the disagreements that could be constitutive of political change.

The Algerian population mobilised in an autonomous movement in early 1937. Since the beginning of 1936, large numbers of Algerians were recruited by the Gard's companies to provide for a growing labour demand.<sup>65</sup> The mixing of this influx of colonial workers with longer standing Algerian Gard residents prompted suspicion on the part of the local authorities, which was not mirrored by enthusiasm in the communist press.<sup>66</sup> Regrettably, the archives reveal nothing about the political dynamics of this demographic change in late 1936. The first recorded episodes of autonomous Algerian political activity occurred on the first two Sundays of January 1937, when meetings organised by two Algerian miners and two *cantiniers* attracted 200 and 500 North African attendees.<sup>67</sup> These early meetings criticised colonial inequality outright, calling for an end to the Indigeneity code, and equality of treatment for the Algerian departments with those of the Hexagon.<sup>68</sup> By the end of the month, the *Union Fraternelle des Musulmans du Gard* was born, with *cantinier* Mohamed Chalal as its president.<sup>69</sup>

On 21 February, Chalal read a programme of demands in front of a crowd of 1,000 in Trescol.<sup>70</sup> Although police recorded little information about the attendees, and local press ignored the events completely, the organisers reveal the movement to have been composed of *cantiniers* and mineworkers from across the coalfield. The organising

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<sup>65</sup> Treppe, *Les trois batailles du charbon*, 110.

<sup>66</sup> On grounded suspicion and colonial policing, see: Vincent Bollenot, 'Surveiller les mobilisations, se mobiliser sous surveillance. Articuler une histoire du renseignement et histoire des mobilisations en situation impériale' *Genèses* 120.3 (2020), 117.

<sup>67</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Prefect to Interior Ministry, 8 Jan. 1937; ADG 1/M/803, Letter Prefect to Interior Ministry, 14 Jan. 1937. A meeting on the third Sunday of the month was planned, but no trace appears of it in the police archives.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Prefect to Interior Ministry, 5 Feb. 1937.

<sup>70</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 23 Feb. 1937.

committees of the meetings were composed of Chalal and Slimane Zizi, another *cantinier*, as well as two Algerian workers, Abdel Moumen who lived at Champclauson and Saltane who lived at camp Fourier. This indicates that the UFMG drew upon the space of the *cantine* as a site of sociability, building an institutional form of politics from it with greater degrees of autonomy than the case of Moula's *cantine* in the mid-1920s.<sup>71</sup>

As the movement grew, the meetings attracted interest from sympathetic Europeans. Mohamed Chalal began the meeting outside his *cantine* on 21 February, attended by over one thousand people, by thanking the 'European element' for their presence and their willingness to 'support' the Algerians' cause and to hear their 'grievances'.<sup>72</sup> These meetings thus constituted a significant political encounter between an increasingly organised Algerian community and French actors. Next, Chalal warned that the UFMG was 'neither a sell-out nor for sale', and wished to remain free from the control of local political movements – an appeal for autonomy that reflects somewhat fraught relations between communists and the Algerian cause.<sup>73</sup>

In his speech, Chalal sought to rouse combative solidarity among the Algerians and to appeal to the sensibilities of local communist trade unionists. In a very practical sense, this dual goal is evident in the fact that he repeated the speech in Arabic, Kabyle, and French.<sup>74</sup> In terms of content, the sheer breadth of Chalal's references and strategies for soliciting support was remarkable, blending a critique of racial oppression in the metropole with an exaltation of universalist values. Opening by insisting on the UFMG's 'resistance to oppression', Chalal went on to emphasise its opposition to 'racial hatred' and related 'draconian and exceptional measures' that Algerians suffered. Instead, the

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<sup>71</sup> See Chapter Three of this thesis.

<sup>72</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 23 Feb. 1937.

<sup>73</sup> Ruscio, *Le PCF et l'Algérie*, 100.

<sup>74</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, Chalal speech, 23 Feb. 1937.

UFMG was for a form of worker-universalism, summarised in their motto of ‘work in peace and equality.’<sup>75</sup> Next, he invoked the participation of Algerians in French military campaigns to justify their ‘right’ to ‘the benefits of the social and democratic laws of France.’<sup>76</sup> His vision of rights challenged actual legal definitions to invoke the universal principle of ‘man without distinction of race or of religion, equality in birth and in life’, adding ‘and I invoke here the first article of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789’. Following this learned Republican appeal, Chalal turned to a corporeal humanism. Stating that the Algerians had ‘awoken’ from a ‘lethargic sleep’, ‘eyes wide open, searching for light’, he hammered home that colonised subjects had ‘organs with the same need of satiation as the whole human race.’ This embodied critique of racial prejudice exposed the contradiction between the high ideals of republican universalism and the quotidian lived experience of Algerians. Yet this bodily humanism was not merely abstract. In the context of the coalfield, this appeal echoes the place of the defence of working-class bodies that was a crucial pillar of labour politics. Chalal, who very likely read the local communist newspaper and had regular encounters with injured workers, understood the rhetorical potential of this discourse in making an explicit demand for ‘solidarity’.

Chalal then enumerated the UFMG’s specific, targeted demands.<sup>77</sup> Of the mining companies, the UFMG demanded the ‘improvement of housing conditions by measure of social hygiene’, including the ‘installation of a second room especially for the preparation of food, the storing of wood, and of coal’, and the construction of showers at Champcaluson and Laval. This first set of demands targeted hygiene-related labour-

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> This bears certain echoes of the ‘moral economy of wartime sacrifice’ in the articulation of indigenous social demands in Algeria, see: Hassett, *Mobilizing Memory*, 97-104.

<sup>77</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, Chalal speech, 23 Feb. 1937.

milieu inequalities explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Of the trade union, the UFMG demanded that they campaign for the extension of family allowances to Algerians who had left children in North Africa, that the *caisse de secours* be made available for the burial costs of Algerians and the attribution of payments to orphans and widows, the right to vote for mining delegates, ‘representation within all organisations’, and the inclusion of Algerian demands in programmes of workers’ demands. Through this range of claims, the UFMG called for effective solidarity in practical, institutional, and programmatic terms. In short, they desired the same labour-milieu protections and social rights possessed by Europeans that the previous chapter of this thesis demonstrated sat at the centre of the Gard’s contemporary Popular Front politics. Of the administrative and judicial powers, the UFMG’s main claims pertained to questions of interpretation and representation. No Algerian should be ‘harassed, arrested, or judged’ if his cause was not ‘sufficiently heard, or exposed by the intermediary of a qualified interpreter’.<sup>78</sup>

It is notable that these demands were local and materially implementable, with any fundamental critiques of colonialism seen in earlier meetings now implied rather than explicit. While this ideological mediation perhaps indicates Chalal’s pragmatism, this broad range of material demands reveal an intimate knowledge of the balance of power during the Popular Front. Chalal’s critique of the position of Algerians in Gard society and their treatment by various local actors blended anti-racism and universalisms of various stripes, exploring the boundaries between the latter and particularism that continued to mark labour politics in latter twentieth-century France.<sup>79</sup>

### **Solidarity and Colonialism at the Congress**

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<sup>78</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 23 Feb. 1937.

<sup>79</sup> Gay and Perdoncin, ‘Français, immigrés’; Stangler, *La solidarité et ses limites*.

The UFMG's critique of colonial oppression, and the CGT's relative blindness to it, came to play a central role in the National Congress of the FNTSS-CGT that took place at the Grand Casino in Alès between 29 March and 2 April 1938. It was the first national congress since the Popular Front had come to power, and also the first to which colonial delegates from North Africa were formally invited: eleven delegates from Tunisia and Morocco – including three Europeans and eight '*indigènes*' – out of a total of 289 delegates.<sup>80</sup> The minutes of the Congress provide unusually rich insights into the interaction between local trade unionists and colonial representatives. At the opening of the event, several contributions came together to form a 'moral report' that took stock of the priorities of mining unionism, discussing the defence of social gains against employers' attacks, vigilance against fascism at home and support for the Spanish Republic abroad, and the rights accorded to European migrants by the Front government.

Despite the unprecedented presence of colonial delegates, the report omitted any mention of the colonies. It took an intervention from Mohamed Hamdi – representative of the mining region of Gafsa in Tunisia – on the seventeen Tunisian miners killed during the repression of a strike in 1937 to highlight this absence of colonial issues.<sup>81</sup> As well as blindness to events across the Mediterranean, Hamdi identified a lack of fraternity in the Gard, encouraging local delegates 'to look after their indigenous comrades of La Grand'Combe who live six or thirteen to a room, and to consider them as their brothers.' In doing so, Hamdi articulated a link between the colonial situation in North Africa and the specific conditions of North African workers in metropolitan France. Both an official

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<sup>80</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, *Congrès*.

<sup>81</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Hamdi, *Congrès*, 31 Mar. 1938. Hamdi's intervention came against the backdrop of tensions between the CGT and the Confédération générale des travailleurs tunisiens, see: Juliette Bessis, 'Le Mouvement ouvrier tunisien: de ses origines à l'indépendance' *Le Mouvement social* 89 (1974), 95-7.

colonial delegate and an unofficial spokesperson for Gard Algerians, Hamdi highlighted how housing – a claim of the UFMG – was inextricably linked to colonial status.

But how was Hamdi, a Tunisian delegate in town only for the duration of the Congress, aware of the housing conditions of Algerians in this metropolitan coalfield? Police surveillance of the Congress reveals no exchanges between the delegate and the UFMG. However, a note in *Le Cri du Gard* indicates that on the fringes of the Congress, an ‘assembly of Algerian workers’ took place, at which the communist trade unionist Arthur Vigne and ‘various delegates from Algeria and Tunisia’ spoke.<sup>82</sup> The brevity of the article makes it difficult to assign the assembly a concrete role in relation to Hamdi’s intervention. Nonetheless, it is a rare and precious example of a direct encounter between the Algerian workers of the coalfield who recognised the significance and potential of the Congress, colonial delegates, and local communist activists. While differences of analysis very likely persisted, it was through such encounters that the bumpy process of solidarity construction, constituted by the elaboration and recognition of specific grievances, occurred.

Hamdi’s intervention also highlighted complex dynamics between local trade unionists and Algerian workers. In response to Hamdi, Marius Mazaudier declared that the union had ‘always sought to defend’ the Algerians, especially given that their lack of ‘trade union education’ made them easier to ‘manoeuvre’ by the companies, for their ‘profit’.<sup>83</sup> This paternalistic discourse was representative of a didactic impulse that marked French trade unionism’s relations with migrants from the nineteenth century, that in this case muted the local historical experience of Algerian radicalism in January 1929.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 9 Apr. 1938.

<sup>83</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Mazaudier, *Congrès*, 31 Mar. 1938.

<sup>84</sup> Cabot, *À bas les Belges*, 65.

Mazaudier went on to emphasise the union's role in protesting against the 'conditions of hygiene' in which Algerians lived – probably referring to the newspaper articles highlighted in Chapter Three – which, he said, led to the creation of a hygiene commission investigation. While accepting Hamdi's criticism of the housing situation, Mazaudier insisted that the union had 'obtained a result', so that only three or four of the 'boxrooms' described by Hamdi remained at the time of the Congress, with most Algerians of La Grand'Combe living in better conditions.<sup>85</sup> He made no reference to the autonomous housing demands of the UFMG – local trade unionists were the principal actors. Here, fraught relations between the UFMG and the local CGT emerge over the attribution of agency.

But differences of analysis emerged between French trade unionists. Whereas Mazaudier saw inequality principally in terms of the relatively exploitability of Algerians by the companies and thus the weakening of the working class at large, Arthur Vigne emphasised that more action was needed in order to assure them of '*le bien-être qu'ils attendent* [the well-being they expect]'.<sup>86</sup> It is possible that what motivated this more compassionate frame of analysis was Vigne's interactions with the Algerians of the coalfield, possibly in his functions as legal aide for injured workers.<sup>87</sup> Whatever its motivation, Vigne's analysis points towards divergent, if not wholly contradictory, lines towards Algerians amongst local communists. His line of reasoning seems to reflect the emergence of a form of solidarity that was not purely instrumental, but worked towards a greater recognition of the physical sufferings of Algerians, while, like Mazaudier, never adopting a racial or colonial lens.

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<sup>85</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Mazaudier, *Congrès*, 31 Mar. 1938.

<sup>86</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Vigne, *Congrès*, 1 Apr. 1938.

<sup>87</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Benarab, Letter Vigne to Alès court, undated 1938.

The embodied plight of the Algerians of the Gard continued to impose itself in varied debates. First, Communist Dr Guy Hausser, director of the CGT's newly founded *Institut d'étude de l'hygiène et des maladies professionnelles*, delivered a report on occupational diseases that invoked the heightened health risks related to poor housing conditions.<sup>88</sup> 'We have heard about the case of the comrades who share a boxroom between seven or eight. Does this state of affairs not lead to tuberculosis?', he declared, before emphasising the 'duty of social solidarity' of the organised working class 'in the absence' of state aid.<sup>89</sup> This represents an important articulation of sensitivity to the specific vulnerability of colonial workers to disease, and an affirmation of the fundamental place of health protection in working-class migrant solidarity.

During the Congress's debate on foreign labourers, colonial delegates raised questions about the possibility of solidarity in a context of racial discrimination. Addressing the national union rather than local Gard actors, Amor Elhachmi of Redeyef (Tunisia) appealed that 'equality must reign among the workers, no matter their race or religion'. This was a radical proposal at the Congress for its invocation of race, echoing the UFMG's diagnosis of the previous year. In this vein, Elhachmi demanded the adoption of a resolution in favour of North Africans to show that 'working-class solidarity [was] not *un vain mot* [an empty word].'<sup>90</sup> While his first statement represented an ascription to an ideal of worker-universalism that actively sought to eliminate prejudices, Elhachmi insisted that this could only be achieved through particularist measures.

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<sup>88</sup> This young doctor pioneered a series of working-class hygienist initiatives before being deported under Vichy's anti-Jewish laws, leading to his extermination in Auschwitz in August 1942 at the age of thirty. See Joseph Bieder, 'Un militant de la lutte contre les maladies professionnelles: Guy Hausser (1912-1942)' *Histoire des Sciences médicales* 38.1 (2004), 57-64.

<sup>89</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Hausser, *Congrès*, 31 Mar. 1938.

<sup>90</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Elhachmi, *Congrès*, 1 Apr. 1938.

This intervention prompted exchanges about colonial workers in a discussion about foreign nationals that was not intended to include them. After Skroedski, the foreign workers' spokesperson, intervened on Polish and Czech social rights, Arthur Vigne insisted that among the Gard's large migrant population, a section was 'more odiously exploited' – the Algerians. By the end of the debate, Skroedski, whose own region of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais employed only a negligible proportion of North Africans (438 out of 150,000 workers in January 1938), came to recognise the colonial colour-line that existed in the mining industry in metropolitan France and North Africa, referring to how colonised subjects were 'even more badly treated' than the foreign nationals he represented.<sup>91</sup> It appears then that the interventions of colonial and local delegates contributed to a recognition of the weight of colonial relations in the inequalities of labour-milieu experience. Moreover, this recognition stemmed not from union paternalism, but from interactions between colonised subjects and French trade unionists.

In light of this apparent willingness to address hierarchy within the mining workforce, Emmanuel Layre raised a specific demand of the UFMG. 'Comrades, the children of our Algerian comrades do not receive allowances, and it's all to the profit of the Companies.'<sup>92</sup> According to the Landry law of 11 March 1932, family allowances were paid by employers to workers for children 'residing in France', and did not distinguish on the basis of nationality.<sup>93</sup> In Algeria, however, it was only 'national citizens', and not 'national subjects' (i.e. the indigenous majority from whom the Algerian workers in Alès were drawn) who had access to these allowances.<sup>94</sup> Family allowances thus represented a manifestation of material inequality along colonial lines. Crucially,

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<sup>91</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Skroedski, *Congrès*, 1 Apr. 1938; ANMT 40/AS/48, Report CCHF on North-African employment in coalmining, 8 Jan. 1938.

<sup>92</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, Layre, *Congrès*, 1 Apr. 1938.

<sup>93</sup> Izambert, 'La régularité du séjour des étrangers en France', 23.

<sup>94</sup> Antoine Math, 'Les allocations familiales et l'Algérie coloniale: à l'origine du FAS et son financement par les régimes de prestations familiales' *Recherches et Prévisions* 53 (1998), 37.

Layre kept his analysis within the framework of capital and labour, rather than incorporating the racial and colonial analyses of Chalal, Hamdi, or Elhachmi, or Vigne's 'well-being' perspective. Nevertheless, Layre referred to the local struggle of the UFMG, albeit without naming the organisation, stating that the Algerians had 'demanded to receive family allowances like the French.' This again demonstrates the productive tension that ran through the construction of solidarities, with Layre's fidelity to a strictly economic conception of class domination not precluding his decision to voice the demand articulated by the local Algerian population, in the context of a Congress that served as a moment of opening to different, more expansive forms of solidarity.

'Deeply moved' by the situation of their 'North African comrades', the FNTSS-CGT later that day unanimously voted a motion dedicated to campaigning for the 'extension of the law of 11 March 1932 to North African workers working in French mines.'<sup>95</sup> Interactions between North-African representatives, local trade unionists, and the Algerian community played an important role in the passage of this complaint from the local to the national level, and its integration into the programme of the national trade union.

Just two months later, the local mining CGT put this promise into effect. When a strike, described by *Le Cri du Gard* as a 'solidarity strike', was threatened against disciplinary measures taken against an Algerian and a French worker at Rochebelle, the local CGT proposed a *convention collective* on 8 June 1938.<sup>96</sup> Consisting of eight pages of demands, the twenty-sixth article of the union's proposal stipulated that child benefits be 'paid to all Algerian workers'.<sup>97</sup> Although it was not the main issue of the struggle, this

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<sup>95</sup> IHS-CGT 74/1/17, North African family allowances resolution, *Congrès*, 1 Apr. 1938

<sup>96</sup> *Le Cri du Gard*, 28 May 1938.

<sup>97</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Regional Miners' Federation *convention collective* proposition, 8 June 1938.

specific demand initiated by the UFMG was taken into account and considered important by local trade union representatives. On 15 June, the Sub-Prefect signed the agreement, an act which, according to him, would ‘remove the risk of a strike’.<sup>98</sup> The process by which the demand reached the convention remains unknown, but its presence testifies to a sensitivity and a practical solidarity on the part of local mining delegates. Perhaps the need for Algerian participation in the strike motivated the integration of their demand; unfortunately, the archives are silent on this subject. Moreover, it was the threat of a workers’ strike – a trade union mode of action that the UFMG itself could not use, but from which Algerians were far from being excluded – that brought this specific demand to fruition. The ultimate fate of this landmark act of programmatic solidarity remains unclear, and it seems wholly plausible that it was jettisoned with the downfall of the Popular Front and the mounting crisis of 1939.

### **Culture, Race, and Workers’ Power in 1939**

The year 1939 nonetheless saw the Algerian community continue to act with political autonomy. Throughout a series of conflicts, *cantiniers* continued to play a significant role in combatting racial discrimination. These conflicts continued to be absent from local press. Yet the nature of the claims, their articulation, and their reception by the local authorities and by trade unionists demonstrate the shifting contours of solidarity practice.

On 23 July 1939, a group of *cantiniers* based in La Grand’Combe addressed a petition denouncing the actions of the town’s new police officer to the Gard Prefect. Written by Mohamed Chalal and signed by twelve others, the petition accused the policeman Guy of applying a ‘draconian, even arbitrary and unprecedented’ measures by denying them permission to host performances from travelling Algerian musicians.<sup>99</sup> This

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<sup>98</sup> ADG 1/M/799, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 15 June 1938.

<sup>99</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Petition *cantiniers* to Prefect, 23 July 1939.

type of function constituted an important dimension of such *cantines* across the country, which represented spaces for Algerians to ‘group and to meet at their ease’, ‘better than anywhere else’. In the petition to the Prefect, Chalal emphasised its democratic legitimacy by declaring that it had been ‘unanimously voted by two thousand Algerians at the *salle municipale*’ that same afternoon.<sup>100</sup> With this vote justifying their representation of the colonial population of the Gard, the *cantiniers* emphasised the importance of their spaces for cultural activity and socialisation, that was met with political repression.

The petition hypothesised two reasons for Guy’s actions: either he acted by ‘unfavourable opinion’ towards one of the *cantiniers* – likely Chalal – or ‘the commissioner acts by hatred, by contempt for our race in general’.<sup>101</sup> The petitioners purported to speak on behalf of the Algerians of La Grand’Combe, ‘against this manoeuvre of racial politics’. Just as was the case for their treatment by the companies, the Algerian population’s treatment by policemen was motivated by racism. Furthermore, the petition postulated that Algerians were in fact ‘more French and more at home than all other foreigners’, whose events the commissioner allegedly did not disturb. Through this move, the *cantiniers* sought to expose the colonial colour line in operation at a very local scale, and, crucially, to contest it by claiming Frenchness. Moreover, the issue at stake went beyond the basic conditions of vital survival, and ventured into the realm of cultural life – a cultural life that was nonetheless closely tied to sociability and quality of life, and lived under the auspices of what the UFMG condemned as a local racial regime.

The *cantiniers* envisaged two possible solutions. The first was the ‘pure and simple application of laws’, meaning that musical events would be permitted. Somewhat more revealing was the second suggestion, which was to ban Algerian *cantiniers* from

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<sup>100</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Chalal to Prefect, 23 July 1939.

<sup>101</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Petition *cantiniers* to Prefect, 23 July 1939.

‘trading and living in the commune of La Grand’Combe’, ‘expelling’ them to ‘concentration camps’. This situation would be ‘preferable’ to the ‘shame’ imposed by the ‘reign’ of the commissioner who subjected them to ‘measures of exception and social injustice’. Chalal and the *cantiniers* thus made a direct and self-conscious comparison between the discrimination they faced at the hands of Guy and the repression of Spanish Republicans in Spain and in France.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, *cantiniers* played upon their fundamental socioeconomic role of housing and feeding Algerian migrants as well as mobilising recruitment networks. Their labour was essential to the continued extraction of coal. The threat to withdraw this labour, by leaving if discrimination did not end, bore echoes of strike activity.

In response, Guy sought to undermine the *cantiniers*’ claims. Deploying his knowledge of local legislation, the commissioner referred to municipal and departmental decrees from 1910 and 1930 regarding concerts held in ‘cafés, cabarets, and public houses, whoever the owners or managers are’.<sup>103</sup> To defend himself against charges that he discriminated against Algerians because of ‘hostility to their “race”’ – himself using inverted commas to indicate his contention of the claim – Guy suggested that he applied the law equally to all. Moreover, he asserted that the Algerian performers would be ‘better scammers than musicians or dancers’ given their unscrupulous extraction of ‘a considerable part’ of the Algerian population’s resources. He was thus merely applying the universal law, which served to protect the indigenous from their maleficent co-religionaries. After defending himself, Guy attacked the chief signatory’s legitimacy to represent the Algerian community:

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<sup>102</sup> It was not only in Paris that diversity created situations in which colonial subjects could compare their situation with that of other migrants. See Michael Goebel, “‘The Capital of Men without a Country’: Migrants and Anticolonialism in Interwar Paris” *American Historical Review* (2016), 1458.

<sup>103</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Grand’Combe police commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 31 Aug. 1939.

Is Chalal really qualified to speak in the name of all Algerians residing in La Grand'Combe? It seems that, while one speaks of worker comrades, one should adopt, at least in appearance, their lifestyle. Whereas Algerian subjects residing in La Grand'Combe are mostly underground workers, Chalal has found a profession less tiring that consists in doing virtually nothing and lounging around in fine clothes, which is a veritable insult to the misery of his compatriots, without work or resources. When one speaks of Muslim habits and customs, one shouldn't completely do away with them and live with an Italian concubine, which is hardly traditional.<sup>104</sup>

An emphasis was placed on the difference in class experience and in religious practice between Chalal and the Algerian workers he purported to represent.<sup>105</sup> This charge sought to undermine Chalal's legitimacy as a vector for the interests of the Algerian population. To support this point, Guy cited accusations – that he himself admitted were unproven – against Chalal by men who claimed to have been recruited by him in Algiers for a fee, before being left there in 1929. Guy underestimated the importance of the *cantine* for the political construction of affinities based on colonial relations of power, instead seeing solidarity as a pre-determined force based primarily on class experience.

But this was not merely a story of Algerians interacting with the police; trade unionists equally played a somewhat ambiguous role. Guy also revealed that the petition emerged following a CGT meeting on 25 July, at which Georges Vital, a local Communist union organiser, had 'committed to adding his signature'.<sup>106</sup> What this indicates is an at least sporadic and potentially systematic and institutionalised involvement and representation of Algerians in La Grand'Combe's trade union structures. However, Vital's name did not appear on the petition that the Prefect received. Guy interpreted in this either a lack of cooperation in the composition of the petition, or a refusal to sign by Vital due to the 'gross deformations of truth'.<sup>107</sup> The veracity of either interpretation is impossible

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Virginie Dutoya and Samuel Hayat, 'Prétendre représenter: La construction sociale de la représentation politique' *Revue française de science politique* 66.1 (2016), 7-25.

<sup>106</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Grand'Combe police commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 31 Aug. 1939.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

to ascertain based on available archival material. Other hypotheses are possible. While the union supported specific Algerian demands on issues related to ‘labour milieu’ conditions and legal rights, it was perhaps reluctant to venture onto the terrain of cultural life. In the context of the differences of analysis evident at the Congress of 1938, it is equally possible that Vital did not wish to put his name to a document that prioritised race over class as the root of oppression. Whatever the motivation, Vital’s absent signature suggests unresolved tensions in the union’s relationship with the Algerians’ particular oppression and demands.<sup>108</sup>

When war broke out, Chalal’s subversive influence came under further scrutiny. With war came the requisition of miners, with the memory of the occupation of the country’s principal coalfields during the First World War raising the stakes of production in the Gard.<sup>109</sup> On 19 September 1939, the sub-director at the Grand’Combe company, Esteve, reported to the Chief Engineer of Mines in Alès that twelve Algerian workers had deserted ‘without authorisation and after permission had been refused’.<sup>110</sup> An inquiry began immediately, and its conclusions were unsurprising. The Sub-Prefect did not hesitate to see in the departures a ‘campaign managed by an Algerian subject, Chalal’, whose deportation he had requested to no avail.<sup>111</sup> The *cantinier* was responsible for their breaking of the law of 11 July 1938 on the ‘general organisation of the Nation in times of war’, which saw each illegal departure risk up to five years in prison. Not only was this withdrawal of labour an illegal subversion of company and nation, the Sub-Prefect added that if the deserters made it home to Algeria, they may disrupt labour recruitment for

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<sup>108</sup> Pitti, ‘Grèves ouvrières versus luttes de l’immigration’.

<sup>109</sup> On the occupation, see Jean-François Eck and Pascal Raggi, ‘Une première expérience d’occupation allemande: les charbonnages du Nord et les mines de fer de Lorraine pendant la Grande guerre’ *Entreprises et Histoire* 62 (2011), 66-94. On the Great War in the Gard, see Sugier, ‘La Première Guerre mondiale’, 223-7.

<sup>110</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Esteve to Chief Engineer, 19 Sept. 1939.

<sup>111</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 21 Sept. 1939.

metropolitan industries. Chalal's influence over the population thus troubled industrial production in the metropole and labour flows into the military, making him a threat to the Nation.<sup>112</sup>

The alleged content of Chalal's influence drew heavily upon the material conditions of Algerian experience in the Gard coalfield. Following Chalal's arrest for 'defeatist remarks', the Sub-Prefect wrote to the Prefect that Chalal:

reportedly told his compatriots that it was in their interests to leave France to avoid being mobilised in the mining company, where they would be obliged to work for a *morceau de pain*. He reportedly added that the military power of Germany was such that France would be inundated with asphyxiating gases and that Algerians would be kept in our country as prisoners and would be forced to work.<sup>113</sup>

The 'reported' nature of this Intelligence indicates that the authorities were reliant upon second-hand information for translation. Assuming the report was accurate, by invoking a degree of hunger with which many Algerian miners were familiar, given their meagre wages and unstable employment, Chalal advanced a roundly embodied vision of the consequences of conflict. Furthermore, his warnings about asphyxiating gases must be read in the context of mining work as well as the older memory of the Great War. The threat of asphyxiation by gas was not merely a rhetorical abstraction, but a real everyday concern with which mineworkers had intimate, experiential knowledge.<sup>114</sup> Beyond rhetoric, the (alleged) selection of these details by Chalal drew parallels between the company's exploitation in peace and the threats of war.

The authorities undertook further investigations into the structures of political and social solidarity in the Algerian community. An Arabic-speaking agent was commissioned

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<sup>112</sup> On the requisitioned Algerian workers in France, see Danielle Beaujon, 'Controlling the Casbah: Policing North Africans in Marseille and Algiers, 1918-1954' (PhD Dissertation, New York University, 2021), 138-50.

<sup>113</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 25 Sept. 1939.

<sup>114</sup> See Ch.3 of this thesis. For example, *Le Cri du Gard* of 2 Feb 1935 indicated that La Grand'Combe's underground mineworkers were 'sullied by carbonic gas'.

from the Office du Maroc in Marseille to gain insights into its organisation.<sup>115</sup> This agent, who spent one day in La Grand'Combe, indicated that he had uncovered a network of influence around Chalal including Slimane Zizi, his 'right-hand man' and UFMG organiser in January 1937, and his Italian partner, Celina Cerutti, who on a daily basis gave 'commented readings of the newspapers' to the clients of the *cantine*, especially in Chalal's absence.<sup>116</sup> Such a revelation affirms the participation of a European woman in the autonomous Algerian movement locally.<sup>117</sup> While affirming Chalal's centrality, what this really shows is the importance of *cantines* as spaces of solidarity in which actors could assemble and discuss.

However, the anonymous investigator proposed a material reading of the situation, and accorded more agency to the departing Algerians than the local authorities had allowed. Their main concern was the pay reduction that would come with requisition, with the agent arguing that 'great efforts were not necessary to push them to depart: they were brought to it quite naturally.'<sup>118</sup> Those who did leave were thus not so much controlled by the *cantinier* as acting upon their own concerns, developed through material struggles and networks of information about the coming war. Whatever their motivations, the companies' and authorities' fear of losing crucial workers remained. The anonymous agent suggested that measures taken against Chalal, Cerutti, and Zizi 'would have an exemplary effect'.<sup>119</sup> While he was doubtful of their omnipotence, he saw utility in the punishment of actors who were significant in the community.

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<sup>115</sup> In a report to the Interior Ministry in early 1938, the Prefect stated that 'constant surveillance is exercised by the local police, but it is difficult to assure because they are spread out, speak Arabic, and do not mix with the population. In reality, we do not know what they think, or what happens among them', ADG 1/M/803, Report Prefect to Interior, 12 Feb. 1938.

<sup>116</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Office of the Moroccan protectorate to Prefect, 19 Oct. 1939.

<sup>117</sup> Neil MacMaster, 'The Role of European Women and the Question of Mixed Couples in the Algerian Nationalist Movement in France, circa 1918-1962' *French Historical Studies* 34.2 (2011), 365.

<sup>118</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Office of the Moroccan protectorate to Prefect, 19 Oct. 1939.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

Concerns linking Chalal's influence to a departure of Algerian labour from the Gard were instrumentalised by his lawyer, Quiminal, in a defence against the threat of deportation. The majority of the two-thousand-word text sought to emphasise Chalal's respectability among the town's population, to refute the accusation that his political interventions were 'anti-French', and to downplay his role in the UFMG.<sup>120</sup> However, the lawyer shifted tone to conclude with a thinly-veiled threat: Chalal's disappearance would have 'a very untoward effect on the worried spirits of the North-African workers of his *pays d'adoption*, La Grand'Combe'.<sup>121</sup> After denying Chalal's omnipotence and subversiveness, Quiminal played upon the authorities' fears of unrest amongst Algerian workers in a critical period for the French war economy.

Although following this episode it was reported that Chalal 'adopted a more prudent attitude', the Algerian workforce continued to cause the company and state problems.<sup>122</sup> By 6 March 1940, Grand'Combe directors worried about their Algerian workforce who were used to 'going to Algeria periodically to see their families who took care of their business', with them now 'stuck in La Grand'Combe'. This had troubling effects: 'Their state of mind no longer being the same as before, this contributes to the lowering of their productivity.'<sup>123</sup> In an attempt to put an end to the 'continual departure' of Algerians either to Paris or elsewhere, the Chief Engineer of Mines of Alès requisitioned the 1,500 who worked at La Grand'Combe on 21 March 1940.<sup>124</sup> Contesting the measure that they saw as an unjustified punishment that would see them lose wages, 300 Algerians stopped work for a day. Also cited among their complaints were the fact that they 'were forced to work on Easter Monday despite initially being promised a day

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<sup>120</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Quiminal to Prefect, 20 Dec. 1939.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report Grand'Combe police commissioner to Sub-Prefect, 3 Mar. 1940.

<sup>123</sup> ANMT 40/AQ/129, Letter Grand'Combe director to CCHF, 6 Mar. 1940.

<sup>124</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Report gendarme Ribes, 21 Mar. 1940.

off' and the differential treatment between them and the Spanish elements of the workforce, who were not requisitioned.<sup>125</sup> Chalal disappeared from the authorities' narrative about subversive activity. Instead, the workers themselves were accorded somewhat more autonomy, even if they were adjudged to have misunderstood the meaning of requisition. What emerges is a first example of a strike uniquely undertaken by Algerians, in opposition to a measure that affected them in a differential manner, challenging the colonial colour-line. It appears that this action was autonomous. The French communists who had offered increasing but unstable solidarity to Algerian causes had ceased to be an effective actor in the coalfield. In part this prompted them to act autonomously. When institutional solidarity melted away in the wake of war, autonomous community solidarities, perhaps rooted in the politics of the UFMG and the *cantines*, led the Algerians to engage in strikes.

Solidarity with regard to internationally significant issues was not a fixed concept under the Popular Front. Rather, it was a relational notion, constituted by an assortment of social and political actions and beliefs that sought to challenge oppressions in partial and shifting ways. The 'Spain' model present in the pages of *Le Cri du Gard* represents an almost ideal picture of Communist anti-fascist solidarity that presented local activism as part of an international struggle against oppression. Alongside this discourse, consensual solidarity was forged by the participation of broad sections of the community, and its rooting in local labour politics of difference, and the identities specific to mining and migration. By contrast, the 'Algerian' model shows the difficulties of solidarity in a context where the articulation of class intersected with race and colonialism. These

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<sup>125</sup> ADG 1/M/803, Letter Prefect to Interior, Labour, Public Works, 21 Mar. 1940.

tensions were rendered explicit by the UFMG's autonomous mobilisation, and by North African delegates at the National Congress who combined to challenge racialised structures and exclusive practices of solidarity.

There was a marked difference between the mass-based community movement which developed around support for the Spanish republican cause (and the subsequent waves of refugees), and the much more hesitant response to the campaigns of the UFMG. Colonial attitudes and national political priorities interacted with local dynamics of Popular Front construction, from which Algerians were largely absent, to shape this colour line. This demonstrates how the construction of solidarity does not happen on its own, is never 'given', but is rooted in a complex combination of structural features and contingency. The divergence between the extent and breadth of community participation in raising funds for Spain and the much more isolated actions of the UFMG indicate that ambiguous responses towards the specific demands of Algerians in the Gard went beyond the ideological hesitations of the PCF. Indeed, it was this racialisation of solidarity that Mohamed Chalal, Mohamed Hamdi, and Elhachmi denounced in their appeals to trade unionists.

But this is not a simple, binary story of exclusion of Algerians and wholehearted support of Spaniards. Solidarity was a complex, multi-actor process of co-construction that was shaped as much by the recent history of the local construction of the Popular Front as it was by the supplications and appeals by supporters of the Spanish Republic, and the UFMG. Both the Spanish and Algerian campaigns mobilised solidarity structures and sentiments that had emerged locally around the physical dangers posed to the mineworking body. In this respect, it is significant that Emmanuel Layre and Mohamed Chalal, separately, both sought to make links between the solidarities specific to mining and the wider Spanish and Algerian causes. Moreover, in both cases, community politics

developed outside the PCF's direct influence to control meanings of solidarity that went beyond communist institutional domination. In both cases, a wide range of actors espoused an action-focused preoccupation with material and effective solidarity that went beyond rhetoric and discourse: solidarity, they declared, could not be an 'empty word'. The actions of local national communities, the spaces of the Polish church and the Algerian *cantine*, as well as broader identifications based on origin or alterity did not reject the solidarities of class, but were constitutive of more expansive class solidarities. This has important implications for the questions raised in Laure Pitti's landmark article on immigrant struggles and workers' strikes in 1970s France.<sup>126</sup> While police sought to draw attention to difference, no strict dichotomy between class and immigrant or national identities necessarily existed in the minds of actors in the late 1930s. Solidarity was a concept wrought with hierarchy, in terms of race and national priorities. Yet, these hierarchies were not fixed. Instead, they evolved in response to the actions of a broad range of actors on different scales.

It is useful to return to Arthur Vigne to grasp the interaction between the two sections of this chapter. Just a month after delivering a solidarity wagon to the people of Jaén as an official delegate and secretary of the committee for helping Spain, Vigne intervened in the debate at the National Congress to recognise that Algerians were 'more odiously exploited' than all other sections of the workforce, and to encourage local trade unionists and the national leadership to achieve for Algerians in the metropole the 'well-being that they expect'. This was a radical development. It broke from norms that sought to mute the colonial dimensions of the differential oppression of Algerians and that framed this oppression only in terms of its relevance for the weakening or strengthening of the class struggle. Vigne's position was likely also shaped by his more ordinary union

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<sup>126</sup> Pitti, 'Grèves ouvrières versus luttes de l'immigration'.

role in supporting migrant workers' access to social rights.<sup>127</sup> It is impossible to say how these experiences influenced Vigne's politics. Nonetheless, their apparent interaction suggests that practices of solidarity with Republican Spain and with the Gard's Algerians may have mutually reinforced each other, rather than merely exemplifying a colonial colour line.

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<sup>127</sup> ADG 7/U/8/19, Accident Benarab, Letter Vigne to Alès court, undated 1938.

## **Conclusion. Sensitive Solidarity through the Second World War and Beyond**

History did not, of course, end with the requisitioning of the Algerian workers of Grand'Combe. Their withdrawal of labour was, however, the last such incident which occurred in the Gard under the Third Republic, presaging a new era in which the Vichy regime occupied a more emphatic role in the organisation of production and life. With the outlawing of the PCF, the subsequent *drôle de guerre*, and the eventual establishment of the new regime in July 1940, a new age of state repression arrived in the coalfield.<sup>1</sup> As the authorities interned Communist figures Arthur Vigne, Isidore Michel, and Georges Vital, what had become a publicly visible and imposing force for the articulation of solidarity and contestation went underground.<sup>2</sup> While this subdued the pre-war Popular Front dynamics, movements of contestation continued throughout the Vichy years that can be interpreted through the lens of solidarity in the labour milieu as it had developed over the preceding decades.

Punctual moments of labour unrest tested the limits of the new regime of repression. In the wake of the famed 'patriotic strike' of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais in early June 1941, an incident occurred at Le Martinet.<sup>3</sup> Since a fire in a neighbouring pit had obstructed underground tunnels, teams working at Feljas were obliged to descend at another entrance and to walk two kilometres through underground tunnels to their place of work. A tacit agreement existed between *chef de poste* Gaston Molle and his team that workers could make this journey by using the automatic rail system when empty coal

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<sup>1</sup> On these processes in the Gard, see: Robert Zaretsky, *Nîmes at War: Religion, Politics, and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938-1944* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Roussel, 'La grève de Mars 1942 dans le Gard' *Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire sociale minière* 2 (1993), 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Étienne Dejonghe, 'Chronique de la grève des mineurs du Nord/Pas-de-Calais (27 mai – 6 juin 1941)' *Revue du Nord* 69 (1987), 323-45.

wagons were available. On 12 June, however, Molle arbitrarily denied them this privilege, taking issue with what he perceived as laziness and poor discipline when he overheard the workers telling each other not to rush. This scene led to the prosecution of eight French workers, and the recommendation by the mining engineers charged with the investigation to identify foreigners involved 'whose past [was] sufficiently loaded that they may also be condemned.'<sup>4</sup> This somewhat disproportionate response was no doubt influenced by events in the NPDC. However, it also indicates how practices of collective self-protection against oppressive labour discipline continued to mark underground relations.

Resistance in the coalfield was subsequently linked more explicitly to the mining labour milieu. On 11 March 1942, Communist tracts appeared in the washrooms at Grand'Combe making a series of claims indicative of a moral economic understanding of coalfield justice. Alongside a call for a 50% increase in wages, the tracts demanded bread and wine, milk for the children, clothes and shoes, and 'good soap', as well as overtly political measures, including elected delegates, a forty-hour working week, and the liberation of imprisoned trade unionists.<sup>5</sup> While the material demands reflected a moral economy of vital minima standards of life, the more political demands related to the rights of workers to protect themselves against excessive exigences. The following day, 1,040 workers including 326 foreigners were absent from Grand'Combe, prompting the strike to spread to other locations. The repression that met this action was harsh, with sixty-nine arrests, resulting in four deportations to Algeria.<sup>6</sup>

As well as the washrooms, propaganda work was carried out in the camps where Algerians lived. Police investigations, for example, identified Asissa Belkadi of Bougaa,

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<sup>4</sup> ADG 1/W/655, Report mining engineers Marcy, Riffaud, Damian on Feljas, 15 June 1941.

<sup>5</sup> Roussel, 'La grève de Mars 1942', 14-18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

Constantine residing at no.52, rue des Poilus as a ‘very dangerous’ propagandist ‘in favour of the extremist parties’, in a way that was congruent with the dynamics of community mobilisation that had emerged across the inter-war years.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, newly arrived activists also generated new political encounters. For example, Remiggio Pina, a Spanish Civil War refugee from La Unión, was singled out by the surveillance personnel as one of the ‘instigators’ of the strike. However, unlike what might have been expected from interwar communist forms of activism structured around language groups, Pina’s most dangerous activity was reported not to be among the Spanish, but in the Algerian camps. There, he had been spotted ‘making speeches amongst the indigenou’, who claimed not to have understood him when interviewed by the police.<sup>8</sup> The nature of this activism remains unclear, but this encounter indicates that newly arrived Spanish refugees sought to accelerate the process of solidarity construction.

In this way, the stuttering relationship between Algerian mobilisation and broader working-class action endured. In early 1942, the Algerian population of Alès had found itself again demanding access to family allowances. On 17 February, the Labour Ministry received a letter from ‘Ourahmoune Mohamed demanding the benefit of family allowances for children residing in Algeria’ for the colonial workers of the Gard.<sup>9</sup> Ourhamoune’s handwritten script is reminiscent of the critiques of treatment after workplace injuries by injured Algerians explored in Chapter Two of this thesis. The letter emphasised that the Algerian workers had ‘left their country’ to produce for France, and denounced the injustice of denying them family allowances while other workers were able to claim the benefit.<sup>10</sup> While this letter reflected the continued pertinence of trans-

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<sup>7</sup> ADG 1/W/655, Surveillance report Belkadi, 16 Mar. 1942.

<sup>8</sup> ADG 1/W/655, Surveillance report Pina, 16 Mar. 1942.

<sup>9</sup> AN F/22/1516, Letter Labour Ministry to Directory of Social Insurance on Ourahmoune letter, 17 Feb. 1942.

<sup>10</sup> AN F/22/1516, Letter Ourhamoune to Labour Ministry, undated.

Mediterranean family issues to labour-milieu inequalities, it also indicated the disjointed nature of solidarity between Algerian miners and the other sections of the mining community. The fact that their demand for family allowances was made one month prior to the March strike yet did not feature in the wider demands made during the strike is indicative of how solidarity faltered under the duress of wartime discipline.

The question of migration, solidarity, and the labour milieu in the period of nationalisation following the liberation, and the subsequent labour unrest of 1947-48, merits its own study.<sup>11</sup> It is worth outlining here how the trade-union movement during the post-war years thought through, interacted with, and strategized around the situation of diversity. Issues specific to migrants were accorded institutional importance in the early post-war period. In 1945, a CGT Gard Miners' Federation Congress heard reports on how migrants were affected by issues of silicosis, access to maternity services, and family allowances in particular ways. Alongside these programmatic questions, emotive speeches were made, declaring that 'many [migrants] have paid a heavy price for the mortal wounds inflicted in the entrails of the earth, do they not have the worst working conditions and the lowest paid jobs of all?'<sup>12</sup> Insisting upon the disproportionate, multidimensional threats to foreigners' lives in the labour milieu, these words reflected the solidarity politics constructed during the Popular Front.

Similarly, following mass participation by foreign workers in the strikes of 1947-48, the CGT's national mining federation called for 'either sub-sections or language groups' of migrant workers to be re-established to improve the effectiveness of organising.<sup>13</sup> Another aspect that re-emerged was the need for French activists to 'rid

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<sup>11</sup> They are touched upon in Marion Fontaine and Xavier Vigna, 'La grève des mineurs de l'automne 1948 en France' *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire* 121 (2014), 21-34.

<sup>12</sup> Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis (ADSSD) 455/J/471, MOI Congress Gard, 1945 undated.

<sup>13</sup> ADSSD 455/J/475, FNTSS-CGT National Congress, undated 1949.

themselves of prejudices that make them under-estimate the particular demands of the immigrant comrades.’ Indeed, the trade unionists themselves emphasised the role played by migrants in various wartime struggles as justification for the need to accept such demands. They were ‘our immigrant comrades who with us waged a struggle against the rapacious mining companies, the Nazi occupier, and to win the coal battle, and at present struggle for the betterment of our living conditions.’<sup>14</sup> While the references to resistance and the *bataille du charbon* may have resonated most with the majority of miners based in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the reference to class struggle against the mining companies may have prompted Gard delegates present to think back to the memory of January 1929.<sup>15</sup> While Noiriel suggests that it was the War that brought about integration of migrants into the French labour movement, it is important to highlight that the CGT emphasised interwar struggles against coal companies.<sup>16</sup>

As during previous decades, the experience of colonial workers from Algeria posed specific political problems. In June 1946, French union members including Arthur Vigne participated in a discussion on the North African workforce in the Gard, raising the familiar issues of wages, family allowances, housing, *cantines*, working conditions, and propaganda. The following month, Georges Roussel submitted a brief report on those of Molières-sur-Cèze, noting their ‘defective’ living conditions but also stating that few of them were ‘good workers’.<sup>17</sup> This brevity in the treatment of Algerians progressed in ways that mirrored the interwar years.

But this attitude did not preclude an eventual and more serious engagement with Algerian issues. On 29 April 1951, Tamaris hosted more than 150 delegates (100 North

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Hanna Diamond, ‘Miners, Masculinity and the ‘Bataille du Charbon’ in France 1944-1948’ *Modern and Contemporary France* 19.1 (2011), 69-84.

<sup>16</sup> Noiriel, *Longwy*, 315.

<sup>17</sup> ADSSD 455/J/472, Georges Roussel Algerians report, 1 Jul. 1946.

African and 50 ‘metropolitan’) from across the coalfield at the Departmental North African Conference.<sup>18</sup> The minutes of the meeting first denounced the repression operated by the French state in North Africa, calling for the release of political prisoners in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.<sup>19</sup> Following this anti-imperialist appeal – which was itself an advance on the attitudes of the late 1930s – the delegates declared that they considered that ‘the particular claims of the North Africans are in the interest of all’, and for this reason, after expressing a series of universal claims around retirement and equal wages, enumerated a detailed list of ‘particular claims’. Some claims advocated extending social rights including family allowances to Algerians; others concerned specific labour rights for Algerians such as paid leave for Muslim holidays, an especially lengthened vacation system to allow them to return to Algeria once per year, with guaranteed employment on their return to the Gard; and others still related to living conditions, such as demands for the construction of new lodgings. Given that the speakers were ‘conscious now more than ever that the unity of workers is the essential condition of working-class victory’, the conference voted to prioritise North African demands to bring about ‘the realisation of a more fraternal union of the workers of the metropole and North Africa.’ The significance of these words cannot be understated. In order to achieve working-class unity and to advance the aims of the entire class, an official body of the communist union in the Gard elected to focus upon the sectional needs of the Algerians. But while the will to facilitate Algerian activism within the union was undeniable, the relatively weak participation levels of French workers may nuance the optimism here.

Indeed, these well-meaning meetings did not necessarily lead to action. A report on this work discussed at the Regional Congress of the Miners’ CGT in October 1951

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<sup>18</sup> ADSSD 455/J/476, Letter Gard CGT to Roussel, 11 Apr. 1951.

<sup>19</sup> ADSSD 455/J/476, Minutes of Departmental North African Conference, 29 Apr. 1951.

complained that such work among migrant groups was often accomplished by only a small number of French members, and that, although discussions took place, motions often went unimplemented.<sup>20</sup> In July 1953, Francini wrote to local organisers giving instructions on how to ensure that ‘the North African workers feel the warm friendship of their brothers of the metropole’, which involved the effective spreading of information about meetings, securing the participation of French union members, and elaborating *cahiers de doléances* with the Algerians, all with the goal of encouraging North African participation in CGT activities.<sup>21</sup> During national pension strikes in August 1953, Roussel of Molières-sur-Cèze sought to experiment with the articulation of general and particular demands.<sup>22</sup> Alongside the national-level demands and those specific to mining, a set of local claims articulated sensitivity to Algerian specificity. For example, Roussel demanded that a North African should accompany mining delegates on all visits and that new housing should be built to accommodate their families.<sup>23</sup> The first of these demands proposed a practical solution to the linguistic problems that may have threatened the safety of Algerians, and bears echoes of the demands for the sacking of the Polish interpreters at Tréllys in February 1936. The second indicates that the early 1950s saw a significant shift for the Algerian population of the Gard when families began to arrive.

From the early 1950s, the long process of mine closures took hold. Deindustrialisation brought fundamental changes to the labour milieu, which were never contested in a national strike on the same scale as the 1984/5 miners’ strike of Britain.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the miners who still worked at Ladrecht in Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues at

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<sup>20</sup> ADSSD 455/J/476, Regional Congress of Federation, 27-28 Oct. 1951.

<sup>21</sup> ADSSD 455/J/475, Francini letter to organisers, 28 July 1953.

<sup>22</sup> See Michel Pigenet, ‘Les grèves d’août 1953’ in Michel Pigenet and Danielle Tartakowsky, *Histoire des mouvements sociaux en France: De 1814 à nos jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), 438-45.

<sup>23</sup> ADSSD 455/J/475, Molières-sur-Cèze claims package, 12-27 Aug. 1953.

<sup>24</sup> Notwithstanding 1963, see Achille Blondeau, 1963. *Quand toute la mine se lève* (Paris: Messidor, 1991). On Britain, Robert Gildea, *Backbone of the nation: mining communities and the great strike of 1984-85* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

the turn of the 1980s rebelled against a closure plan. Their struggle lasted more than a year and involved a range of forms of radical action, including occupations of administration property and the kidnapping of a director, as well as drawing upon and cultivating Occitan identity.<sup>25</sup> Following the strike, a study conducted by Françoise Gardes-Madray and Jacques Bres sought to give voice to the community of strikers and their families, and revealed the important involvement of migrants and their descendants. Akli, an Algerian who had been on sick leave when the strike erupted and contributed some of his benefits to the strike fund, reflected upon the role of colonialism in differential experiences of integration. In a section on the specific position of alterity occupied by Algerians, Akli reported being ‘proud of [his] race’, while the Spanish, Italians, and Yugoslavs were no longer really ‘from’ anywhere.<sup>26</sup> His words serve as testimony to the long-lasting effects of coloniality on the experience of migration.

Unlike some of the other deindustrialised regions of France or indeed other parts of the former Midi Rouge, the Alès coalfield has not experienced the same rise of the extreme right. Although the fourth and fifth circumscriptions of the Gard into which the former coalfield is divided elected extreme-right deputies at the 2024 legislative elections, several significant former pit towns – Le Martinet, Cendras, Saint-Martin-de-Valgalgues – remain bastions of the Left. Prior to the election, *Mediapart* described La Grand’Combe as resembling ‘on paper many other deindustrialised rural towns’ that had turned to the Rassemblement National, with its 40% unemployment rate and population loss. Despite these material conditions, the reporter interviews several local inhabitants – including Annie Arcangioli, president of dance troupe *Les Joyeux mineurs* and daughter of an Italian

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<sup>25</sup> On the strike, see Maxime Lacroix, ‘Ladrecht, ou le crépuscule de la rebelle cévenole (Destival, mai 1980-juin 1981)’ (Masters Thesis, Université d’Avignon, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Françoise Gardes-Madray and Jacques Bres, *Parole ouvrière: autour de Ladrecht* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1986).

anarchist who had arrived in the interwar years – who highlight the local spirit of solidarity, rooted in La Grand’Combe’s history as a *terre d’accueil* and of Cévenol resistance.<sup>27</sup> Following the article’s publication, 72% of the town voted for the Nouveau Front Populaire candidate at the second round of the legislative election.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Alès *ville* voted by 50.71% for the far-right candidate.<sup>29</sup> As this thesis has shown, the politics of the Alès coalfield have never been wholly determined by structural factors. In the twentieth century, its people were engaged in a process of negotiation, survival, and contestation to forge lasting solidarities.

### **Experience, Sensitive Solidarities, and the Labour Milieu**

The findings of this thesis have broader implications for social histories of migration and labour in interwar France and for processes of solidarity more broadly. The analysis here suggests the hitherto underappreciated importance of sensitive solidarities with a sensory dimension to the experience of extraction and to labour politics in situations of diversity and hierarchy. First cousins but not quite cognates in the English language, sensory and sensitive provide a way for linking the first half of this thesis that presented an environmentally conscious history of hierarchy and solidarity in the labour milieu, and the second half that probed a political history of solidarity construction. Situated, embodied, and thus sensory experiences of the labour milieu were responded to by reflective and thinking actors in everyday life and political conflict. By adopting this perspective, the thesis has unpacked the ensemble of types of action that constituted a

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<sup>27</sup> Cécile Hautefeuille, ‘La Grand-Combe, « ville maudite et à l’abandon », résiste pourtant au RN’ *Mediapart*, 27 Jun. 2024, accessed 1 Sept. 2024, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/270624/la-grand-combe-ville-maudite-et-l-abandon-resiste-pourtant-au-rn>.

<sup>28</sup> Publication des candidatures et des résultats aux élections, Législatives 2024, Résultats tour 2, La Grand’Combe. Accessed 4 Sept. 2024, [https://www.resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/legislatives2024/ensemble\\_geographique/76/30/3005/30132/index.html](https://www.resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/legislatives2024/ensemble_geographique/76/30/3005/30132/index.html).

<sup>29</sup> Publication des candidatures et des résultats aux élections, Législatives 2024, Résultats tour 2, Alès. Accessed 5 Sept. 2024, [https://www.resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/legislatives2024/ensemble\\_geographique/76/30/3004/30007/index.html](https://www.resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/legislatives2024/ensemble_geographique/76/30/3004/30007/index.html).

*'territoire solidaire'*, ranging from workplace interactions in the face of danger, courtroom corroboration, coal disobedience, and the collective contestation of pollution to the creation of support networks and political structures and programmes – some 'universal' and some 'particular' – that recognised and sought to negotiate difference as a means to advance the class struggle.<sup>30</sup>

My exploration of the sensitive and sensory dimensions of solidarity has implications for social histories of working-class experience and for political histories of immigration. In the first instance, this thesis has shown how capitalist extraction of coal from the earth was differentially experienced depending on class, nationality, race, and gender.<sup>31</sup> If some dimensions were 'universal', many 'particularities' existed in the sensorial experience in and beyond the pits. Furthermore, these multifaceted experiences of the labour milieu were not merely factors that demonstrated difference and social hierarchies. Exploring the processes by which they were lived sheds light upon the contingencies and agencies of working-class existence. The shared experiences of toxic, exigent, and diverse workplaces, the threat of injury and the denial of justice, insufficient access to coal, and polluted built and natural environments, forged relations between people from different places, who were aware of, negotiated, and at times struggled against these environmentally mediated factors of exploitation. While these social, mechanical, and environmental conditions presented opportunities in which solidarity could make sense, hierarchies and other interests could guide people's actions, as was the case with Larbi Ouhnia's witnesses in Chapter Two. The tension between convergent and divergent experiences, and between the determinism of social, economic, and

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<sup>30</sup> This provides a response to the question Vigna poses about the construction of 'solidaristic territories' in contexts of 'variegation'. See: Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France*, 117.

<sup>31</sup> This shows the value of folding in an ecological dimension to understandings of class experience. See Barca, 'Sur l'écologie', 23-40; Greene, 'Rethinking the Boundaries', 100.

environmental processes and human agency are key to understanding the contingent, co-constructed social history of solidarity.

By insisting on the lived experience of labour, this thesis hopes to shift the focus of social histories of migration in France away from the state, and to locate them within a new history of twentieth-century capitalism.<sup>32</sup> Rather than the administrative and repressive practices of the state determining the foreigner's experience of the Third Republic, I insist on the necessity to understand that migrants lived in, interacted through, negotiated, and contested differentially experienced working environments. Experiences of precarity and exposure in the Gard did not flow naturally from the fact of extraction, but were shaped by the implementation of rationalisation and by a set of local actors – company directors, French supervisors, engineers, doctors, lawyers, landlords, and mine guards – who in demanding discipline and production weighed just as heavily on migrants' lives as the forces of the state. Taking this 'embodied approach', that is sensitive to sensory experiences, brings the capitalist nature of interwar French industry to the centre of understandings of migration and labour.<sup>33</sup> This analysis suggests the necessity of considering the materially and environmentally mediated facets of the complex, multi-layered process of social and political cohabitation within conditions of administrative Othering and economic exploitation.

Building on this approach, the thesis proposes a different reading of the interaction between migrants and politics in twentieth-century France. While an overarching worker-universalism that emphasised proletarian sameness in its discourse and demands remained a potent force, I have shown how during the 1930s an incomplete but real

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<sup>32</sup> As noted in the introduction, this builds upon moves in this direction, including Barton, *Reproductive Citizens* and Del Giudice, 'Foreign workers in the French labour courts'. On the history of capitalism as labour history, see: Bryan D. Palmer, "'Mind Forg'd Manacles" and Recent Pathways to "New" Labor Histories', *International Review of Social History* 62 (2017), 279-303.

<sup>33</sup> Armiero and Tucker, *Environmental History of Modern Migrations*.

process of mutual solidarity emerged that placed sensitivity to difference at the centre of its praxis and its programmes. This revelation demonstrates that a practical and productive probing of the relationship between solidarity, universalism, and particularism in French trade-union politics significantly pre-dated the contexts analysed by Vincent Gay and Anton Perdoncin in the post-1945 CGT or by Laure Blévis, Eric Pezet and Cole Stangler in the CFDT.<sup>34</sup> In turn, this might prompt historians to engage in more detailed studies that might render more complex the historiography's insistence upon the frail and shallow state of interwar migrant-French solidarity.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, rather than responding to union directives from Paris, this process of solidarity construction was specific to the Gard in its dynamics, rhythms, and character. This was demonstrated by the way that the radical strike of January 1929 shaped local union mobilisation, and by the role played by migrants in opposition to the embodied threats posed by mining during the rise of the Popular Front. For long periods, the true work of solidarity was done in quotidian interactions or in covert activity, either within the boundaries of the law, as was the case with workplace accident aid, or beyond them as was the case with coal disobedience or washerwomen's anti-pollution demands. In this context, the labour insubordination of January 1929 represented an important and all-too-forgotten leap forward for visions of labour solidarity as a self-conscious practice of 'differential unity'.<sup>36</sup> During those cold weeks, diverse groups of communist activists, women, European and colonial migrants radically opposed their collective oppression, developing practices and programmatic demands that recognised hierarchies. This was a key moment for the translation of some of the forms of quotidian cooperation and

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<sup>34</sup> Gay and Perdoncin, 'Français et immigrants'; Blévis and Pezet, 'CFTC/CFDT Attitudes towards Immigration'; Stangler, *La solidarité et ses limites*.

<sup>35</sup> This view has predominated since the 1980s. See Schor, *L'Opinion française*, 274. Examples of strikes involving migrants are plentiful in interwar Paris, but are yet to receive close attention, see Meriggi, *Entre fraternité et xénophobie*, Ch.1.

<sup>36</sup> Wilder, 'Solidarity', 259.

interaction into more ambitious projects of change, which had the effect of locating European migrants at the centre of the Gard Popular Front's institutions of labour politics, while the place of colonial workers and women remained more ambiguous.

But this process of solidarity construction was not solely inward looking. The impact of locally-rooted support for Republican Spain fostered practical and ideational links between local experiences of the labour milieu and the global system of capitalism and fascism. At the same time, the Algerian mining population's struggle and its reception exemplified the complex and dynamic nature of solidarity in mid-century France. The relationship between the Algerian workers and the wider mining community was hampered on both sides by their status as colonial subjects, together with differences of language, culture, and political tradition, as well as by the specific positions that the Algerian workers occupied within the mining industry. However, despite these differences, the actions of the Algerian miners and the echo they received from other sections of the local population demonstrated how sensitivity to differential oppression was one way in which practices of solidarity could and did develop across the inter-war years. However, despite the undeniable progress made by the UMFG, the fact that French communists were so reluctant to take up colonial or racial analyses demonstrates the ideological fissures that perdured and limited solidarity. Be that as it may, this thesis should prompt historians of colonial workers in interwar France to consider that similar dynamics may have been in operation in, for example, the mines of Saint-Étienne.<sup>37</sup> More broadly, scholars may consider how internationalist movements have sought, to greater

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<sup>37</sup> Thereby expanding on Burdy's initial overview of the 'isolated' Algerian community in the Soleil neighbourhood. See: Jean-Paul Burdy, *Le Soleil noir: un quartier de Saint-Étienne* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1989), 179-201.

or lesser effect, to mobilise solidarity by articulating a rooted continuity in understandings of oppression between local dynamics and issues of global fascism or imperialism.

This prior history also has consequences for understanding conflicts and mobilisations during the era of the Popular Front. Rather than the Front ordaining migrant integration into the French working class, these marginalised people had played an active part in the local construction of the Front from 1933.<sup>38</sup> This suggests the need for studies of the Popular Front that analyse the hierarchies and solidarities of the labour milieu in other contexts to arrive at a more socially grounded understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the experience of the Front in the Gard was actively linked to moral economies that were mediated through the environment, a process most evident during the strike at Trélys in February 1936. Recognition of this environmental dimension suggests the potential of a more complex, socio-environmental history of the Popular Front. Such a project might recognise the labour dynamics of the Popular Front era, while extending the investigation to environmental questions of resource management, migration, hygienism and health, colonialism, and agricultural relations.<sup>39</sup>

In methodological terms, this thesis has proposed to read migration, mining, experience, and solidarity through the lens of the 'labour milieu'. As well as casting an ecological eye on the productive workplace, the 'labour milieu' approach encompasses a broader spatial and conceptual understanding of labour, including reproductive inputs and the management of desired and undesired consequences of extraction. This means seeing mining as a more total socio-environmental process through which hierarchies of experience were mediated. Yet, while useful for explaining historical developments in a

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<sup>38</sup> Cabot, *La gauche et les migrations*, 226.

<sup>39</sup> While 'the environment' was not an object of political contention as it would become in the 1980s, such a project may learn from a recent volume on the Mitterrand years. See Renaud Bécot and Christophe Bonneuil, 'Chantiers pour une histoire environnementale des années Mitterrand' *20 et 21. Revue d'histoire* 159.3 (2023), 3-28.

specific territory, the focus on the labour milieu also allows for reflection on migration, environment, and social history in ways that are not bounded by place. For instance, the workplace injuries, illnesses, or deaths suffered by migrant men in the Gard had impacts on family and kinship networks in Algerian, Polish, or Czechoslovak villages. While previously remittances tied them to the Gard, occupational disease, serious injury, or death showed how they too suffered from the embodied precarities of extraction, while bringing about new interactions with the French social state or proletarian solidarity. Future studies of migration during this period may benefit from exploring how the lens of workplace accidents, illnesses, and death within the mining industry facilitates a ‘denaturalized’, global analysis of the structural, embodied fragilities of the ‘injury impoverished’ under capitalism.<sup>40</sup> Such an undertaking would serve to bring a consciousness of the interplay between economic processes, environments, and workers’ health to global labour history, and a global angle to locally-rooted environmental labour histories.<sup>41</sup>

Given its particular levels of migration, the occupational risks inherent to the industry, and the relatively mono-industrial contexts in which it tends to occur, the mining industry’s labour milieu is rather singular. However, a literature on hydrocarbons has begun to probe the socio-environmental consequences of and conflicts over extraction, distribution, and consumption.<sup>42</sup> Going forward, historians might consider other contexts in which multiple types of economic activity interacted, each with their own configuration of workers, systems of social reproduction, and workplace dynamics. Taking such an approach to the worlds of modernising agriculture, port areas, or indeed in metropolitan

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<sup>40</sup> This would thus take McEvoy’s proposition to a global scale, see McEvoy, ‘Working Environments’, 145-73; Holdren, *Injury Impoverished*.

<sup>41</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Bécot and Le Naour (eds.), *Vivre et lutter dans un monde toxique*.

centres may provide a demonstration of how the experiences and politics generated by workplace risk and pollution could transcend the particularities of the mono-sectorial cultures often assumed to have existed in mining communities.

Looking into the latter decades of the twentieth century and the present day, the notion of the labour milieu and its link to solidarities can be useful for scholars of deindustrialisation. Current studies of the process which trace the decline of an industry – or a labour milieu – and concomitant social problems often identify a failure of solidarity, and not infrequently involve a reaction against racialised Others.<sup>43</sup> What my thesis has shown is how the labour milieu of the Gard was a site not only of convergent experiences among the working-class population, but significantly of divergence and hierarchy. The social solidarities often vaunted as proper to the industrial age were not, in fact, automatic, but contingent, co-constructed, and fragile. Deindustrialisation studies may draw upon the suggestive concept of the labour milieu as a means by which to investigate shifts that occur in relation to labour sectors, environment, and the place of outsiders in local societies during periods of sectoral crisis. Relations of solidarity were always mediated through embodied, socio-environmental conditions of production and reproduction, and when successfully constructed, arose out of a sensitivity to difference and hierarchy within capitalist exploitation that could be incorporated into, or could exist in tension with, a broader, universal political project.

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Steven High, *One Job Town: Work, Belonging, and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Ontario Press, 2018). The large research project ‘Deindustrialisation and the Politics of our Times’ is to hold its 2025 annual conference on ‘Deindustrialization, Nation, Immigration: What Political Responses?’, indicating the developing historical interest in the question.

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