Festival and Revolution: the Popular Front in France and the press coverage of the strikes of 1936

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Couples dance; people gather to listen to the sound of a violin and an accordion; laughing men wave from factory gates at passers-by in the street (plates 56 and 57). These are scenes of the strikes of 1936 which greeted the first Popular Front government in France; strikes which have most often been portrayed as a series of festivals. The striking workers refused to leave the factories, preferring to occupy them to prevent employers hiring an alternative labour force, and commentators have noted how these occupations afforded the workers the opportunity to make music and dance. Such scenes served to inaugurate a folklore for the Popular Front. So much so that later accounts of these events frequently cite contemporary photographs as a special form of evidence.¹ For example, when the historian Julian Jackson discusses the ‘prevalent atmosphere of “joy”’ during the strikes, he cites the ‘vivid photographic images which have come down to us from 1936’, images of ‘improvised dances’ and ‘makeshift orchestras’.² However, it is problematic to assume that such photographs allow unmediated access to the strikes. This is not simply because photographs cannot be treated as transparent records, but also because the imagery of the strikes emerged and circulated in a particular fashion. To ignore this is to ignore the function of the photographs.

In this essay I want to argue that allowing the festive photographs to define the strikes is only to reproduce one specific account of the disputes, an account moreover which played a central role in shaping the struggles in 1936. I shall argue that the imagery of the strikes was constituted by the evolving relationship between the strikers and the workers’ organizations, and demonstrate that the imagery of the joyous strikers emerged only as these organizations progressively gained control of the strike movement and attempted to curb it.³ The curtailing of the strike movement involved a redefinition of the aims of the strike itself: the goals of increased pay and the reduction of hours replaced a challenge to the prevailing social relations of production. The imagery of the joyous strikes operated within this suppression of militancy, for the figuring of relations between workers served to obscure the other relations defining the strike. Thus it will be argued that ultimately the iconography of the joyous strike was turned against the strikers. Yet it should be stressed that an argument drawn from the press coverage of the strikes will offer only one view of the strikers’ festivities and will not provide access to the strikers’ own perception of their activities. The workers may have experienced the festivities as a precondition for other levels of organized

57 ‘Perched on the gates, the workers at the Renault factories await the results of negotiations between the employer’s and workers’ delegations’, *Le Populaire de Paris*, 30 May 1936, p. 6. Photo: the author.
struggle, yet the workers’ organizations presented these same festivities in a
different light.\textsuperscript{4} That this curbing of the strike movement should be undertaken by
the organizations which represented the working classes is a seeming paradox.
This paradox can only be understood in the context of the specific relationships
defining the Popular Front, so it is with the formation of this coalition that we
must begin.

The making of the Popular Front

The Popular Front was a coalition of parliamentary parties and extra-
parliamentary organizations formed to resist fascism in France; this coalition
had its origins in the events of February 1934. On 6 February various right-wing
groups, including the extreme right-wing paramilitary ‘leagues’, met at the Place
de la Concorde in the centre of Paris to demonstrate against the new government
of Edouard Daladier. The night ended in riots and fifteen deaths, and the
following day Daladier resigned. The Parti communiste français (PCF) – some of
whose supporters had participated in the anti-parliamentary riots – then mounted
a counter demonstration on 9 February, which also ended in violence. The
Confédération générale du travail (CGT)\textsuperscript{5} called a general strike for 12 February
and the Socialist party, the Section française de l'internationale ouvrière (SFIO)
and then the PCF decided to hold demonstrations on the same day. The
supporters of these two parties converged at the Place de la Nation and this
meeting marked the beginning of a rapprochement between these left-wing
organizations, the first stage in the formation of a united front against the threat
of fascism.

The significance of the meeting on 12 February was ultimately symbolic; its
importance lay in its status as a moment of tangible cooperation which began to
efface the memories of the 1920 Congress of Tours and the schism within the left
over the issue of affiliation to the Comintern. But the SFIO and PCF were not
instantly united in February 1934. Since 1927 the PCF had pursued a policy of
‘class against class’, which had isolated the party. However, after internal
negotiations and the intervention of the Comintern, this policy was abandoned
and on 27 July 1934 the PCF signed a pact with the SFIO. In October the leader of
the former, Maurice Thorez, called for the pact to be widened to include the
middle classes in a ‘popular front’. This appeal to the middle classes was directed
at the supporters of the Republican party of the centre: the Radicals. The broader
front was finally cemented in 1935 when the Radicals agreed to participate with
the Communists and Socialists in a series of 14 July demonstrations.

Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated on 14 July 1935, yet this
support for the Popular Front was due only in part to the Republican rejection of
fascism. As a broad coalition of the left, the Popular Front had become the focus
for opposition to the series of governments which had failed to reverse the effects
of the Depression. On 14 July the leaders of the left swore an oath to defend
‘democratic liberties’ which was also a vow ‘to give bread to the workers’.\textsuperscript{6} The
Comité de rassemblement populaire, set up initially to organize the
demonstrations of July, now assumed the task of drawing up a programme for

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the Popular Front, a programme eventually published on 11 January 1936. The introduction stated, ‘When this programme has become a reality a great change will have occurred: freedom will have been better defended, bread more certainly ensured, peace better preserved.’ Yet how these aims were to be achieved was not stated in any detail; for example, the demand for a ‘[r]eduction of the working week without reduction of the weekly wage’ did not specify a new number of working hours. Although this programme was not detailed, the very fact that the parties of the left had put their signatures to a common statement served to confirm the unity of the Popular Front. These parties entered the general elections of May 1936 in this alliance and in the second round of voting emerged with a clear victory. The SFIO won the most seats, and their leader Léon Blum announced on 5 May that his party was prepared to lead the new government. Blum was scrupulous in following constitutional convention, and waited for the period of a month before taking office. It was during this month that factory occupations began, initiating the largest strike movement France had yet seen.

The revolutionary image of the strikes

Blum made a point of emphasizing that the election victory was the victory of the Popular Front and that there was no mandate to carry out a Socialist programme. He argued in 1936, as he had since 1926, that parliamentary victory for the SFIO was not the beginning of revolution but meant only the ‘exercise’ of power within existing capitalist institutions. He stated, ‘Our aim is not to transform the social system, it is not even to apply the specific programme of the Socialist Party, it is to execute the programme of the Popular Front.’ The elected members of the Popular Front were thus caught in a contradiction. Whilst representing the working classes, they had pledged to operate within the hostile framework of a bourgeois system of government. The various members of the Front experienced this contradiction more or less acutely and it was also increasingly felt by the Front’s supporters. This may be seen in the circumstances of the very first strikes.

The first strikes took place on 11 May at Le Havre and at Toulouse. They began in response to the sacking of workers for May Day absenteeism. Thus the strikes were demonstrations of the workers’ solidarity with syndicalist activism, demonstrations which were in part encouraged by the belief that a ‘great change’ was about to happen. Yet already, by this date, Blum was criticized by members of his own party for his inaction: Marceau Pivert, the leader of a tendency at the extreme left of the SFIO, noted that, ‘The leading bodies of the party are lagging behind the masses.’ Such impatience also seems to have been a factor in the first Parisian strikes, which began with the strike at the Bloch factory in Courbevoie on 14 May. This strike was not part of the demonstration of solidarity, but instead had a pay increase as its principal goal. Whilst this dispute was quickly resolved, further strikes took place in Paris; by 24 May there had been six factory occupations. On this day 600,000 people marched past the Mur des Fédérés at Père Lachaise cemetery to commemorate the martyrs of the Commune. Yet the PCF was aware that the size of the demonstration was not simply a sign of support for the government about to take office. On 25 May the party passed a
resolution containing the following statement: ‘the central committee understands
and sympathizes with the people’s evident desire, given that nothing has been
achieved in the three weeks since the Popular Front victory, to see put into
practice with the greatest urgency the measures agreed in the joint programme.’

Thus the impatience earlier voiced by the left-wing minority of the SFIO was now
acknowledged by the central committee of the PCF. The impatience sensed by the
party was more forcefully expressed the next day by the true unfurling of the
strike wave, which Blum himself was to describe later as a slap in the face.

The origins and timing of the strikes were the subject of bitter disputes in the
press and the contradiction within the new government was evident in the
coverage offered by the organs of the Popular Front parties. The strike coverage of
Le Populaire de Paris, the newspaper of the SFIO, began on 27 May. On this day
Pivert published an article entitled, ‘Everything is possible’:

Everything is possible. Yes, everything is possible for those who dare to act,
thanks to the atmosphere of victory, confidence and discipline which is
spreading over the country. Let’s mobilize the party; let’s get others to
follow us; let’s decide, let’s act.

Pivert argued that the party now had a mandate for revolutionary action, and the
burgeoning number of strikes in the wake of the election victory was a
demonstration of this. Yet Pivert remained in a minority within the party, and the
strikes were presented very differently elsewhere in the same issue of Le Populaire.
An account on the front page stressed the congenial, leisurely atmosphere within
the occupied factories: ‘One even heard the seductive sound of accordions and
saxes coming from certain workshops!’

These conflicting accounts of the strike as a festival and the strike as a
revolutionary action were seized by the right-wing press. On 28 May, in Le Jour,
Léon Bailby contrasted Pivert’s statement with Le Populaire’s description of the
factories to demonstrate how the paper was attempting ‘to minimize the
operation’. Bailby was greatly alarmed by the occupations and saw them as the
beginning of a campaign of expropriation organized by the Communists. This
argument was repeated by a number of papers hostile to the Popular Front, most
explicitly in the right-wing papers, such as L’Ami du Peuple and L’Echo de Paris,
but also in mainstream publications such as Le Temps. These papers presented
the strikes as political acts, and this description served to deny the status of the
strikers’ claims: their demands were represented as part of a conspirators’ plot and
as a distortion of prevailing conditions. Pivert’s exhortations were reproduced as
threats, as the accusations of incipient revolution were made in the context of the
gains made by the PCF in the elections.

In response to this situation, the Popular Front press began to emphasize the
spontaneous nature of the strikes: this was a rejection of the ‘Soviet conspiracy’
and this served to confirm the legitimacy of the strikes as protests against pay and
conditions. Marcel Roy, secretary of the Fédération des métaux, discussed the
beginning of the strikes in his industry in an article published in Le Populaire on
28 May and reprinted in the CGT paper Le Peuple the following day. Roy began
by emphasizing the low pay for workers in the industry, and the harsh conditions
produced by Taylorization. He then noted how the strikes were enabled by the reunification of the Marxist and non-Marxist elements of the CGT in March 1936, confirming the solidarity of the workers.\(^{23}\) The occupations at Le Havre and Toulouse then provided an example for the Parisian strikers. Roy summarized: ‘The metalworkers have again found the path of syndicalist organization. Unity, [and] the victory of the Popular Front are the driving forces behind the confidence the organization enjoys.’\(^{24}\) Roy then went on to dismiss the charge that the strikes were led by the Communists, and part of some ulterior plan of the Popular Front. ‘The Popular Front is one part of the social mechanism which can and must serve the interests of our cause, but the chief part is and will remain the struggle of the workers, the Syndicat.’\(^{25}\)

Such arguments were given a very specific visual form in the first photographs of the strike reproduced by the Popular Front press. On the same page as Roy’s article, \textit{Le Populaire} printed a photograph of a large number of strikers grouped behind a syndicat banner in the courtyard of the Nieuport aviation factory at Issy-les-Moulineaux (plate 58). As with Roy’s article, the image was reproduced in \textit{Le Peuple}. The caption for the photograph in \textit{Le Populaire} read: ‘In the Nieuport factory, a group of strikers have gathered before our photographer to confirm their allegiance to the CGT.’ The significance of this photograph lies in its specific relationship with the social formation constituted by the striking workers. As the caption emphasizes, the image shows the solidarity of the workers: the massed group literally presents a unified front. Thus, in this public demonstration of their allegiance to the CGT, the strikers are represented as a cohesive and self-directed group rather than as the pawns of a few ‘conspirators’. The autonomy of this group is articulated in the very organization of the photograph. Again as the caption emphasizes, the group addresses the camera. The figures are not caught unawares as in certain forms of photojournalism or documentary photography, nor are the figures marshalled \textit{for} the camera.\(^{26}\) Thus the strikers’ self-presentation is a visual analogue to their series of demands: both may be considered as interruptions of ‘normal’ relations. The strike at the Nieuport factory was a resistance to the prevailing social relations of production and the photograph was a resistance to the conventions of photographic reportage which made of the subject a passive object. In this sense, the photograph is a resistance to what Steve Edwards has described as the ‘monological’ operation, in which ‘the camera turns the subject of the photographer’s fascination into an object which is by definition, dumb.’\(^{27}\) Now, to argue that a photograph such as the image of the Nieuport strikers offers a form of resistance is not to attribute an agency to the image itself or to maintain that its meaning is fixed. Rather, I want to emphasize how the photograph functioned \textit{within} the altered social relations of the strike. The efficacy of this type of photography lay in its conjunction with these altered social relations.

This is confirmed by the limited nature of this photograph’s circulation. The image of the Nieuport workers was reproduced at a specific moment in the development of the strike movement: at the very end of May the movement remained confined almost completely to the Paris region and thus it had not yet assumed the proportions of a national crisis. During this period, the Popular Front papers were at their most supportive of the strikers, as the action did not yet seem
to be any great threat to the incoming government. Sympathetic papers therefore printed a number of photographs of massed groups similar to that taken at the Nieuport factory. The force and significance of these photographs at this juncture may be demonstrated by the fact that such images are entirely absent from the hostile press.  

I shall offer a further demonstration of the significance of these photographs in the conclusion. However, at this point it should be noted that the Popular Front press did not simply continue this type of photographic coverage: the Popular Front did not maintain its support for the strikes and as the relations between strikers and the workers’ organizations were transformed, so the currency of such photographs changed.

The domestication of the strikes

*Le Populaire’s* early coverage of the strikes ranged from Pivert’s militancy to the peaceful sound of an accordion floating from an occupied factory. It was this second account, of the strike as a celebration, which came to be developed by the Popular Front press as the magnitude of the strike movement became apparent. This may be understood as a development of the account produced by the Radical paper *L’Œuvre*. On 28 May this paper carried a description of the strikers and their entertainments:

> The inner courtyard is very lively. Some are reading the papers. A radio is playing a dance concert.
In quiet moments, romantic songs are sung in chorus, the songs of the minute.

Amateur virtuosi have had violins, mandolins and banjos brought in.30

Here, the description presents the lived experience of the strike, and this anecdotal description is very much in contrast to accounts such as that offered by Marcel Roy. *Le Populaire, Le Peuple* and, above all, the PCF’s *L’Humanité* tended to present the strikes within the context of a set of developing political formations, using lengthy citations from communiqués. Yet from the beginning *L’Œuvre* had adopted a mode in which descriptions of the scenes of the strikes played a large part. There the strikes were presented less as a means of forcing negotiations and more as a series of spontaneous festivals. This perspective was a result of *L’Œuvre*’s position as a Radical paper. As such, the paper did not present information to the parties involved in the struggle; rather, it made that struggle intelligible (and palatable) to its bourgeois and petty bourgeois readership.31 The strikes were not presented as a revolutionizing of production, in which the workers occupied the factories in order to run the machines themselves, as had happened previously in Italy and Poland.32 Instead the occupations were shown as a holiday – only a break from work, and not a fundamental disruption of the relations of production. Thus, *L’Œuvre*’s account of relaxation and celebration could be concluded with a tribute to the ‘working people who understand perfectly that their cause has nothing to gain from disorder’.33

This perspective was supported by the photographic coverage of the paper. On 30 May *L’Œuvre* published a photograph with the caption: ‘The “Farman jazz”’, showing a massed group of figures (see plate 56). Yet this group do not address themselves to the camera and instead direct their attention towards the musicians who occupy the foreground of the image: the workers have become an audience. The implications of this were drawn out in the caption given to the image when it was reproduced by *Le Populaire*: ‘At the Farman factories: whilst waiting for the results of negotiations... workers in the factory courtyard listen to the sounds of an improvised orchestra.’ The caption emphasizes that the music is a diversion, a means of passing the time whilst the workers’ representatives negotiate. Once again, as in the Nieuport image, the mass of the workers are positioned in relation to the syndicat; yet whereas in the Nieuport image the workers presented their allegiance themselves, in the Farman photograph they are no longer protagonists. The image of the musicians and their audience is an image of relative passivity: the workers may be on strike, but the time created by the cessation of work is taken up by entertainments. Unlike the Nieuport photograph, this image presents the mass of workers as distanced from political activity.

This account of the image is also supported by the pattern of its circulation. Besides appearing in *Le Populaire* and *L’Œuvre*, the photograph was also reproduced in *Le Petit Journal, L’Excelsior* and *Le Jour*: Republican, conservative and far-right-wing papers respectively. Thus, the photographs of the festive strike were reproduced in the papers which consistently avoided reproducing images of politically active workers – the photograph of the Nieuport factory, for example.
This unequal distribution of the images of the strike was relatively shortlived. In the period between 1 and 4 June the strike movement became general and as this happened the workers’ organizations attempted to take control of it. On 3 June the Union des Syndicats de la Région Parisienne decided not simply to support the strikes but to organize – and thus contain – the movement. At this point there was a convergence between the coverage by the organs of the left-wing and the position set out by L’Œuvre.

The reasons for this convergence lie in the relations between the members of the Popular Front. It has already been argued that the Popular Front government was caught within a contradiction between the interests of its supporters and the interests of the capitalist institutions which the government had pledged to maintain. This had involved the left-wing members of the Front in a series of compromises. For this reason aspects of their individual programmes were moderated in order to cement the vaunted unity established in 1934. Nevertheless, this unity remained vulnerable and the outbreak of the strikes served as a further pretext for the opponents of the Front to attack the incoming government. Thus, whilst the charges of a Communist conspiracy were an attack on the PCF, the purpose of this attack was to expose the extremism of the latter party to the Radicals, the least willing partners in the Front. In the first days of June, as the strike movement grew, so the attacks on the Communists were increased in an attempt to undermine the coalition. By these means the employers’ organizations put pressure on the government which was to take office on 4 June in order to force the opening of negotiations at a national level. It was at this juncture that the left-wing press more closely aligned their coverage with that of L’Œuvre.

As the Communists were both the focus of the attacks and the most active supporters of the unity of the Front, so was the shift more marked in their publications. In L’Humanité on 4 June, the anecdotal mode used in L’Œuvre was adopted. ‘No smoke issues from the high chimneys. One no longer hears the deafening noise of the machines, but instead snatches of a popular song playing on the radio or the joyful cries of young strikers caught up in a football match.’ Here the cessation of work is marked by a particular shift; the roar of the machines is replaced by the sounds of sociability. Stopping the machines permits the formation of a new community.

This sense of a new community was central to the strike coverage in Regards, the Communist-supported illustrated weekly, on 4 June. The front cover of this issue adapted a photograph first reproduced in Le Populaire on 30 May (plates 57 and 59). The initial use of the image showed a set of figures waving and saluting from the gates of the Renault factory. However, when the image was reproduced in Regards it had been drastically cropped, so that less than half of the original photograph was shown. As a result, the figures occupy a larger proportion of the image and this change in their scale encourages a more anecdotal reading. This has the effect of directing the viewer’s attention away from the gestures of greeting and defiance figures in the earlier version of the photograph and towards the potential flirtations between male workers and female pedestrians.

This type of coverage marked a shift in the editorial policy of Regards. The journal had been established as an alternative to the perceived decadence of the ‘bourgeois’ press, and earlier editorials had inveighed against the subjects treated
in illustrated weeklies such as Voilà and Détective. For example, in 1933 an editorial declared: ‘Regards has too much respect for its readers to believe that they are only interested in detectives’ reports and society gossip and scandal.’ Yet, in the changed climate of 1936, the policy of Regards shifted: the cover photograph of strikers emphasized interpersonal relations that were also articulated within the magazine, in the layout and photographs used for the article on the strikes (plates 60, 61 and 62). This article spreads over three pages: the first page is given over to a sequence of three images of the strikers’ general and committee meetings. The first image on this page shows a gesturing figure, Timbaud of the Syndicat des métallos, yet this figure does not dominate the image: the photograph was taken from a very low viewpoint so that the composition is crowned by a range of figures looking down at the speaker from a rooftop. Such a view was already a part of the strike imagery made familiar by Le Populaire, a
‘In the Renault factories with the striking metalworkers’, Regards, no. 125, 4 June 1936, p. 5. Photo: courtesy of Bibliothèque marxiste de Paris
‘In the Renault factories with the striking metalworkers’, Regards, no. 125, 4 June 1936, p. 6.

Photo: courtesy of Bibliothèque marxiste de Paris
‘In the Renault factories with the striking metalworkers’, Regards, no. 125, 4 June 1936, p. 7.
Photo: courtesy of Bibliothèque marxiste de Paris
sign for the strikers’ control of the factories. Yet, just as the cover of Regards redirected this image of autonomy, so here the strikers are fitted into a relation with the syndicat. The photograph places the sign of the strikers’ control with that of the delegate: thus the strikers attend to the delegate but are not presented as directed or coerced. In turn, the relationship established in this image is confirmed by the two photographs below. The second image is of Timbaud’s audience in the courtyard. This image is placed directly above another of the strike committee meeting held after the delegate’s address. Thus, whilst the presence of the syndicat is indicated, what is emphasized is the process by which the mass of workers formulate demands.

The first page of photographs works to contain the strike within the framework of conventional negotiations, and an analogous containment and organization is involved in the following two pages. Of the eleven photographs reproduced only one shows a strike meeting; the remainder develop the themes of sociability implied by the magazine’s cover. The first two images on the second page show the organization of a ‘parlour’, where strikers could meet privately with wives or girlfriends, and below these is a photograph of a father receiving a visit from his son. These photographs establish the strike as a partial interruption of personal relationships. Yet the images also establish the reconstitution of these relations in the new site of the factory. As in the coverage of L’Humanité, this sociability was predicated on the cessation of work: at the base of the page is a photograph of the stilled machines with the caption, ‘In the midst of the temporarily abandoned machines there is conversation, joking, the reading of the papers.’ This served to dismiss the threat of expropriation.

The imagery of Regards served simultaneously to banish the spectre of the ‘sovietization’ and to assimilate the strike to existing conventions of illustration. Thus, the photographs on the final page of the article conform to already established genres. There is another image of an ‘improvised orchestra’, a photograph of two ‘charming workers’, one of whom was a ‘beauty queen’ of the quarter, and a sequence of photographs showing the provisioning of the workers, with a delivery of beer, the sale of cigarettes, and the distribution of bread. These pictures form a corollary to the sequence of images on the second page of the article; they emphasize ‘human’ relationships and the images of provisioning show common ‘human’ appetites. Here the workers are defined as ‘le peuple’ rather than as militant ‘ouvriers’; they are engaged in a struggle for bread rather than in a revolutionary confrontation with the prevailing relations of production. This struggle for bread conforms with the Popular Front slogan demanding ‘bread, peace and freedom’, as does the new community formed when the machines are silenced, which is the expression of a new freedom. This conformity to the Popular Front rhetoric is given in Pierre Unik’s accompanying presentation of the strikers,

I don’t know what to admire the most, the seriousness, the magnificent gravity of these workers who know that a powerful adversary has been confronted, who have confidence in themselves, confidence in the syndicat and its increasing membership, confidence in the elected members of the Popular Front who have actively supported them, and in the committees of the Popular Front which organize the solidarity of the strikers, this
seriousness or the good humour, the joy that they know to put into this great, grave affair on which their families’ bread depends.  

In this account any tension between the images of the strike as revolution and festival is simply internalized as a mild confusion on the part of the commentator as to what is most impressive. The account does not admit of any conflict between the two modes of description: the different accounts of the strike are held in equilibrium, sustained by the organization of the Popular Front.

The coverage in Regards ordered the strike into acceptable categories and precisely avoided the disruptions of the earliest reportage. Indeed, Regards now came to resemble a magazine like Voilà in certain aspects of its coverage. It could be argued that such similarities were, in part, a result of the divergence between the photographic coverage of the weekly and the daily press. However, a type of imagery analogous to that used in Regards was taken up in the daily papers seeking to maintain the unity of the front. Thus, on 4 June, L’Humanité reproduced several photographs of dances in the factories. Even the militant readership of Le Peuple was offered a new image of the strikers. The direct address of the earlier images of massed workers was now softened in a photograph showing such a group ‘fronted’ by a women turned towards the camera. This woman forms the principal subject of the image, making it distinct from earlier group shots. Moreover, the woman seems to be placed on a step, so that she is level with the viewer and slightly raised above the crowd. Just as the imagery of Regards had ordered the strike within the inclusive rhetoric of ‘bread, peace and freedom’ rather than through an imagery emphasizing the identity of a class, so the photograph in Le Peuple established the female figure as a mediating term between strikers and viewer: antagonistic class relations are subsumed under ‘universal’ relations of gender. This attempt to establish a new form of relation with the viewer is emphasized in the caption, ‘Men and women workers guarding the factory ... with a smile.’ The phrase ‘with a smile’ comes from a Maurice Chevalier hit of 1921, and it still had sufficient currency in 1936 to become the title of a film starring the singer. Thus the photograph in Le Peuple and its caption framed the sociability of the strikes in terms derived from the entertainment industry. This manner of covering events was typical of Voilà. Indeed, ten days later, the same combination of codes was used in Voilà’s first coverage of the strikes. A page devoted to the strikes included a photograph of women dancing to an accordion; the image was captioned: ‘More than one department store was converted into a dance hall and the little errand boys often revealed themselves as the accordionists of the future.’ Here the strike is as much an opportunity to escape the routines of work as an opposition to a mode of production. In this manner the strikes began to be assimilated into what might be termed a Popular Front iconography, shaped to conform to the Radical perspective in order to maintain the unity of the front. However, in the latter stages of the strike this iconography was more actively set against the militancy of the workers.
The uses of pleasure

On the evening of 4 June the representatives of the employers’ organization – the Confédération générale de la production française (CGPF) – met Léon Blum, just after the new prime minister had presented his government to the president. This meeting began the series of negotiations which stretched over the next few days and resulted in what were to become known as the Matignon Agreements. On the night of 7 June the leaders of the CGPF and the CGT put their signatures to a document establishing collective labour contracts, the right of workers to join unions, the election of workers’ delegates to conduct negotiations with management, and a series of pay increases of between 7 and 15 per cent.49 A further condition was that workers should resume work as soon as the management of their firm had accepted the terms of the general agreement. Whilst it has often been assumed that this agreement and the resulting legislation was simply a rapid fulfilment of the Popular Front programme, this was not in fact the case. Adrian Rossiter has emphasized that the programme of January 1936 made no mention of the measures Blum presented to the Chamber on 9 June that same year concerning collective contracts, paid holidays and the forty-hour week.50 Rather than considering the Matignon Agreements as a coup against the CGPF, Rossiter demonstrates that the employers were pleasantly surprised to find that Blum and Léon Jouhaux, the General Secretary of the CGT, were sympathetic to their point of view, and he argues that Blum’s role as arbitrator relieved the employers of a degree of responsibility for the consequences of the agreement.51

Whilst the Matignon Agreement was hailed by the Popular Front press as a victory, it did not secure a unanimous return to work, and in fact strikes continued to spread.52 As a consequence L’Humanité developed the account of the everyday life of the strikers set out in Regards. On 8 June Marcel Cachin used this account in a response to the employers’ claims that the occupations were an abuse of property rights. ‘They evoke the rights of property ... they would probably be quite astonished if the wage earners were to reply to them that they themselves also have a property to defend. It is that of their life, the only one they have under the sun.’53 Yet this argument also served to limit the scope of demands, by focusing on ‘the living wage and the conditions for human life’.54

The extent to which Cachin’s definition of property prescribed his analysis of the strike may be demonstrated by comparing his account with a slightly earlier discussion of the issue. In the Catholic, democratic L’Aube, Maurice Guérin argued,

> It is a matter of knowing to whom the instruments of production legitimately belong. One could answer: to those who paid for them with their money; to the bosses and shareholders, the creditors and sleeping partners. And that still appears simple and peremptory. However, what has given the enterprise a certain surplus-value? The work.55

Having established this, Guérin concluded,
What is at issue is the right of work to possess a share of the property that it has made thrive and a part of the authority in the enterprises to which it imparts life. Until now, capital has gathered to itself all property and consequently all authority. The time has come when it must share both the one and the other, if it does not want to be forced to abandon them altogether.56

This argument asserted the workers’ contribution to production and as a result a revision of the existing relations of production was envisaged. By contrast, Cachin’s defence of the individual life of the worker led to a series of demands for the amelioration of the existing framework – as was, of course, wholly in accord with Blum’s stated aims.

This relationship between limited demands and the narration of the lived experience of the factory was developed in Simone Weil’s ‘La Vie et grève des métallus’, where the pleasures of the strike are set in a tension with the political aspects of the dispute.57 Weil opens her essay with a discussion of the public incomprehension of the strike and offers the perspective from the shopfloor as a means of explanation. ‘When one has certain images driven into the spirit, the heart, the flesh itself, one understands.’58 The narrative begins with the author’s first day at a new job, and the process of submitting to the dictates of the machine. Payment for this work is presented as an extension of the discipline. ‘To count penny for penny. During eight hours of work, one counts every penny. How much are these pieces going to bring? How much have I earned this hour? And the hour after? On leaving the factory, again one counts each penny.’59 Weil presents this situation as the root cause of the strike, for which the Popular Front election victory provided the occasion. ‘One bends beneath the yoke. As soon as the yoke is loosened, one raises one’s head again.’60 The strike is then described as a reversal of the earlier situation.

The joy of entering a factory by the smiling consent of a worker guarding the gates. The joy of finding so many smiles, so many words of fraternal welcome. How it feels to be amongst comrades, in these workshops where, when I was working, each one of us felt so alone at our machine! The joy of moving freely through the workshops where each used to be riveted to their machine, [now] forming groups, chatting, having a bite to eat. The joy of hearing music, song and laughter instead of the pitiless din of the machines, the powerful symbol of the harsh necessity to which we submitted.61

Weil employs many of the devices that Unik and other correspondents used to describe the liberty given by the strike. Yet this liberty is the temporary freedom from the machine rather than a freedom from an oppressive system. The virtue of this account remained the manner in which it asserted the non-political origins of the strike through the perspective of lived experience. Yet for Weil this perspective could not be reconciled with the analysis of negotiations.

The habit of passivity acquired over years will not be shaken off in a few days, even such glorious days. And then it is not at the point when for a
few days one has finally escaped slavery that one can find it in oneself to study the conditions of constraint to which one will submit again.\footnote{62}

Here, the very harshness of life in the factory precludes the consideration of the economic relations creating the conditions. The strike is precisely defined as an escape from these conditions, rather than as an attempt to redress them.

This emphasis on the strike as a distraction was increasingly developed in the photographic coverage of the Popular Front press. This was in part a response to the growth of street activity on the part of the strikers, which alarmed both the right-wing press and the government. On 10 June L’Echo de Paris noted:

Yesterday strikers carrying the red flag led several processions through the streets of Paris. Our photograph shows one of these processions on the rue de Rivoli. The strikers have raised fists. One easily imagines the effect produced on the Parisian public by this revolutionary spectacle, authorized by the public authorities.\footnote{63}

In this situation, Thorez counselled moderation. In a widely reported statement of 11 June, he insisted,

In certain cases it is even possible that we run the risk of alienating ourselves from sections of the petty-bourgeoisie and the peasantry. So what next? \ldots So, we must know how to end a strike when satisfaction has been obtained. We must even know how to accept a compromise when all demands have not yet been met but victory on the essential points has been achieved.\footnote{64}

This explicit statement of a desire to curtail the strike movement was matched with a policy of organizing ever more elaborate entertainments for the strikers, which served in part to keep them occupied within the factory walls.

These entertainments were illustrated on the front page of L’Humanité of 11 June, and in the issue of Regards published on the same day. Whereas earlier photographs had ‘caught’ seemingly improvised concerts, the photographs in Regards show more carefully organized events. An image of the Jacquemet et Mesnet factory shows three figures in drag, posing before a crowd of workers: the costume of the foreground figures indicates a self-conscious artifice and this is emphasized by the manner in which the figures perform for the camera, addressing their mime to the photographer (plate 63). In this photograph the symbolic gender reversal of the performers belongs to the logic of the carnival. Such inversions are acknowledged to be temporary and thus the reproduction of the photograph in Regards served to underline Weil’s definition of the strike as a temporary inversion of the conditions of work. Nevertheless, precisely because such images were marked by artifice in their content and composition, they could be dismissed by the right-wing press as part of the façade concealing the revolution. In L’Echo de Paris on 12 June it was argued, ‘At the beginning, the strikers wanted to pretend that the strike was conducted with good humour,
amidst songs and innocent entertainments. All revolutions begin in this way.\textsuperscript{65}

This account once again underlines the tension between the presentations of the strike as festival and as revolution. Whilst, at an earlier moment, the left-wing press had sought to hold the two accounts in equilibrium, in the period after 11 June the Popular Front press adopted the terms offered by the right-wing.

In one of the weeklies most supportive of the Popular Front, Marianne, the opposition between militancy and the warmth of song established in L’Echo de Paris was recast: the ‘innocent entertainments’ were not presented as a deception, rather as an alternative to the workers’ activism. In an article entitled ‘Souvenirs de “l’occupation”. Chansons sur le tas’, the author describes a visit to a little bar frequented by artistes on the Boulevard de Strasbourg, where a few performers are having a drink before going to entertain the strikers.

Outside, for the first time, there is a tense atmosphere on the street. Groups are forming, people are active. Processions go by with placards, shouts, slogans, dummies hung from gallows. The strike has spilled out onto the street. There is less good humour, less calm discipline. These long processions on the boulevards, of workers with raised fists, give Paris a fevered, troubled air which one would be sure to feel oneself if an effort wasn’t made to drive it out like an evil thought.

But straightaway, in the comfortable atmosphere of the little bar, I again find the warmth which gives comfort to good people, the sight of men helping one another.\textsuperscript{66}
This account is, in effect, the reverse of the image of the Nieuport factory, its negative. On 28 May the militancy of workers was presented as solidarity, as comradeship. By 17 June the images of harmony and comradeship had been disassociated from the strikers, and lay outside the description of the strike itself.

In an attempt to maintain the unity of the Popular Front against what was perceived as the increasing threat represented by the strike movement, the press sympathetic to the new government sought to redefine the objectives of the strike and the very terms in which it was to be conceived. The representational strategies which emerged in order to defend the first strikes against accusations of revolutionary intent were gradually adapted and finally directed against the strikers. Yet the terms established by the Popular Front press were not maintained by the strikers themselves. Certain workers produced their own photographs of the strike, and some of these were reproduced in La Vie ouvrière and Regards. The latter printed a page of such images in the issue of 18 June (plate 64). These images do not depend on the tropes of the festival, or dwell on picturesque detail. Instead, they return to another form of presentation, that used in the photograph of the Nieuport factory. The workers themselves continued to confront the camera, and this marked a refusal of the iconography of the Popular Front.

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3 This and related statements are based on a detailed survey of the principal daily papers as defined in D.W. Pike, La Presse française a la veille de la seconde guerre mondiale, Paris, 1973, p. 6. His list of papers, in descending order of circulation, is as follows: Le Petit Parisien, Le Journal, Le Matin, L'Humanité, Le Petit Journal, Le Jour, L'Œuvre, Le Populaire de Paris, L'Excelsior, L’Echo de Paris, L'Ami du Peuple. I have also included Le Temps, Le Figaro and Le Peuple and the two evening papers Paris-Soir and L'Intransigeant. The period of the survey is from the beginning of the strike coverage in each paper, (usually 27 May) until 22 June. Regrettably, it was necessary to limit the survey to the Parisian press.

4 Michelle Perrot has argued that the French strikes of the late nineteenth century involved festivities as reassortments of social communication which were a precondition for struggles involving pay and conditions. See M. Perrot, Les Ouvriers en grève, France 1871–1890, Paris and The Hague, 1974, vol. 2, p. 547 ff.

5 The CGT was the confederation of fédérations, each fédération being the equivalent of a British trade union, grouping together at a national level the various syndicats or branches of a union for an industry.


7 Programme du Front Populaire, 11 January 1936, cited ibid, p. 299.

8 Cited ibid. p. 301.


11 I have retained the term 'syndicalist’ as syndicalism is not equivalent to trade unionism: in 1906 the CGT confirmed the syndicat as the basis for a reorganisation of production and distribution. In 1934 this policy was adapted to the ideas of economic planning developed by Henri de Man.

12 This was part of a statement made on 10 May and published in Le Populaire de Paris on the 12, cited in Danos and Gibelin, op. cit. (note 10), p. 158.

13 Cited ibid. p. 52.

14 Jackson, op. cit. (note 2), p. 86.


18 The occupations of 1936 were necessitated by the presence of the ‘reserve army’ of the unemployed. This army always functions to curb industrial unrest but this was particularly the case in France in 1936 when involvement in the occupations was most prevalent among semi-skilled and unskilled workers, who would have been the most vulnerable to dismissal and replacement. See E. Shorter and C. Tilly, Strikes in France 1830–1968, New York and London, 1974, p. 132.


20 Although the SFIO won the most seats in the elections, the PCF made the greatest gains. In the first round the vote for the PCF increased by 800,000 whilst the vote for the SFIO decreased by 30,000. See Jackson, op. cit. (note 2), p. 50.

21 The term ‘Popular Front press’ is used simply as a shorthand for those publications sympathetic to the coalition; this includes most obviously the official organs of members of the Front such as L’Humanité, Le Populaire de Paris and Le Peuple, but also non-affiliated papers such as L’Œuvre and weeklies such as Marianne, Regards and Vu. For accounts of the press under the Popular Front, see Ory, op. cit. (note 1), p. 541 ff. and G. Leroy and A. Roche, Les Ecrivains et...

23 In 1921 the revolutionary wing of the CGT split off to form the Confédération générale du travail unitaire, which quickly came under the control of the PCF. The confederations were reunited at the Congress of Toulouse on 1 March 1936.


25 ibid.


28 It should be noted that the absence of a type of photograph from a particular newspaper cannot simply be attributed to the whims of the staff photographer. For while most of the major papers did have staff photographers, they also acquired pictures from agencies and freelance photographers, and would thus have had access to a diverse range of material. For a detailed discussion of the organisation of press photography during this period, see F. Denoyelle, La Lumière de Paris. Les Usages de la photography, Paris, 1997, especially pp. 112–72.

29 To state that the Popular Front did not maintain support for the strikes is to say that the elected parties pursued a policy which came to be primarily concerned with ending the disputes. This is in no sense a denial of the support offered to strikers by individual party members and local groups.

30 L’Œuvre, 28 May 1936, p. 5.

31 One indication of L’Œuvre’s delicate position during this period is given by the defensive tone of a note appended to a statement from a workers’ delegation denouncing press misinformation: ‘Is it necessary to say that this text does not concern L’Œuvre, which has always tried . . . to reproduce as faithfully as possible the thoughts of the delegates of the workers’ organisations?’ Anon, ‘La Conférence paritaire s’est prononcée pour le droit syndicale et la liberté d’opinion’, L’Œuvre, 2 June 1936, pp. 1 and 5, p. 5, ellipsis added.


33 Anon, ‘A Issy’, p. 5.


35 On 4 June the delegation representing the employers of the metalworking industries announced the collapse of talks. Schwarz observes that the purpose of this was probably to make the announcement coincide with the change of government. He supports this claim by noting that the employers’ decision to break off talks was taken on 3 June, but kept secret until the following day. Schwarz, op. cit. (note 10), p. 78.


37 Regards was not an official organ of the PCF: from 20 February 1936 it had presented itself as the illustrated weekly of the Popular Front. See C. Estier, La Gauche hebdomadaire, Paris, 1962, p. 78.


40 Roy’s article was accompanied by a photograph of factory gates captioned, ‘Especially picturesque is the surveillance exercised by the strikers at the Nieuport factory at Issy-les-Moulineaux, who, from the top of the gates, inspect the street.’ Le Populaire de Paris, 28 May 1936, p. 6.


42 François Delpla has singled out the coverage of the strike in Regards as a turning point in the magazine’s treatment of sexuality, with the period after the strikes introducing traditional images of femininity. Delpla argues that this is part of a movement away from the magazine’s earlier militancy. ‘Les Communistes français et la sexualité (1932–1938)’, Le Mouvement social, no. 91, April–June 1975, pp. 121–52, p. 133.

43 Unik, op. cit. (note 39), p. 5.

44 Le Peuple, 4 June 1936, p. 4.

45 See Rarick, op. cit. (note 1), pp. 57 and 194.


48 The escape from routine through popular music was a topos reworked during the strike occupations. The opportunities provided for the errand boys to reveal their talents may be contrasted with Maurice Chevalier’s accounts of his early life as a metalworker; Adrian Rifkin draws attention to one scene in Chevalier’s autobiography: ‘And once, the rhythm of the song in his head and the dully repeated rhythm of beating out the pinheads clash: the hammer
comes down on his thumb, crushing it.’ Rifkin, op. cit. (note 46) p. 36.

49 The text of the Matignon Agreements is reprinted in Jackson, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 305–306.

50 Rossiter, op. cit. (note 9), p. 663.

51 ibid. pp. 677–79.

52 Danos and Gibelin, op. cit. (note 10), p. 87.


54 ibid.


56 ibid.

57 S. Weil, ‘La Vie et grève des ouvrières métallos’, La Révolution prolétarienne, no. 224, 10 June 1936, pp. 5–8, here cited from Œuvres complètes II. Ecrits historiques et politiques, Paris, 1991, pp. 349–61. This is the text most frequently cited by historians as evidence of the festive atmosphere of the strikes. The text is considered an authoritative source because Weil had worked in a factory in 1934–5, and because it was published in the ultra-left La Révolution prolétarienne.

58 ibid. p. 349.

59 ibid. p. 353.

60 ibid. p. 356.

61 ibid. p. 357.

62 ibid. p. 359.

63 L’Echo de Paris, 10 June 1936, p. 1 [picture caption].

64 Cited in Danos and Gibelin, op. cit. (note 10), p. 108.

65 Anon., ‘La grève des hôtels, restaurants et cafés a bouleversé hier la vie de Paris’, L’Echo de Paris, 12 June 1936, p. 1. This in turn was a development of arguments set out in Anon., ‘Chez Renault, citadelle ouvrière’, Le Figaro, 9 June 1936, p. 4.