The Calais riot of 5 January 1934 and the Dynamics of Unemployed Contention¹

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This article analyses the protests of the unemployed in northern France in 1934–35. This topic allows investigation of the most intense agitation of the jobless in France in the interwar years. The literature has principally focused on the PCF and the transition between Third Period and Popular Front policy phases to explain the evolution of movements of the unemployed in France in the 1930s. This article takes a multi-disciplinary approach combining archival research with the concepts of social movement theory to establish the dynamics of unemployed contention within northern France in these years. The findings of this article are that these dynamics can neither be understood principally through communist instrumentalisation nor as an archetypal social movement. Whilst sharing much with patterns of protest in general, the condition of the unemployed created an irreducible specificity to the dynamics of unemployed contention in northern France in 1934.

Studies of interwar protests of the unemployed in France have observed the central role of the French Communist Party (PCF) and highlighted the synchronicity between phases of PCF strategy and the development of the movements of the unemployed.² Whilst undoubtedly true in a broad sense, the danger with such an insight is that it suggests a one-way instrumental relationship between the PCF and the unemployed that suggests the absence of autonomy in the patterns of protest or the agency of the unemployed entailed in these social movements. This article will address the patterns of protest emanating from the riot of the Calais unemployed. Geographically, this was the epicentre of the most intense period of national protest and it provided the widest repertoire of action. To assess the pattern of protest, social movement theory, especially the synthetic ‘dynamics of contention’ approach, will be considered.³ Three cycles of collective action, those of Calais town, the wider coastal area and the Nord region, that were triggered by the Calais riot of the unemployed on 5 January 1934 will be studied.
Since the 1970s, the study of social movements has grown into a mature interdisciplinary area of scholarship offering the possibility of a fruitful dialogue with labour historians. The political scientists, sociologists and social psychologists that compose this field have sought to abstract through comparative inquiry common attributes of collective behaviour within protest movements. The term social movement itself is predicated on the recognition that protest should be understood as a complex process embracing activists and networks within multi-organisational fields rather than being the work of a given institution such as a political party or trade union. Roughly speaking, social movement theorists divide between the resource mobilisation approach which emphasises rational–political factors and the culturalist approach which focuses on subjective factors, in particular collective identity. More recently, dissatisfied with the polarisation of the field, scholars have synthesised these elements into a ‘dynamics of contention’ paradigm. In this spirit, three main areas of social movement theory seem to be particularly apposite to the study of the unemployed in France in 1934: first, theorisations of temporal–spatial phases of protest cycles; second, concepts explaining mobilisation; third, the characteristics of particular forms of protest within a ‘repertoire of action’.

The peculiarities of the French crisis of early 1934

To understand the starting conditions for this cycle of protest requires a close examination of the historical context and how participants would have cognitively framed their world. In terms of the movements of the unemployed, the Lille–Paris Hunger March of 18 November to 2 December 1933 drew national attention to its activities and impressed activists. Yet the hunger march did not in itself signal a transformation of the activism of the unemployed, depending as it did on the centralised and top down mobilisation of the resources of the PCF. The year that followed bought a new militancy, not only of the unemployed but also in campaigns against fascism. With the hunger march, the Communist Party had restored its hegemony over unemployed protest and seized upon a tactic it could apply across the country. Hunger marches set out in Basses-Pyrénées, Normandy, the Loire, Nord, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Gard and Somme. The news of the hunger marchers — and, in the case of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais, returning marchers — inspired new efforts on the part of the unemployed.

This resurgence occurred as the pace of events accelerated and took a threatening turn. The democratic and diplomatic order of central Europe established at Versailles had recently collapsed. Hitler’s power was consolidating and the ‘Austro-fascist’ Dollfuss was dismantling democracy in Austria. Breaking on 8 January 1934, the Stavisky corruption scandal that seemed to implicate senior political figures, including ministers, suggested a deep crisis of political legitimacy for the Third Republic and led to riots of 6 February of the far right outside the French parliament. On 12 February, a one-day general strike and demonstrations up and down the country against the threat of the fascism showed the powerful potential of unity between the different wings of the labour movement for mass mobilisation. This created a new configuration of political opportunities.
At the structural level, mounting unemployment only exacerbated the sense of tension. Although low by international standards, joblessness in France rose to a higher plateau than previously. In the years of the neo-cartel government (1932–34), the right had taken to the streets with peasant riots in Chartres in January 1933 and demonstrations from taxpayers, veterans and small businessmen in different parts of the country. With a right-centre coalition government from the February crisis, 1934 and 1935 witnessed the years of greatest hardship for the French working class and an intensification of political polarisation. Against the backdrop of economic crisis, unemployed protest, from early 1933 onwards, took place within the wider context of sectional economic protests of peasants, veterans, tax-payers, civil servants, isolated groups of industrial workers and traders. Associated in hindsight with the Popular Front, the collective action of the unemployed from early 1934 formed a constituent part of what Danielle Tartakowsky has aptly called the ‘new culture of demonstrations’ (‘la nouvelle culture manifestante’).

Opening new cycles of protest: the Calais riot of 5 January 1934

On 5 January 1934, Le Groupement des Chômeurs de Calais, the local communist-led unemployed committee, organised a demonstration demanding a weekly sack of coal to fend off the mid-winter cold of northern France. Of the French unemployed committees, the Groupement had been exceptionally active. Its distinctive record was not a simple reflection of communist implantation. Calais was at that time a socialist stronghold. The committee had delegated five members to participate in the hunger march. As was the intention, on the marchers’ return, their example stirred the unemployed to action. If everything was done to ensure that the Lille–Paris hunger march did not provoke the authorities, this restraint did not persist on their return to Calais. Yet, in Calais at least, militant demonstrations replaced the hunger march tactic thereby reconfiguring the movement’s repertoire of action with considerable ramifications for the levels of popular participation and resources required. Those who took part in the hunger march could not fail to appreciate its limitations as a tactic: the heavy organisational burden, the small numbers of participants and the consequent advantages that it gave the police.

The demonstration on 5 January began after the signing-on session at the mairie (mayor’s offices). Eight to nine hundred dockers from Calais-Nord, who suffered from the uncertainties of casualised labour and its threat of recurrent unemployment, joined the 200 unemployed who assembled at the Hôtel de Ville (town hall). Because of this imposing presence, the police hurriedly shut the doors of the Hôtel de Ville. André Martinod, a committee member, a hunger marcher and recent recruit to the PCF, made a speech to the crowd of dockers and unemployed. His participation on the hunger march gave him a moral authority with his peers. ‘We’, the firebrand shouted, ‘have not come to present our demands for yet another occasion, but to demand a sack of coal a week and not a month’. Eugène Morel, secretary of the Calais unemployed committee, then read the letter of demands of the unemployed dockers. Thus, whilst Morel had made a rational appeal through a general list of demands within the routinised conventions of the movement, as had happened many times before, the communist novice Martinod skilfully framed a particular source of
collective anxiety and perceived injustice, dramatised it and thereby heightened the emotional intensity of the moment. Martinod once again addressed the crowd, ‘The unemployed know where to find the coal — at the port’. The crowd then headed towards the port and the Mory-Watteau works where coal was stockpiled for the Navy. There the unemployed loaded up with coal. Understanding the powerful symbolism of such an event, but also perhaps calculating on conflict, Martinod explained that they should each take one or two blocks to pile up in front of the Hôtel de Ville to show the council that there was plenty of coal in Calais.15

In an effort to regain control of the situation, the Central Commissioner of Police formed a line with about ten of his men to prevent the demonstrators from returning to the centre of town. During the ensuing scuffle, 19 year-old Maurice Porquet was arrested for striking a police officer. Overwhelmed, jostled and ignored, the best that the Central Commissioner could do was to follow the 1500 or so demonstrators who were heading for the Hôtel de Ville.

Yet again, near the Hôtel de Ville, the Central Commissioner told the crowd to disperse. After repeating himself three times, he then ordered his men to draw their revolvers. Thus provoked, the jobless began to pelt the police with coal. Martinod approached the Central Commissioner and ‘imperiously’ (in the words of the latter) demanded the release of Porquet. Martinod growled that the police official had overstepped his authority and that he would come to regret this. In a flash, Martinod leapt on to a tram to expose to the crowd the officer’s refusal. Angered by Martinod’s attitude, the officer attempted to arrest the former hunger marcher, but Martinod successfully freed himself. Another spate of missiles rained down on the police. In addition, the windows of a café and the tram were smashed.16

Only with the arrival of reinforcements were the police able to restore calm to the streets. The events provoked strong reactions from local people polarising local opinion. ‘These serious incidents’ Favier reported, ‘have moved the Calais population’. The contrast between the Calais riot and the hunger march could not be starker. After the police harassment of the journey to Paris, 5 January represented a moment of vengeance for those hunger marchers — Martinod, Jean Lahaye, Émile Perrard, Xavier Brasseur — who participated. The day brought a sudden and momentary reversal in the symbolic and spatial relations of power. The unemployed were for a brief time in control of the situation. This sense of triumph and concessions from the local authorities had a powerful effect on the unemployed and allowed the cycle of protest in Calais to intensify and be sustained for several weeks. On an emotional level, it mobilised hope and at least temporarily stifled popular fear of the police. Of course, there were subsequent arrests and trials. Seven of the demonstrators went to jail, with sentences between eight days and one month.17

The day’s events also signalled a more profound transformation. The hunger march had struggled to generate sizeable support and its militants preferred caution over confrontation. It typified both the miserable fortunes of the PCF, the ineffectiveness of the unemployed movement and the low ebb of working-class confidence. The Calais riot revealed a quite different emotional climate. From the perspective of analysis of the Groupement as a social movement, the riot acted as what social movement theorists have called a ‘transforming event’ or the catalyst for new cycles of protest of varying temporal and geographical reach.18 Within this, the role of
the individual should not be discounted as the actions of Martinod were highly untypical of communist unemployed activists. With its innovative, unprecedented and forbidden character, the event crossed the boundary between ‘contained’ and ‘transgressive’ collective action that McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly identified. The Calais riot inspired unemployed activists far and wide: in Paris, Saint-Étienne and Valenciennes police surveillance reported that militants talked excitedly of the ‘example’ or ‘gesture’ of Calais.

**Intensifying and sustaining protest in the town and coastal area**

The riot of 5 January opened two months of remarkable local agitation amongst the unemployed that was unparalleled in France during the 1930s. The subversion of authority emboldened the leaders and electrified the atmosphere in Calais. The demands — a sack of coal, seven not six days benefits a week, more reasonable signing-on times and ending of special conditions imposed upon dockers — struck a deep resonance amongst part of the population of Calais, amongst whom there were nearly 4000 unemployed. On 11 January, the Groupement organised a lobby of 500 outside the hearing of Porquet’s case at the Palais de Justice in Boulogne and in the evening held a public meeting at which 2000–3000 were in attendance. Reflecting on the events of 5 January, Martinod blamed police provocation for the violence and insisted on more demonstrations despite the Mayor’s ban. After the meeting, scuffles with mounted police broke out and two more unemployed were arrested.

Now opting for a permissive stance, itself a signal of the effectiveness of protest, the Deputy-Mayor authorised an unemployed demonstration for 14 January. This attracted 3000 and organisers sent a delegation to the Hôtel de Ville to see the Deputy-Mayor and the Sous-Préfet (Sub-Prefect) of Calais. The delegation comprised six members of the unemployed committee (Cadras, Lahaye, Martinod, Morel, Parmentier and Perard) plus Bourneton, the regional secretary of the Communist Party, Brasseur, a unitaire dockers’ official and significantly Vantielcke, the secretary of the Calais SFIO (Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière). In the charged atmosphere that followed the events of 5 January and anticipating similar popular unity on the 12 February anti-fascist demonstration in Paris, the protest ended with shouts of ‘Long live unity of action!’

As William J. Sewell noted, transforming events not only disrupt routine social practices themselves, they also engender further disruptions elsewhere. The Calais riot generated a district cycle of protest. Through district networks of the PCF, the unions and the committees of the unemployed, the nearby towns became caught up in the infectious mood. In late January, there were demonstrations of between 100 and 300 in Marck, Boulogne-sur-Mer, and Saint-Pol-sur-Mer. By mid-February, police reports noted that agitation had spread to Baraques, Coulogne, Coquelles, Frethun, Brèmes-lez-Andres, Guines and Sangatte. Beyond the district connections that the Groupement were able to animate directly, collective action amongst the unemployed entered its most intense and remarkable phase in a ripple effect emanating from Calais. Geographical proximity, industrial composition, a common sense of injustice and human agency shaped this effect, lending a complex spatial pattern to
the riot’s ramifications. These factors explain why the Calais riot generated a ripple effect when other similar events in Saint-Quentin or Etaples did not.

That protest enveloped surrounding areas did not mean that it declined in Calais itself; not, at least, for the moment. On 26 January, Calais witnessed another massive mobilisation of the unemployed, which at its height reached 3000. After gathering their forces, the unemployed marched to the Hôtel de Ville. A delegation, received by the Mayor, demanded coal, which he said he would discuss, and asked for the charges resulting from 5 January to be dropped, which he flatly refused. The failure of the mobilisation of 26 January did not deter the committee but it did threaten to frustrate and demoralise the movement. Determined to press its case, the committee called successive meetings or demonstrations. On 1 February, 500 demonstrated for these demands.27 On the following day, 2000 attended a meeting and voted unanimously for a motion condemning the Deputy-Mayor and councillors for ignoring the ministerial circular authorising payment of benefits for Sundays and holidays. It pointed out that these had been paid since February 1933 in Montigny-en-Gohelle, Lille and Caudry. They declared themselves ‘resolved to impose it [emphasis in original]’.28 On 3 February, 600 unemployed and 150 dockers marched to the Hôtel de Ville demanding benefits on Sundays. Five days later, 700 waited outside the Hôtel de Ville as a delegation negotiated with the Mayor.29

On 5 January, Calais had stood out as an exceptional and inspirational symbol of successful militant action, but now, through conjunctural feedback, national events intensified the cycle of protest in Calais. The nationwide anti-fascist general strike of 12 February brought between 6000 and 15,000 onto the streets of Calais. Indeed, the town witnessed one of the strongest mobilisations with probably over 10 per cent of its population participating.30 In the aftermath, the combativity of the Calais unemployed reached another highpoint. On 13 February at 8.30 am, a group of unemployed picketed the signing-on at the mairie. Within half an hour, a contingent of 900 had been formed. At Lahaye’s call, they went to the Godin works to force the employer to take back those he had recently discharged. Realising the futility of this, given the lack of work at the firm, they returned to the mairie. The town clerk had not yet arrived. On the discovery of this, Martinod told the crowd that the overpaid clerk only started work at 10 am. Brasseur then shouted to the restless assembly that Vincent and Jockelson, two dockside firms, had unloaded a cargo of coal at 50 centimes a tonne below the union rate. He proposed that they compel the firm to pay them the difference, even if the money had to be taken from the safe. They reformed, with, at the head of the march, the symbolic paraphernalia of protest, a docker’s flag and two red flags of the Soviet Union, thereby manufacturing common identities and allegiances. Having resolved on this course of action, a delegation delivered their demands for the town clerk.

Brasseur, one of the delegation, returned to the crowd and explained that they would get their answer at 3 pm and that if they did not get satisfaction they would smash up the mairie. The teeming mass cheered Brasseur’s bravado loudly. They then headed for Vincent’s office where another delegation was received. They demanded trade union rates and the 175 francs back-pay for the team that had worked on Saturday. With growing impatience, the crowd went to Jockelson. They then heard that Vincent and Jockelson were meeting at 5 pm. In the meantime, the unemployed,
whose ranks were swelled with around 50 unemployed women, marched to the barrack. There, they booed and heckled an officer on the other side of the barrack railings. He must have been horrified at a mob of 1200 to 1500 which had the temerity to sing the Internationale, the \textit{Chanson de la 17e} and chant ‘Long live the red army’ then ‘government of murderers’ in front of his barrack. In symbolic terms, this was a rehearsal of insurrection, challenging the sites of power of the French state if not actually storming the barrack itself. On their return to the \textit{Hôtel de Ville}, they went their separate ways, planning to assemble once more at 3 pm.

At the appointed time, around 1000 unemployed thronged outside the \textit{Hôtel de Ville} as their delegates negotiated with the \textit{commission paritaire} (the tripartite adjudication and appeal committee). Emerging some time later from these discussions, Victor Serret listed the concessions that they had won. Sunday payments were to be made, and would be paid retrospectively. The rates of benefits were revised upwards: adults receiving 7 francs a day, 16 to 19 year olds getting 5 francs and those under 16 getting 3 francs 50 centimes. The \textit{commission paritaire} was also to include members of the unemployed committee. Walle, a SFIO councillor, confirmed the dramatic gains to the populous mass. Brasseur followed, hailed their achievements, and finally Martinod took his turn to address the gathering. The latter called on them to demonstrate outside the offices of the press (\textit{Le Petit Calaisien}, \textit{Le Phare}, and \textit{Le Telegram}) that he claimed had so misrepresented their movement. At 5.45 pm the boisterous demonstration eventually ended and the participants returned to their homes no doubt to recount the day’s events to family, friends and neighbours.\footnote{31}

The next day, 14 February, the attention of the Calais unemployed movement once again turned to Jockelson and Vincent. As before, police commissioner Favier was powerless to stop the large numbers of unemployed who had answered the call of the unemployed committee. Their spirits high after the previous day’s activity and with Serret and Lehaye at their head, the unemployed made their way to the dock firms’ offices. There, a delegation met with Mr Alexandre of Jockelson’s management and Mr Zegre, the president of the dockside employers. The delegation, emboldened by recent events, were in no mood for half-measures. Revealing the insurrectionary frame constructed by the movements’ leaders, they were reported to have said:

\begin{quote}
Give us immediately what our comrades who unloaded the \textit{Ostrovent} are owed. Hurry, because the lads are waiting. Otherwise we’ll open the safe. For two days we have been masters of the street, the factories are ours, the \textit{mairie} is ours, your material is ours, we’ve won this with our own hands. The army is also with us and we proclaim a Soviet Socialist Republic.
\end{quote}

The employers’ representatives hastily made a series of concessions ‘simply to appease them’.\footnote{32}

\section*{Decline of the cycle of protest in the coastal area}

Yet the ferment in Calais could not sustain itself indefinitely. The Calais unemployed committee had been faced with the dilemma of continuing the cycle of demonstrations in Calais itself, which would inevitably draw in police reinforcements, or to
spread the movement to neighbouring towns and villages. They opted for the latter. On 16 February, unemployed committee members including Brasseur went to Marck where a meeting of 250 was held after a demonstration had been banned. Two days later, fifteen Calais unemployed joined forty other at a meeting in Barraques.

The next meeting in Calais itself took place on 23 February with 1500 in attendance. There, Morel reflected on their magnificent demonstrations and that they had forced the local authorities to accept the Groupement’s demands on condition of government approval. This, he reported, had been refused all the way along the line. Morel bitterly criticised the local council and called for agitation to continue. Brasseur followed, stating that he was not afraid of the gardes mobiles (a paramilitary police force to deal with threats of public order) that had been sent to Calais and said that one day their violence would be answered. The committee proposed a motion and announced the visit of leading communists Cachin and ‘Gibon’ [sic — Gitton] on 3 March. With the increased police presence and the flat refusal to compromise on the part of the government, the limits of local unemployed protest, however combative, must have been apparent to the leaders and the ranks alike. They sought to escape this dilemma via the involvement of the wider forces of the CGT (Confédération Serevale du Travail) for a demonstration on 4 March. Unable to secure this, they were forced to postpone to 11 March. On that day, police and gardes mobiles, having denied the right to march, dispersed thirty to forty unemployed in Marck and 120 in Guines with six arrests. In Coulogne, a meeting of about forty was held. The two months of unemployed agitation in Calais had effectively come to an end.

The movement transformed: the cycle of protest in the Nord region

Unsurprisingly, the mood of Calais infected the neighbouring region of the Nord whose unemployed had also participated in the hunger march of November–December 1933. The Nord and Pas-de-Calais region combined France’s premier coalfield (responsible for sixty-five per cent of the nation’s coal production in 1929), its principal centre of the textile industry, as well as substantial engineering and steel. The multifaceted character of its industry produced a complex economic geography. The towns and villages densely populated the coalfield which stretched 100 km eastwards from Béthune to Valenciennes and 5 to 15 km north to south. Some parts of the coalfield — Denain, Anzin and Valenciennes — combined mining and steel production. Beyond the coal basin, other economic specialisations existed: wool in Roubaix, Tourcoing and Fourmies; linen in Lille and Halluin, cotton in Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing. To the east, heavy metallurgy developed around Maubeuge in the Sambre and Escaut valleys in close proximity to coal. From the perspective of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais’s regional character, its particular industrial mix meant that investment was concentrated in large workplaces and associated with them were powerful employers. This region should not be understood in one-dimensional terms, however. Around Avesnes, labourers combined industrial outwork and agricultural work, especially in the beetroot fields in an annual cycle of alternating industrial and agricultural activity. During the economic slump, the combination of large workplaces and the badly-hit older industries meant that this region suffered mass unemployment of a character not matched elsewhere outside the Paris region.
For those involved in the daily routine of organising the unemployed, the returns on their efforts defied logic. In the early days of 1934, the possibilities must have seemed boundless. News of events in Calais brought new hope to the unemployed. Attendance at meetings grew significantly. In Valenciennes, 180 crowded into the weekly meetings and leaders openly spoke of the need to emulate the ‘the Calais gesture’. Talk of defying the authorities had a new conviction about it. Providing evidence of the importance of the emotional dimension of the cycle of protest, police observed a ‘new spirit’ amongst the leaders of the unemployed. The Prefect of Nord described the changed situation to the Minister of the Interior:

... Rowdy demonstrations occur more and more regularly, notably around Valenciennes where meetings are larger, where groups easily improvise after signing on and where the deposition of demands has taken an aggressive character ... It is noteworthy that the Calais incidents are cited in all the meetings as an example to the unemployed by extremist orators.35

The agitation centred on the coalfield of the Nord. On 6 January, the unemployed of Petite-Fôret marched to the mayor’s offices at Aubry. On 9 January, 100 unemployed demonstrated at Anzin market and thirty-five at Sin-le-Noble. On 29 January, an impressive 400 demonstrated through the streets of Denain. Some communist implantation existed in the area but not in sufficient numbers to stage demonstrations without genuine participation from the non-party unemployed. The Denain district of the Communist Party had nine cells and 89 members in 1932. Only twenty members were based in Denain itself.36 On 1 February, 450 to 500 again demonstrated in Denain. This agitation also spread beyond the mining region. In the textile town of Bailleul, there were three demonstrations on 11, 15 and 31 January of between 70 and 100. On 20 January, fifty demonstrated in Houplines and the following day 160 marched in Nivelle.

It was obvious to all that a propitious moment for the unemployed movement had arrived. Éloi Mériaux chose to agitate for a demonstration, in effect a hunger march, on 4 February in Valenciennes, a large mining and steel town in the east of the department. Valenciennes was one of the largest Party districts in the region.37 He argued against those who favoured more localised demonstrations. A number of Comités des Chômeurs (CdCs, Committees of the Unemployed) activists — Mériaux and Marcel Mayeur (Valenciennes), François Desbois (Petite-Fôret), Fernand Lecompte and Jules Boussingault (Anzin) — toured the region tirelessly advocating the march on 4 February.38 Other prominent PCF figures such as Martha Desrumeaux sensed the possibilities and threw themselves into such work. Mériaux predicted 20 000 and his tone in the unemployed committee meetings suggested a near insurrectionary quality to the day.39

The demonstration did not match these elevated expectations but was nevertheless impressive by standards set by previous regional mobilisations of the unemployed. On the day itself, 1500 demonstrated with flags, banners and placards. The police dispersed groups of unemployed at the assembly points of Marly, Saint-Saulve and Trith-Saint-Léger. A column of 200 gathered from Conde, Fresnes and Escaupont, was dispersed and then went individually to Anzin. A group of 300 likewise made their way from Denain to Anzin. From Anzin, 1500 marched to Valenciennes.40 They
then attended a meeting where Lucien Sevrez, a communist councillor for Valenciennes, Suplice Dewez, the Nord deputy, and Pierre Mercier, an official of the Parisian unemployed movement, spoke. At the end of the demonstration, the police dispersed the crowd with one arrest.41

Elsewhere in Nord agitation found a resonance from unexpected quarters. The CGTU’s (Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire, communist-affiliated trade union confederation, described as unitaire) campaign also reached out to unemployed agricultural labourers. Mustered from various rural communes, a hunger march converged on Cambrai on 23 February. The particularly anguishing grievance that moved the seasonal workers of the whole region, according to the Réveil du Nord, was that half the unemployed seasonal workers in Iwuy received no benefits at the time of the Cambrai hunger march.42 By the time of their arrival in Cambrai at 12 noon with the addition of the town’s unemployed, the demonstrators numbered 2500 and marched around the town. At 1.30 pm a delegation went to the Sub-Prefect. An hour later a public meeting began with Brodel, an SFIO deputy, Puech, secretary of the CGTU agricultural workers, Dewez, the PCF deputy, Mynck of the regional CGTU, and Taquet, the secretary of Denain unemployed committee, all speaking.43 This passed off under the scrutiny of the police. Thirty police cyclists were ready to be deployed from Cambrai along the route and six squadrons of gardes mobiles (four of which were mounted) waited in Cambrai in case of trouble.44 The Sub-Prefect reflected on the success of the agitation amongst the agricultural labourers, ‘the discontent has been exploited by the intervention and creation of unitaires agricultural unions which were created with Avesnes-lès-Aubert as the centre. The movement, little by little, has taken hold of a greater district’.45

After the example of the Cambrai hunger march, other marches in the Nord region were organised to Douai on 18 April with 400 participating and Avesnes on 22 April with 2500 marching.46

Whilst these remote areas were successfully brought into activity, the mood was waning in the core areas of communist implantation. The size of meetings began — from the organisers’ point of view seemingly without reason — to dwindle. With 200 attending the Valenciennes unemployed committee on 24 February, the number soon halved and even dipped as low as thirty on 22 September.47 Differences of opinion over tactics, such as whether to seek authorisation for a demonstration, whether to opt for local more spontaneous or regional more thoroughly prepared demonstrations, took their toll. The moment of quicksilver radicalisation had been lost. Unemployment had passed its seasonal peak by March and the statistics were falling. The mantra in the communist press that this was all an illusion did not help activists on the ground come to grips with the ebb and flow of possibilities. The regional and national leadership had also temporised over the next step for the movement.48 In the meantime, largely unsuccessful attempts to revive unemployed activity punctuated the long hiatus. Of course, there were some exceptions. On the night of 21–22 August, in Valenciennes large numbers took part in an eviction fight with the police.49 Whilst the campaign against evictions was also in evidence in Roubaix and Armentières during the summer, more small-scale efforts were the norm for the CdCs.50 On 30 June, the police easily dispersed a demonstration of no more than 100 in Valenciennes. On 10 July, the Lourches committee could only summon seventy for a
demonstration. On 29 July, the collective forces of the unemployed of Roeulx, Lourches and Denain mustered a forlorn demonstration of 150 and meeting of 200 (in February the unemployed committee in Denain had mobilised 450–500 for a demonstration).

The fortunes of the unemployed movement in the Nord were only to turn with the onset of winter and the organisation of a regional hunger march. Beginning on 15 October, four columns from Fourmies, Denain and Somain, Le Cateau and Dunkirk wound their way through the mining and textile towns and villages of the Nord to Lille. Accumulating marchers on their itinerary, when they converged on Lille, they were 1500 strong and were received by large numbers of local workers and unemployed. 51

After this trigger event, the momentum of unemployed struggle changed once more. Unemployed protesters gained in numbers and confidence. Several hundreds demonstrated in Fives, Lambersant, Armentières, Quiévy over the next few weeks.

**Extending the repertoire: the occupation of the mairies**

With the recrudescence of a protest cycle with the regional hunger march, the repertoire of action widened to the occupation of the mairies signalling an intensification of protest. These occupations — though they were certainly out of the ordinary — were not a new tactic and had been used in Etaples, Montluçon and Saint-Quentin.52

The examples from Saint-Quentin and Etaples were, however, largely spontaneous and isolated affairs. After the end of the regional hunger march, the activists of the unemployed movement adopted the occupation of the mairie as a conscious tactic rather than a spontaneous improvisation and they did so in one locality after another: Neuf-Mesnil, Madeleine-lez-Lille (3 November), Templemars (15 December), Anor, Rousies (17 December), Louvroil (20 December), Rousies and Cerfontaine (21 December), Iwuy (24 December), Haubourdin (26 December), Avelin (14 January), Loos (16 January), Bousies (18 February). The prime mover in this campaign was the Comité Intercommunal et Régional des Chômeurs du Bassin de la Sambre, led amongst others by Gaston Staquet and Irénée Duez.53 An opening of possibilities for a new cycle of protest based on the occupations juxtaposed emotive issues (the broken promises to hunger marchers and Christmas hardships), the hope generated by the tactic’s success, disrupted social routines, labour movement resources and favourable structural conditions. Unemployment witnessed a dramatic rise in late 1934 in the Sambre basin. The bolt factories and ironworks shed hundreds of workers. Whereas Maubeuge’s unemployment had oscillated around 400–450 in 1933, by mid-November 1934 it had reached 956. The same ‘catastrophic situation’ existed in Haumont, Ferrière-la-Grande, Aulnoye and Louvroil. As a result a public meeting after the hunger march to Lille in Maubeuge/Sous-le-Bois could attract 825 of whom 300 joined a demonstration afterwards. The demand for payment of benefit on Sundays and holidays and for free coal for the unemployed, had an added festive poignancy given that Christmas was a day without benefits. Parents feared a cold and joyless Christmas for their children.
The first occupation in the Nord took place in Neuf-Mesnil because the Mayor refused to pay the benefit of the regional hunger marchers. On 23 October, Deudon and Staquet led 150 demonstrators to the *mairie* of Neuf-Mesnil over this issue. On the same day, forty unemployed waited four hours singing revolutionary songs for the Mayor of Haumont in the *mairie* until he returned from the Sub-Prefect at Avesnes. This improvisation formed the model for occupations elsewhere.

On 3 November, the refusal to pay two days of benefit to the unemployed sparked an occupation in Neuf-Mesnil. At 8 am, the unemployed invaded the *mairie* and remained for ten hours, refusing to move for either the Mayor or the police until their demands were met. The tactic of refusing to leave the *mairie* succeeded in obtaining the benefit payment and so embarrassed the council that the Mayor and several councillors resigned. As a consequence, André Lemoine, one of the leading Avesnes communists, was elected Mayor. Now protests of the unemployed expanded the PCF’s municipal conquests. On the same day, *L’Humanité* reported that the unemployed of La Madeleine, the suburb of Lille, surprised Mayor Deschamps with an eleven-hour occupation of the *mairie*. He acceded to a delegation paying two unpaid days of benefit and establishing weekly benefit payments rather than every ten days.

The *Grand Echo* also related the event but the Police Commissioner played down proceedings in his report to the Prefect as ‘a little effervescence’, challenging the press version. These two successes served as an example to others.

A veritable rash of local occupations began in Templemars, just to the south of Lille, on 15 December. The dispute had arisen because the council had agreed a month earlier to the payment of the seventh day. Because Jules Fichelle of the unemployed committee had spoken at the council session, a councillor who had not been present demanded that Jules Lemoine, the Mayor, annul the decision because it had broken council procedure. Angered by the reversal, fifty unemployed decided to occupy the *mairie* after they had signed on. At first, the sergeant and two gendarmes from Seclin tried to evict the protesters without effect. Police reinforcements were drafted in from Lille. The Mayor, eventually arriving at 5.45 pm, promised that the council would confirm its original decision to pay the seventh day at its next meeting. Only the appearance of the special inspector from the Prefecture persuaded the unemployed, after a day-long occupation, to leave peacefully.

This method was copied on 20–21 December in three *communes* within a few kilometres of Maubeuge: Louvroil, Rousies and Cerfontaine. Joblessness in Maubeuge rose rapidly from 882, to 930, to 1,036 in two consecutive weeks in December 1934. One hundred in Rousies and 140 in Louvroil staged the occupations but withdrew after a promise to consider their grievances at the next council meeting. Louvroil’s unemployed, according to the Mayor at the instigation of militants from Maubeuge or Haumont, occupied the *mairie* for only twenty minutes. At Cerfontaine, the closure of the unemployment fund had provoked an occupation, which was resolved by the commitment to ask for a loan from the Prefecture.

In Iwuy, ten kilometres north-east of Cambrai, 250 unemployed stormed the *mairie* on Christmas eve. Their spirits were already high on 19 December when they had held a meeting and two days later deposited their demands with Day, the Mayor of Iwuy. The Mayor rebuffed their demand for benefit payments on Sundays and holidays but said that he would look into the possibility of seasonal distribution of
coal and warm clothing. On the morning of 24 December, the unemployed organised another meeting reformulating their demands, which consisted of the former demands plus three days signing on a week, the payment of public works at union rates, a meeting room, an end to the ban on the CGTU as well as a protest at the use of the garde mobiles against demonstrators. At 9.30 am, two delegates took the list of demands to the Mayor and threatened that they would occupy the mairie if the demands were not met; 200 then pushed their way into the mairie and occupied the salle des délibérations (council chamber) on the first floor. At 4 pm, the Mayor pleaded with the demonstrators not to put demands on the council that were not in its power to grant. At 5.30 pm, the wives of the unemployed turned up to protest, shouting and asking to see the Mayor. A group of them had gone to the Mayor’s house and broken his windows. By the evening, two squadrons of garde mobiles descended on Iwuy from Le Quesnoy. By then, a large crowd of wives, friends, relatives and sympathisers of the unemployed occupied the square in front of the mairie. The Reveil du Nord noted the ‘picturesque spectacle’ of the great windows of the mairie flung open to a chorus of the Internationale for the crowd outside who raised food by a cord to the occupants. The crowd outside the mairie remained until 11.30 pm. It was not until 8 am Christmas morning that Delattre, the Valenciennes special commissioner, entered the salle des délibérations with the garde mobiles, at which point, the 250 unemployed evacuated without resistance. The garde mobiles remained in Iwuy to patrol the streets and guard the mairie for at least ten days, causing Iwuy CdC to send delegations to the mayor and the Sub-Prefect to demand that these policing costs be used to alleviate the hardship of the unemployed, and to meet their request for seven days benefit. Both sides paid a price for the occupation. The Sub-Prefect of Cambrai was replaced because of his failure to re-establish order in good time. The authorities prosecuted those involved in the occupation. On 6 March 1935, with 300 unemployed in attendance, the trial of those involved in the Iwuy occupation took place. One of the accused was jailed for fifteen days, five received suspended sentences and the others were acquitted.

On 24 December, Armand Guillon, the Prefect, circularised all local police authorities about the threat of such occupations. He realised that the prolongation of economic hardships created conditions for more of the same and worse. He wanted to be informed of all developments and called for the rapid deployment of police reinforcements to avoid occupations or for speedy evacuation as well as wishing the conviction of instigators. The watchwords for his subordinates were ‘vigilance’ and ‘firmness’. Two days later, the Prefect followed this up with a letter to the Sub-Prefect of Avesnes about the persistence of this problem. They would face ‘serious incidents, for the threats of occupation are numerous and made with a lot of vehemence’. He warned that Lucien Renaud of the Haumont CGTU proposed an occupation of the Jeumont mairie and stationed a squadron of garde mobiles within striking distance at Landrecies and another at Le Quesnoy. A special meeting of his cabinet, mayors and police officials would be convened on how to tackle this question. The Sub-Prefect alerted his superior to rumours of occupations in Hornaing and Cuincy. The Divisional Commissioner in Lille thought the unemployed of Templeneuve would occupy. Despite various attempted occupations, repression successfully brought the cycle of action to an end.
The mayoral occupations hit small communes where unemployment radically altered the local balance between consent and coercion. Local authorities could no longer rely on the acquiescence of the unemployed but did not have the local police resources to ensure order. The tactic of mayoral occupations was an expression of this situation and momentarily exposed the impotence of local authority. The strength of the tactic, the shift in the balance of consent and coercion, was also its ultimate weakness because each time that order was restored with the arrival of gardes mobiles from outside the locality the demands of the unemployed were frustrated. Such dramatic direct action made a considerable impression upon unemployed militants. The tactic was widely considered in 1936 and acted on in several cases.

Reflecting on the dynamics of unemployed contention

Prompted by the Lille to Paris hunger march, the Calais riot transformed unemployed protest in northern France. The year that followed witnessed the highpoint of unemployed protest but this was short-lived and far from a nationwide experience. As the Minister of the Interior’s eyes cast across the reports from his Prefects on unemployment and political activity, he noticed that, in the year that followed the events of 6 February outside the Chamber of Deputies, the political colours of the mosaic that was France were intensifying. There was both worsening unemployment in the industrial regions and a political and social polarisation.

From the standpoint of the repertoire of contention, going beyond the choreographed style of protest implicit in the hunger march tactic, more spontaneous and more audacious unemployed militancy flared up in Calais, parts of Nord and Saint-Quentin. This reflected a profound radicalisation of parts of French society that later found its fullest expression in the factory occupations of summer 1936, for which the occupations of the mairies provided one but not the only precedent. There was also a diversity of tactics with school strikes in Pérenchies-Prémesques, Iwuy and Sars-Poterie and strikes of relief workers in Saint-Quentin and Cysoing. In reality, as this article has demonstrated, these forms within the repertoire of protest fed into one another. Organising hunger marches at lower levels of militancy was important in conjuring networks of activists into life for more militant action. Yet other industrial areas — Seine, Bordeaux, Lyon, Alsace-Lorraine, the Rhine — were all notable for the comparative absence of protest. The factors already identified in Calais and the Nord were not present in those places. Small differences in starting conditions — the audacity of local leaders, the strength of local communist networks, responses to bans on demonstrations, the timing and impact of workplace closures, the local generosity of benefits arrangements — might lead to the absence or opening of cycles of protest.

In many ways, 1934 was a unique year, before the Popular Front had been fully worked out. It witnessed the reciprocal action of rising working-class militancy and unity of action. The example of the Lille-Paris hunger march provided a novel and, within its own limitations, successful form of collective action for unemployed activists in the scattered industrial regions of France. Yet, it was the Calais riot that acted as the critical trigger for a new phase of protest and definitively broke the
THE CALAIS RIOT OF 5 JANUARY 1934

recurrent disappointments of those trying to construct movements of the unemployed. The chronology of this phase varied geographically but ended a few months into 1935. The popular front policy with its desire for respectability and allies from the political middle-ground meant the withdrawal of PCF resources from the movement. In many places, however, cycles of protest had already come to an end.

At the structural level, the timing and size of unemployment flows formed indispensable prior conditions for protest. Indeed, historians and sociologists have long noticed that the structural and experiential characteristics of unemployment create unique conditions and problems for movements of the unemployed. This implies that although unemployed movements can be considered to be social movements and that generic insights can be drawn from this, there is also an irreducible specificity to movements of the unemployed. It was the psychological impact and fluidity of unemployment that caused this specificity, setting parameters for and conditioning the character of such movements. The period under investigation witnessed the coincidence of the high-point of the secular trend of unemployment, with the most depressed phase of the business cycle and a pattern of seasonal variation in levels of unemployed; all three had an observable effect on the patterns of protest. Sharply rising unemployment necessarily meant high proportions of newly unemployed yet to be demoralised by long-term lack of work. Despite the best efforts of the communists before 1934, they were unable to match this moment in terms of intensity of protest and, even during 1934, they were unable to sustain that intensity in summer lulls in the level of joblessness. Yet there was not an automatic correlation between mass unemployment and protest. Again confirming the idiosyncrasy of unemployed contention, there was a regional unevenness and autonomy to events that structural factors cannot adequately address.

The rational and political wing of social movement theory emphasises resource mobilisation, political opportunities, rational choices, political processes, institutional settings and outcomes. From this perspective, the PCF was crucial in providing material resources for the movements (newspapers, leaflets, rooms, and sometimes paid activists) and the overlapping networks with access to union, party and veteran constituencies. Across the spectrum of protest forms, the demands on PCF assets varied enormously. Hunger marches required the greatest mobilisation of the communist movement: at the national level, in the case of the march of November–December 1933, or at regional or district level in the case of the hunger marches of 1934 and 1935. These hunger marches required very careful and intensive preparation. Unlike the heavy investment of resources that the hunger march entailed, local demonstrations, especially ones that were launched from signing-on times, required much greater elements of popular agency to mobilise successfully. Concentrating on the political process would also privilege the role of the communists with their evolving relationship with other political actors (with the emergence of the Popular Front approach) and their ulterior motives of municipal electoralism and ‘transmission belt’ recruitment from the ‘mass organisations’. From the rational and political perspective, the cycle of protest opened with political opportunities and the resource mobilisation and declined with the combination of the PCF switching resources into other campaigns, the increasing personal costs of participation and the closure of

...
political opportunities often through repression. A focus on political resources and opportunities, however, provides little insight into the fine detail of the appearance of protest. Calais was relatively weak from the PCF point of view and some of its stronger regions failed to generate militant protest.

Some social movement theorists, such as Jasper, have criticised the reliance of their colleagues upon rational models that excluded emotion from the process of contestation. Small geographical or chronological differences generated radical variations in the ability of the movements to mobilise suggesting that it is hard to explain the dynamics of these movements without reference to the ‘mood’, that rapidly evolving amalgam of popular emotions. Indeed, accounts of the movements of the unemployed, whether provided by the police, the contemporary documents of the movement or in memoirs of participants, all refer to a spectrum of emotions (discontent, fear, hope, anger, despair, joy, indignation) as integral to the vital impulse of the movement. The metabolism of movements was much faster than their structural or cultural context. Furthermore, there is a suggestive symmetry between Jasper’s notion of demonstrations as a form of collective euphoria and the standard police description of popular ‘effervescence’ in situations like the events of Calais or Iwuy. Again like other features of the dynamics of contestation, the repertoire of action can be differentiated along emotional lines. Unlike the euphoria of the Calais events, the hunger march entailed a much more solemn and dignified affair. In terms of the cycle of initiation, intensification and decline, each phase had its corresponding emotional mixes. A roughly sequential emotional cycle of anger, hope, euphoria, tension and despair mirroring the cycle of protest might even be postulated. The emotional dimension thereby provides insightful nuances to the overall account of the movement. Adding significantly to the explanations of the events, the difficulties of measuring and assessing emotional levels compound older concerns that an overemphasis on the emotional aspect of crowd behaviour pathologises protest.

The culturalist wing of the social movement theory has stressed the semiotic character of events whereby symbolic production and the construction of identity are crucial to the cycle of contestation. As we have seen, these protests embodied symbolic and spectacular elements that were both inherently purposive and shaped the fluid sequences of events. In France, from a tactical point of view, the hunger march bore the following features. Firstly, it was a theatrical challenge to, and soft contestation with, the authorities. Secondly, the unemployed were making an appeal beyond their own territory to the public conscience. In this sense, this tactic was a symbolic and a spectacular contestation of public space. It involved only small numbers of active participants seeking a mass participation only at the passive level of spectators and fund-raising supporters. The process of signification and symbolic interaction was equally central to more fluid, hard contestations with the authorities like the events in Calais or the occupations of the mairies. On an obvious level, slogans, chants, songs and banners provide a ubiquitous semiotic landscape of identification for the demonstrators and spectators. Less obviously, the course of events hinged around the construction of symbolic targets of discontent, violence or spectacle (such as the stocks of coal at the Calais docks, the newspaper offices, the police chief, the town hall), or the symbolic personification of the collectivity: the
heroic ‘man of action’ or the movement’s martyr (activists like Martinod or Mériaux arrested or beaten by police).

The rich semiotics of these events allowed, according to the culturalists, the construction of collective identities so necessary to the cohesion and development of a social movement. With the CdCs, however, this process of construction was not straightforward. Identification with these organisations, attendance at their meetings and membership grew as a consequence of such events but the CdCs did not seek to construct an exclusively unemployed sense of identity, preferring composite identities. Neither was there strong evidence of the unemployed identifying themselves as such. Thus, there is a powerful sense of *ch’i’ti* (northern) identity in Charles Tillon’s account of the 1933 hunger march. Other composite identities combined being unemployed with occupational background, locality and, most frequently, class or, in the case of Calais’s unemployed dockers, all of these elements. Constructing an identity on such a transitory phenomenon as unemployment was perhaps inherently problematic.

Reflecting upon the symbolic level, the phases of the protest cycle opened with a dramatic disruption of the normative order creating the conditions for activism such as the refusal to leave the *mairie* or the theft of coal from the port of Calais. The creation of potent widely recognisable symbols capable of establishing composite collective identities accompanied the intensification of the cycle. This ended with the ability of the authorities to disrupt these signifying processes through the closure of arenas within which these symbols and identities were framed, with bans on demonstrations and patrols of the *gardes mobiles*. Ultimately, however, metaphysical analysis provides incomplete explanation. It was the physical force of numbers that permitted the symbolic overturning of existing political authority through the occupation of the streets, or the sites of power, or through the spectacular humiliation of figures of authority. By the same token, the repressive physical forces of the state in the shape of *gardes mobiles* brought to a close each of the three cycles of collective action under examination.

Of late, social movement theorists have sought to synthesise the different approaches — rational/resource mobilisation/political, symbolic/cultural, social psychological/emotional, structural/conjunctural — into a dynamic of contestation. As the events that followed the Calais riot of January 1934 demonstrate, synthesis offers the fullest explanation of events. This approach is more than mere synthesis or eclecticism being based on a rejection of static or monicausal models of protest. Protest is understood as taking place as a coherent process — a protest cycle. Despite their coherence, protest cycles are multifaceted, a reality that older non-synthetic social movement approaches have succeeded in capturing only partially.

The implication is that accounts that focus on PCF policy or levels of unemployment provide explanations that work at the macro rather than the micro level. Whilst such generalised explanations should not be rejected, they are unable to explain the geographical and temporal complexities or the relative autonomy of the cycle of protest and its phases, or the crucial element of human (rather than exclusively institutional) agency within them. A middle position is required. One that rejects the view that the movements of the unemployed and the protests they generated as ‘bearers’ of Comintern policy. The jobless were generally far too unyielding to the
efforts of activists for that. Equally erroneous would be the belief that the unemployed were a social group that acted spontaneously and independently of the resources and activist networks that in particular the communists provided.

At a wider historiographical level, these assessments also suggest the possibility of a cross-fertilisation between social movement theory and the history of protest movements of the unemployed. The point should not be exaggerated since many of the concerns raised were already being addressed by labour historians and there have been efforts to borrow one from another. Yet the conceptual precisions of social movement theory do render more explicit various dimensions of protest and allow the formulation of new research questions in such mature fields of inquiry as the protests of the unemployed.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Richard Croucher, Colin Barker and the two anonymous referees for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.


4 The ‘culturalist’ wing of social movement study are also known as the symbolic interactionists.

5 Concepts of mobilisation include political resources, injustice frames, contained or transgressive collective action; aspects of the forms of protest considered include the selection, creativity and relations to other forms.

6 Seemingly threatened by the local CGT’s Saint-Nazaire to Nantes march of 27–28 June 1933.

7 On 3 December 1933, Maurice Perse, the communist Mayor of Le Boucau, led between 150 and 200 unemployed from Tarnos to Ondres (Basses-Pyrénées), Divisional Commissioner’s (Hendaye) reports, 1 & 4 December 1933, Archives Nationales de France, Paris (AN), F7/13565. [The distance between the two towns is 2.7 km.] On the hunger march from Dives-sur-Mer to Caen of 4 January 1934, La Croix du Calvados, 6 January 1934.

Saint-Étienne to the Ministry of Interior, 30 January 1934, AN, F7/13559; Prefect (Nord) to Minister of Interior, 11 January 1934, AN, F7/13560; Seargent’s report (Haumont), 25 January 1934, Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille (ADN), M616/29.

Chronology and size of events: 11 January: public meeting (2000–3000); 14 January: demonstration (3000); 18 January: public meeting (1500); 26 January: demonstration (3000); 1 February: demonstration (500); 2 February: public meeting (2000); 3 February: demonstration (750); 8 February: lobby (700); 13 February: demonstration (1200–1500); 14 February: demonstration (1200–1500).

The police estimated 2000 and organisers said 3000. Speakers: Morel (CdC), Grave (PCF), Desrumeaux, Maguis and Martinod. Special Commissioner to the Director of General Security, 12 January 1934, AN, F7/13561.

Perrard was spelt Perrard elsewhere. Vantielcke was a deputy in 1936, Claude Pennetier (ed.), Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français, Paris, 1997, CD-Rom.

Special Commissioner to Director of General Security, 14 January 1934, AN, F7/13561.


Special Commissioner (St.Omer) to Sub-Prefect (St.Omer), 16 February 1934, AN, F7/13565.

Special Commissioner (Calais) to Director of General Security, 2 February 1934, AN, F7/13561.

Calais CdC to the Minister of Labour, 2 February 1934, AN, F7/13561; Prefect (Nord) to Minister of the Interior, 11 January 1934, AN, F7/13561.

Situation of the PCF, AN, F7/13098.


Special Commissioner (Calais) report, 13 February 1934, AN, F7/13561.

Special Commissioner (Calais) to the Director of General Security, 15 February 1934, AN, F7/13561.

Special Commissioner (Calais) report, 11 March 1934, AN, F7/13561.

To capitalise on the success of the hunger march, on 23 December a regional congress with 58 delegates from 35 CdCs (including 21 marchers) established a Comité Régional des Chômeurs (CRC, Regional Committee of the Unemployed). Charles Tillon’s report on the hunger march, 7 January 1934, Archives Départementales de Seine-Saint-Denis (ADSSD), 3/Mi/6/107.

Prefect (Nord) to Minister of the Interior, 11 January 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Situation of the PCF, AN, F7/13098.

With twenty-six cells and 320 members in 1932. It organised the eastern end of the mining area encompassing Petite-Fôret, Anzin, Maing, Raismes, Saint-Sambre, Bruay, Saultain, Beuvrages, Thiant, ...
Hérin and Wallers, Situation of the PCF, AN, F7/13098.

Special Commissioner (Valenciennes) to Sub-Prefect, 24 January 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Special Commissioner (Valenciennes) to Sub-Prefect, 24 January 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Prefect (Nord) to Minister of the Interior, 5 February 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Special Commissioner (Valenciennes) to Sub-Prefect, 3 January 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Le réveil du Nord, 18 February 1934.

Special Commissioner (Cambrai) to Prefect (Nord), 23 February 1934, AN, F7/13560. L’humanité, 24 February 1934 claimed 3000.

Report of Captain Werquin, commandant of the section of the gendarmerie of Cambrai, 19 February 1934, ADN, M616/29.

Sub-Prefect (Avesnes) to Prefect (Nord), 22 February 1934, ADN, M616/29.

Situation of the PCF, AN, F7/13098. Special Commissioner (Douai) to Director of General Security, 18 April 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Numbers attending the Valenciennes unemployed meetings in 1934: 24 February, 200; 12 March, 100; 28 March, 100; 6 April, 100; 12 May, 85; 31 May, 80; 9 June, 90; 30 August, 85; 22 September, 30; 29 October, 100, AN, F7/13560.

Special Commissioner (Valenciennes) to Sub-Prefect, 11 April 1934, AN, F7/13560. A report of a Valenciennes unemployed committee meeting of the previous day. Ibid., 20 April 1934. Divisional Commissioner of Special Police (Lille) report, 20 May 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Le réveil du Nord, 14 December 1934.

Central Commissioner (Roubaix) to Prefect (Nord), 28 August 1934, AN, F7/13560.


Special Commissioner (Montluçon) to Sub-Prefect, 26 December 1933 & Special Commissioner (Montluçon) to Prefect (Allier), 30 December 1933. AN, F7/13552; L’humanité, 27 December 1933. Special Commissioner (Boulorange) to Director of General Security, 16 February 1934, AN, F7/13561. Central Commissioner’s report on Alexis François, AN, F7/13588; L’exploit, 24 November 1934; L’humanité, 23 November 1934.

Reporting a meeting of 500 at Maubeuge CdC, Police Commissioner (Maubeuge) to Sub-Prefect, 6 December 1934, ADN, M616/29.

Sergeant’s report (Haumont), 24 October 1934, ADN, M616/29.

Sergeant’s report (Haumont), 23 October 1934, ADN, M616/29.

L’humanité, 4 November 1934. In Athis-Mons (Paris region), about 100 unemployed refused to leave the mairie until their demands had been met. This included free coal, stew, signing on in a proper room on 30 December. Like other mayors faced with this tactic, Paquereau caved in before their demands. L’humanité, 28 December 1934.

ADN, M37/90B & M395/69.

L’humanité, 5 November 1934.

Police commissioner (La Madeleine) to Prefect, 5 November 1934, ADN, M616/32/C.

Divisional commissioner (Lille) to the Director of General Security, 16 December 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Communication from L’oeuvre, 8.05pm, 21 December 1934, AN, F7/13560; Situation of the PCF, AN, F7/13098. Haumont-Maubeuge district of the PCF: 163 members in five cells (Maubeuge-Louvain, Jeumont, Roucies, Ferrière-la-Grande and Haumont).

Le petit Parisien, 21 December 1934, AN, F7/13560.

Mayor (Louvain) to Sub-Prefect (Avesnes), 21 December 1934, ADN, M616/32/C; The Prefect also mentioned an occupation at Anor on 17 December, Prefect (Nord) to Sub-Prefect, 24 December 1934, ADN, M616/32.


Le réveil du Nord, 25 December 1934, ADN, M616/32/C.


L’humanité, 5 January 1935.

Le réveil du Nord, 5 January 1935.

Report of Captain Werquin, Commandant of the Gendarmerie, Cambrai section, 6 March 1935, ADN, M616/32/C.

Prefectoral circular, 24 December 1934, ADN, M616/32/C.

Sub-Prefect to Prefect, 26 December 1934 & Divisional Commissioner (Lille) to Prefect 28 December 1934, ADN, M616/32/C.


For example Jean Chaintron, who described himself as a ‘unemployed propagandist’ in Lyon was not active in the CdC but in the SRI and makes no mention of this unemployed committee, Jean Chaintron, Le vent soufflait devant ma porte, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1993, pp.75–85.


ADN, M616/29 Commissionnaire Police (Bailleul) to Sub-Prefect (Dunkirk), 11 January 1934. About a demonstration in Neuf-Mesnil, Report of Sergeant Geneau (Haumont), 24 October 1934, ADN M616/29. It is quite possible that the police were drawing on Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence elaborated in his work originally published in 1912, Émile Durkheim, Elementary Forms of