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Leslie A. Schuster, *A Workforce Divided: Community, Labor and the State in Saint-Nazaire's Shipbuilding Industry, 1880-1910*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002. X + 233 pp. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$64.95 U.S. (cl) ISBN 0-313-31775-5.

Review by Steve Zdatny, West Virginia University.

Those who pine for the engaged labor histories of the 1960s and 1970s will find *A Workforce Divided* immensely satisfying. Although Professor Schuster gestures here and there toward anthropology and other interdisciplinary vogues, she clearly has the heart of an old-fashioned, coal and iron labor historian. Leaving questions of "culture" and "meaning" aside, *A Workforce Divided* heads right for the old-time meat: labor process and working-class identity. (And I suspect the author did not find it especially marketable.) There is nothing "new" about this social history, but it is as solid as a steel hull or a 50-kilo chunk of peat.

What factors determined the particular shape of the Saint-Nazaire working class? Schuster sets her thesis out on the table at the outset: "The competing identities and divergent values and objectives evident among Saint-Nazaire's shipbuilding workforce in the thirty years before World War I were fostered by the intersection between state programs, industrial production, and the patterns of work and life that workers pursued in the local realm, that is, by factors specific to the industry and to their communities" (p.2). The result was a process that the author opposes to "the traditional model" of industrial development and class formation.

Schuster begins by tracing Saint-Nazaire's transformation from a small fishing port to an industrial town, beginning during the Second Empire. Saint-Nazaire enjoyed certain natural advantages as a port that its more developed neighbor, Nantes, did not. It therefore became the focus of the efforts of the well-connected but entrepreneurially-challenged Péreire brothers to found a shipping empire. They created the shipping company Transat (Compagnie Générale Transatlantique) and the Penhouët shipyards to exploit the expansion of international commerce and their access to Bonapartist patronage. The first chapter of Saint-Nazaire's industrial history came to an end in 1868, when an economic downturn and the industry's own problems all but shut down the shipyards.

The town experienced a modest rebound in the 1870s, more as a transshipment point than as a manufacturing center, largely for carrying mail across the Atlantic. But it was in 1881 that the history of Saint-Nazaire took a decisive turn, when the legislature decided to pour millions of francs in subsidies into the shipping and ship-construction industries. The population of Saint-Nazaire climbed from 16,000 in 1882 to 20,000 in 1886 to over 35,000 by 1901, as new employment opportunities drew workers to this "bleak...poor, dull, [and] squalid place" (p.26).

The 1881 law was crucial for carrying the habit of subventions for the shipping industry into the Third Republic. Schuster several times returns to the notion that the politics of the era set free traders against protectionists in business and the National Assembly and that this legislation amounted to something of a compromise between them (pp.46-7). But I confess to not following her logic. Insofar as politicians and businessmen "embraced state intervention [for] those industries essential to the national interest" (p.47), they could hardly be considered devotees of free trade. After all, everyone who favored protection argued that it was in the national interest. The author might have clarified matters by actually examining the political process that produced the policy of subsidies for maritime construction, but she

does not. This is a minor point, however, since Schuster is less interested in the mechanics of policy than in its consequences.

Its principal consequence was an industry characterized by “erratic activity” (p.39); that is, by a business cycle tied not to the market but to the vicissitudes of public financing. In other words, good politics made for bad economics. Subsidies became a sort of narcotic—Caillaux called them the “morphine of the merchant marine” (p.67)—that served only to undermine the viability of the shipbuilding industry. Penhouët and the other construction firms used government money to make ships. But the shelter they received from the market allowed production inefficiencies to survive and meant ultimately that the industry could never compete *without* these subsidies. Sometimes the incentives it offered were downright perverse, as in the 1893 legislation that encouraged the construction of sailing ships at the expense of steam-powered vessels. The author quotes the political scientist and free trader Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, who “suggested that if the interventionist spirit of this law were extended to other sectors, the nation would soon see a ‘return to pikes and crossbows [for military use]’” (p.54). What is more, while the state taught shippers and shipbuilders to feed at the public trough, it continually reduced rations. With subsidy laws in 1893 and 1904, the state kept the shipbuilding industry in Saint-Nazaire on a yo-yo. Only increased preparations for war, beginning in 1913, brought it some stability.

From the workers’ perspective, “the subsidy system” had the deplorable effect of “enhanc[ing] the cyclical nature of production and contribut[ing] to chronic and elevated unemployment” (p.59). In effect, “the state and its representatives emerged as the true employer in this industry” (p.66), with a profound impact on the attitude and strategy of labor in Saint-Nazaire. Public authorities and employers seem not to have planned it this way, but the endemic unemployment crisis in Saint-Nazaire, and the fact that there was no point fighting with employers, since jobs and the other benefits of employment came from Paris, functioned to de-radicalize labor. That is, it forced Saint-Nazaire’s workers to line up beside their employers in order to keep the tap from the legislature open.

Having laid out the context, Schuster turns her attention to the “labor process” and its role in forming the proletariat of Saint-Nazaire. Her theoretical foils here are two: the old Tilly-Shorter concept of a “modernization” of the French working class and the related idea that the shape of militancy was largely decided by the struggle of privileged workers against de-skilling. She finds instead a “fitful, complex, and highly variable process” (p.80) that created as many new niches for skill as it destroyed, the more so as the industry converted from wood to iron to steel. This was true for France more than, say, for Britain, since even as it modernized, shipbuilding in Saint-Nazaire retained more of its artisanal character than yards in Clydeside. This was all very well for those who found more satisfaction in meaningful jobs and greater control of the labor process. But, of course, it also meant that costs were much higher in French shipyards. Because French shipbuilders could not compete with their British or German competitors, they became even more dependent on state subsidies and therefore more prone to cyclical crises. Employers tried to boost productivity through piece-rates and bonus pay. Workers had their own points of leverage, however, since they knew that shipbuilding contracts rewarded early completion and penalized late deliveries. Costs remained high.

In any event, Schuster finds that it was not primarily the labor process that wrought the Saint-Nazaire working class. It was shaped above all by “community and a community identity” (p.115). Throughout the period covered in the book, the Saint-Nazaire proletariat was composed of two distinct communities that remained separate. The first came from the nearby area of the Brière—backward and marshy and whose inhabitants were generally considered “doleful and stupid” and “widely regarded as a population at odds with the French nation” (p.119)—and especially from the commune of Saint-Joachim. Peat had always been the foundation of the local economy. As the peat harvest declined in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Briérons began to look for other supplements to their meagre resources. They found one in the shipbuilding industry growing in the nearby town of Saint-Nazaire.

What is most significant for Schuster is not just that the Briérons came to Saint-Nazaire to find work, but that they did so without severing their ties to Saint-Joachim. Many of these workers made the long commute to the shipyards on a daily basis. They all flocked back to the Brière for the peat harvest, which continued at a diminishing level. Thus, Schuster points out, even as they converted to industrial labor, the citizens of this rural “small republic” (p.121) did not become an urban proletariat. Quite the reverse, industrial labor enabled them to preserve their rural community.

In fact, the Briérons mixed very little with the real proletariat of Saint-Nazaire, mostly immigrants from further-off but equally destitute corners of Brittany, who straggled into town looking for work. The two groups tended to hold different jobs in the shipyard, since the Briérons had local shipbuilding traditions that gave them access to more skilled jobs, which they then kept among themselves. The non-Briérons meanwhile crowded into the semi- and unskilled jobs in the yard and into various run-down neighborhoods in the expanding town. Here they experienced a fracturing of social life such as the Briérons never knew. It is a grim picture that Schuster draws of new arrivals, living in grimy housing among strangers and, like the Briérons, subject to frequent bouts of unemployment, only without any cushion.

This bifurcation of the working population of Saint-Nazaire helps Schuster explain why “industrial employment in Saint-Nazaire from 1881 did not lead to the formation of a single, cohesive working class with shared concerns and objectives” (p.140). This becomes particularly important when the author turns her attention to working-class politics. Labor unions and socialist politics in Saint-Nazaire, she writes, “could not overcome or mediate the fragmentation created by the production process or by the sharp contrast in goals and priorities between shipyard workers”(p.149). Thus the daily disputes and long-term conflicts in which the shipyards were so rich produced only an anemic labor movement. Shipyard workers from the Brière did not enlist at all. They considered themselves “property owners with multiple economic resources,” (p.151) and apparently had no interest in acting like proletarians by joining unions. Even the *Bourse du Travail*, which opened in with such promise in 1892, was unable to energize the local labor movement.

Part of the workers’ suspicion of militant collective action derived from their experience during the disastrous Trignac strike of 1894. To begin, a two-week strike in the spring produced a compromise settlement. But then the workers “appear to have lost control of their own action” (p.154) when their strike became a national *cause célèbre* that attracted national figures from the labor movement and the socialist party, and turned a relatively simple dispute over layoffs and wages into a rehearsal for proletarian revolution. In the end, after seven weeks of struggle, the Trignac workers had to accept less than they had been offered at the beginning. Schuster calls the strike “a stinging defeat” (p.155) and contends that it soured Saint-Nazaire’s workers on any further association with the national labor movement.

On top of this, local labor politics were poisoned by a feud between two local militants, Adolphe Abraham and Henri Gautier. The former associated himself with Jaurèsien reformist socialism, for which Gautier attacked him as an apostate and bourgeois collaborator. Gautier won the battle, when he effectively pushed Abraham out of the labor movement in Saint-Nazaire. But he lost the war, insofar as the politics of vituperation he practiced only alienated those he wanted to recruit. A great scold to the last, Gautier spent the remainder of his career “castigat[ing] workers for their inattention to socialism and the labor movement” (p.166)—to no effect.

Their inattention to unions and socialism, however, did not mean that the workers of Saint-Nazaire were passive, and Schuster’s final chapter catalogues the long succession of strikes in the local shipyards. From the early 1890s, these strikes became, if not less frequent, smaller and more fractured. With riveters often in the vanguard, strikers often succeeded in raising wages and obtaining other benefits. Yet they found the employers immovable over “the more fundamental issue of who possessed

the authority to control production and to manage the workforce” (p.186). The rationalization of shipyard activity after 1910 “further fragmented workers and restricted the potential for association and coalitions” (p.187). The Briérons and the Saint-Nazairiens never joined forces.

In short, Schuster tells the story of an industrial workforce that neither developed nor behaved in the ways that historians have come to expect. No one regrets this more than the author, who wears her sympathies on her sleeve. Indeed, the book is suffused by a certain disappointed romanticism—as if E.P. Thompson had been forced to conclude that his subjects’ efforts had, in fact, *failed* to make the English working class. Schuster does not exactly distort the evidence to make the workers of Saint-Nazaire conform more closely to the heroic ideal; there is too much of it for her to do that. But we can read her chagrin in her frequent reminders that this slice of the French working class never developed “the commonality of the workplace experience” (p.196) or “developed the willingness to battle with employers and state in the interests of a shared, radical political agenda” (p.1).

Occasionally, I think, her sympathies do affect her judgment, for example in her generally positive portrayal of the Briérons. Schuster applauds the rootedness of the commuter-workers of Saint-Joachim, who refuse to sacrifice their old sense of community. She compares it favorably to the less “comprehensive identity” that characterized those who took up residence in the town. Saint-Joachim, Schuster tells us, was supported by a “rigorous endogamy” (p.131) It constituted “a true community of relatives, so much that neighborhood and cousinhood [were] confused” (p.132). By way of contrast, the working-class neighborhoods of Saint-Nazaire were rigorously heterogeneous “amalgams of migrants at different stages in the process of settling and carving out a life in an unknown and inhospitable setting” (p.135).

I found it hard to accept this rosy picture of the Briérons. For one thing, given the grinding and dirty poverty Schuster describes in Saint-Joachim, it is not at all clear that its boggy *gemeinschaft* was preferable to the poor, but more diverse, neighborhoods of the city. For another, while it is easy to believe that the slums that went up to accommodate immigrants in Saint-Nazaire were miserable places to live, there is no reason to think that housing in Saint-Joachim was any better. And while it might be a sign of social health to have relatives stand as marriage witnesses, as they did more often in the Brière than in Saint-Nazaire, the long-term effects of rigorous endogamy in a small community are hardly benign. In short, as I read about life in the Brière, I couldn’t help but think it would be an excellent place from which to be *disconnected*, and that those who clung tenaciously to life in the marshes were more to be pitied than romanticized. Then again, I grew up in Brooklyn.

In the end, Schuster produces a detailed and thoroughly-researched (her bibliography runs to over twenty-five pages) history of French labor. To be sure, the tale the author has to tell does not end as she would like, with the victory of a solid and right-minded working class. But she does a fine job of explaining why not.

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