

French University Teachers and their Trade Unions, 1945-1972.

Interest Aggregation and Ideological Confrontation in a Period of Educational Expansion

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Post-'45 trade unionism amongst French university teachers was strongly determined by the transformations of France's higher education system. Its predominant state sector was marked by bureaucratic decision making, outspoken centralism and by a structural segmentation between the 'facultés', the 'grandes écoles', the newly created research funds and, after 1966, the Instituts Universitaires de Technologie. The expansion of higher education was mainly carried by the 'facultés', where the explosive growth of the student population necessitated an expansion of the teaching staff. The specific form given to this staff expansion by the French government eventually generated a situation that clearly fostered pro-unionist attitudes amongst specific parts of the academic personnel. How was the teaching staff organised? Four categories were more or less clearly defined for the whole of the 'facultés' system. The so-called 'A-cadre' grouped the professors and the 'maîtres de conférences'. The 'B-cadre' encompassed the junior staff, i.e. the assistants and the category first qualified as 'chefs de travaux', later as 'maîtres-assistants'. Entry into A-cadre was only possible by the obtention of the very prestigious 'doctorat d'Etat'. Within these categories however, statutory positions often diverged: about 30 different types of statute were present in the '60s¹. But, in spite of this imbroglio, they all shared a similar feature. The tenured status as a civil servant was quite often guaranteed from the start (as was the case with e.g. the assistants of the Science faculties) or was at least to be obtained at an early stage of one's career, normally with the promotion to the 'maître-assistant' level. So once entered into the system, there was fairly little chance of being pushed out of it. The non obtainment of the 'doctorat d'Etat', usually a long term objective taking ten years or more, was only occasionally a reason for drop-out, as in most faculties one could linger in a B-cadre position for a whole career. Consequently, staff rotation was only minimal. Expansion not only made new elements enter the profession, but also kept in the older members of the junior staff.

¹ Our analysis of the statutory position of the university staff is mainly based on: G. AMESTOY, *Les universités françaises*, Paris, 1968, pp. 279-365; *La situation des personnels enseignants des universités. Eléments de réflexion pour une réforme. Rapport présenté par Francis de Baecque, Conseiller d'Etat*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1974, 73 p.; *Etude générale des problèmes posés par la situation des personnels enseignants universitaires. Rapport présenté à M. Le Ministre de l'Education nationale par M. Jean-Louis Quermone*, Paris, CNDP, 1981, 104 p.; *Vade-mecum du personnel de l'enseignement supérieur. Troisième édition. Textes à jour au 1er juillet 1964*, Paris, SGEN/CFTC, 1964, 192 p.; *Mémento de l'enseignement supérieur*, Paris, SNESup, 1971, 3 volumes, 348 p. + annexes; F. MAYEUR, "L'évolution des corps universitaires (1877-1968)", C. CHARLE & R. FERRE (eds.), *Le personnel de l'enseignement supérieur en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Paris, Ed. du CNRS, 1985, pp. 11-26; F. MAYEUR, "Les carrières de l'enseignement supérieur depuis 1968", C.-I. BRELOT & J.-L. MAYAUD (eds.), *Voyages en histoire. Mélanges offerts à Paul Gerbod*, Besançon, Les Annales littéraires, 1995, pp. 71-88.

If we are very well informed about the large inflow of students into French higher education after World War II, we only dispose of incomplete and rather superficial statistical data concerning the expanding of the 'corps' of university teachers. We know how many university posts were created by the annual budget and we have a certain insight in the way they were distributed over the faculties. But geographical distinctions are hardly visible most of the time. We only possess vague indications about the way these theoretical post were actually filled up² and we do not have any precise indications at all about the size of illegal recruitment practices on a contractual basis, that were silently tolerated by the ministry³.

These data nevertheless allow us to observe the '60s hypertrophy of the B-cadre in the faculties which has been analysed by Bourdieu in *Homo academicus*⁴. Until the academic year 1958-59 the A-cadre of professors and 'maîtres de conférences' always was a little larger than the B-cadre of assistants and 'chefs de travaux'. Then, things quickly changed, first and for all, by the steady expansion of the assistants 'corps', but also by the creation of the 'maître-assistant' as a new staff category, which encompassed the older 'chef de travaux' and was to become the first promotional goal for the assistants. Both categories were expanded on a very quick pace⁵: in the academic year 1963-64, the B-cadre already doubled the A-cadre (10,195 compared to only 4,902). It almost was three times its size in 1968-69 (17,930 compared to 6,672). In 1975-76, the size of the B-cadre was stabilised at a little more then 28,000 staff members, the A-cadre remaining at a good 10,000 for the rest of the '70s. So, by contrast to Bourdieu's approach, official statistics show us that the 1968 crisis—which is crucial in his vision, as it constitutes a climax in the so-called 'crisis of successions', which coincides with and reinforces the student revolt— did not really affect the gov-

² As far as trade union sources allow us to confirm it, non-occupation of programmed posts was relatively marginal in the studied period. In the beginning of the '70s, some 100 to 200 assistants posts were not occupied in the faculties of Law and Economics.

³ After the 1968 Faure law and the granting of a larger financial autonomy to the newly created 'Unités d'Enseignement et de Recherche', a number of so-called 'vacataires' were recruited by these instances on a contractual basis, on a low salary and without much social protection or further career perspectives. As this practice was illegal, the number of 'vacataires' remained absent from official statistics. The unions and the 'vacataires' action group estimated their numbers at about 1,700 staff members. They were exclusively engaged for teaching assignments. From a social point of view, the 'vacataires' were close to B-cadre.

⁴ P. BOURDIEU, *Homo academicus*, Paris, Minit, 1984, 317 p.

⁵ My data are based on the retrospective and current statistics of the official series published by the ministry of national education as *Tableaux de l'éducation nationale*.

ernment's staff policy. On the contrary, the unbridled expanding of the B-cadre was not interrupted until 1975 when for purely budgetary reasons the recruiting was suddenly blocked⁶. There still were some shifts within both cadres, as a certain amount of assistant posts were being upgraded every year to the level of 'maître-assistant', but there was no further promotional policy, the 'doctorat d'Etat' remaining the big barrier between both cadres. Clearly, France did not design any kind of 'Mittelbau'-policy during the expansion period.

These numbers, however revealing they are, do not say everything. Indeed, they reveal the bottleneck situation created by a government, trying to cope with higher education expansion at low cost. It has to be stressed that specific actors within the university field were clearly in favour of this approach. It was well known that the A-cadre was firmly opposed to any change of the career structure that could affect its position. It was highly revealing that in 1958 the conservative professors of the *Fédération des Syndicats autonomes* were intensely occupied with the name to be attributed to the staff category eventually baptised 'maître-assistant': in a very Courteline-like discussion, they opposed the qualification of this new category as 'professeur-assistant' and preferred 'assistant-professeur' in stead⁷. The beatification of the professor's title and the protection offered by the typically French state doctorate pushed large parts of the A-cadre into complicity with the disruptive staff policy of the minister. A-cadre posts had to remain rare and valuable. In consequence, the B-cadre had very good reasons to question the traditional classification schemes that blocked the road to A-cadre posts and substantial segments would not hesitate to do so when the 1968 student revolt offered them a good opportunity. We will come back to that.

It is one of those paradoxes of social relationships within French academe that the pains taken by the professorial elite to avoid all structural changing of the career path and to shield its position against lower personnel, eventually had a reverse effect and actually contributed to a blurring of the boundaries between staff categories, more particularly in the organisation of university teaching as such. The number of obli-

⁶ G. NEAVE, "Séparation de Corps: The Training of Advanced Students and the Organization of Research in France", B.R. CLARK (ed.), *The Research Foundations of Graduate Education. Germany, Britain, France, United States, Japan*, Berkeley etc., University of California Press, 1993, pp. 178 e.s.

gatory hours a French professor had to teach was so restricted —according to the law, only 3 hours a week— that it was not sufficient at all to provide for complete curricula in the different faculties. This was compensated by the widespread practice of teaching supplementary hours, which also helped to compensate for the relatively low wages of the whole university staff. The ministry coalesced in this practice, as it allowed providing a sufficient amount of courses at low cost. These extra charges were a most important factor for work conditions in the faculties.

In fact, the number of professors and 'maîtres de conférences' was far too small to provide sufficient *ex cathedra* courses, even if it was prepared to take up a large amount of supplementary hours. The consequence of this situation was obvious: the group that so effectively protected its titles was obliged to allow lower staff to fulfil teaching functions actually related to these titles. By a phenomenon known as the 'glissement des fonctions' or function shift, teaching assignments normally reserved for staff members with a 'doctorat d'Etat' were *de facto* or even *de iure*⁸ taken care of by B-cadre, mainly by 'maîtres-assistants' who did not possess the entitlements for this 'privilege'. Large numbers of the junior staff were charged with a teaching workload that prohibited any serious research for their 'doctorat d'Etat'. Furthermore, they were —at best— inadequately remunerated on the supplementary hour's budget. Detailed research will almost certainly show that more direct forms of exploitation by the 'patrons' were not uncommon. By doing this, the possessors and self-declared protectors of the 'doctorat d'Etat' not only created dissatisfaction amongst junior staff: they actually contributed in undermining the academic value of their cherished title. This situation was potentially explosive. For junior staff members, trade unionism was to become a major channel to contest this constellation.

Before World War II, trade unionism was a marginal phenomenon in French higher education. Professional organisation of the teaching staff remained limited to 'amicales', who comprised nearly all of the personnel, but whose role in interest aggregation was negligible. The development of trade unions in primary and secondary

⁷ *L'Enseignement supérieur. Bulletin trimestriel de la Fédération des Syndicats autonomes de l'Enseignement supérieur*, 24-25 January 1960, p. 12. (Council, 20 December 1958)

⁸ A specific delegation system offered the opportunity for non-doctors to exercise the function of 'maître de conférences' on a temporary basis.

education, following their authorisation shortly after World War I, hardly affected higher education. Due to the blurred boundaries between the faculties and the 'lycées', a limited number of leftist professors were affiliated to unions of 'lycée' teachers. Shortly before the collapse of the IIIrd Republic, a *Syndicat de l'Enseignement Supérieur* actually profiled itself within the unified *Fédération Générale de l'Enseignement*. In a similar fashion, a few professors affiliated to the Christian *Syndicat Général de l'Enseignement National* (SGEN). In both cases the influence of the university teachers was marginal. Even if they had formed their own trade union, it lacked all legal recognition.

The young IVth Republic, by contrast, gave major incentives to the genesis of a genuine trade unionism amongst university staff. The authorisation of university teacher trade unionism and the elaboration of a collective bargaining system (a '*Commission Technique Paritaire*') resulted in an assertion of existing unions and in a transformation of the 'amicales' into new ones. Later on, the unions were to play an important role in the academic promotion mechanisms of the *Conseil Central Universitaire* (CCU) whose commissions were partly elected by the academic staff itself. Increasingly, personnel representatives were to be elected by dint of union sponsoring. This is not really surprising. These procedures had to govern faculties that quickly evolved from relatively small organisations to mass services with very large staff units, who were definitely 'faceless' by comparison to the old recruitment practices of the academic 'petit monde'. Inevitably, a centralised promotion policy offered all chances to organisational intermediaries and to unseen forms of collective bargaining, rather than to the continuing of the traditional co-optation strategies.

How did this post '45 unionism present itself in the 'facultés'? The left regrouped into the *Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique* (SNESRS) and affiliated to the *Fédération de l'Enseignement National* (FEN) of the *Confédération Général du Travail* (CGT): it followed FEN into autonomy when CGT split in 1948. However, FEN could not avoid the tensions between social democrats, communists and other radicals. Quickly, these tendencies manifested themselves within FEN as institutionalised fractions⁹. By contrast to the other FEN-

⁹ V. AUBERT, A. BERGOUNIOUX, J.-P. MARTIN & R. MOURIAUX, *La forteresse enseignante. La Fédération de l'Education Nationale*, Paris, Fayard, 1985, pp. 65-89, 100-108; J. GIRAULT, *Instituteurs, professeurs. Une culture syndicale dans la société française (fin XIXe-XXe siècle)*, Paris, Publ.

unions, the SNESRS did not institutionalise the tendencies. This was a clear indication of the weight communists and fellow travellers represented. If this PCF hegemony assured a political continuity, corporative division weakened the union's bargaining power during the '50s. In 1956, diverging interests between tenured 'faculté' staff and the contractual CNRS researchers led to a split of SNESRS, generating a separate researcher trade union¹⁰ and the new *Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (SNESup).

It took the new SNESup a couple of years to regain a certain vigour, but the expanding numbers of assistants en "maîtres-assistants" clearly favoured this process. Without any exaggeration, one can say that the SNESup became the assistant's trade union par excellence. The precise numbers we possess for 1966 show us that, of about 4,800 members, A-cadre represented only 18 % of the members, the assistants representing 52 % and the "maîtres-assistants" 30 %¹¹. No wonder that SNESup quickly became more powerful than the other unions. The a-political *Fédération des Syndicats autonomes*, still largely present in the '50s, was severely weakened in the following decade. Its leading organs being manned by A-cadre mainly¹², it appeared more and more as the "mandarins" union, i. e. conservative and at a given moment even largely lethargical. SGEN seems to have somewhat better resisted the rising SNESup-tide, its Christian background and pro-socialist character procuring it a specific recruitment pool and a possibility of cooperation in a leftist front against the right wing government. Nevertheless, it remained the smaller brother and, in the organisation of common action, it was more than once patronised by SNESup.

SNESup continuously sought to assert itself as the leading force of the university staff and tried to channel all interest aggregation of the different staff categories into a single trade unionist mould. Nevertheless, it was obliged to account with other agents in the field, not only with the competing unions, but most of the time it also had to

de la Sorbonne, 1996, p. 170 e.s.; B. GEAY, *Le syndicalisme enseignant*, Paris, La Découverte, 1997, passim.

¹⁰ J.-C. BOURQUIN, "Syndicalisme et communauté scientifique. Le Syndicat National des Chercheurs Scientifiques au CNRS (1956-1967)", J. SCHRIEWER, E. KEINER & C. CHARLE (eds.), *A la recherche de l'espace universitaire européen: études sur l'enseignement supérieur aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Berlin etc., Lang, 1993, p. 133 e.s.

¹¹ *Bulletin du SNESup*, May 1966, 119, p. 32.

find a common ground with a number of temporary, category related action committees, mainly favouring lower staff interests. In principle, SNESup was opposed to these 'corporatist' initiatives, but in practice it always allied itself with these groups. Christine Musselin observed this phenomenon for the '80s and the '90s¹³, but the same tendency was already present at the end of the '50s. At that time SNESup collaborated with a *Comité national de liaison des chefs de travaux et des assistants des facultés des sciences*. These tactics were repeated in the '70s when the unions had to link their activities to similar organisations of the 'vacataires' and of the assistants of the faculties of Law and Economics. Apparently, SNESup or the other unions were only capable of encompassing the whole of lower staff social action during the '60s.

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

¹² In 1965, the bureau of the federation counted 25 A-cadre members on 29. See: *L'Enseignement supérieur. Bulletin trimestriel de la Fédération des Syndicats autonomes de l'Enseignement supérieur*, December 1965, p. II.

¹³ C. MUSSELIN, "L'Etat et la profession universitaire en France et en Allemagne", *Politiques et management public*, XII, 1994, 2, p. 154.

day during the Algerian war. Consequently, their sensibility for political developments within the student's world was considerable¹⁴.

The opposition against the dominant pro-PCF group crystallised in a far-left alliance around Alain Geismar and succeeded in conquering the SNESup bureau during the 1967 congress¹⁵. SNESup was practically the only union where a 'gauchiste' alliance ousted the traditional actors of the left. Clearly, the 'bureau 68', as it was to be known in the future, was backed mainly by assistants and 'maîtres-assistants', but one should be cautious for a determinist interpretation of this Parisian earthquake. Indeed, the communist group had its supporters in the same categories just as well. Consequently, political contingencies had their influence. PCF-loyalty kept a host of assistants away from their 'gauchiste' or otherwise 'dissident' colleagues. The latter's coalition favoured a far more politically oriented trade unionism and fostered an outright breach in the university hierarchy as such, rather than defending the traditional material demands of the former. The contestation of the university structures was most symbolically translated in projects to replace the former A- and B-cadres by a 'cadre unique', designed to abolish the distinct status of junior and senior staff. The contrast with the old CGT-style could not be greater. At the eve of the May '68 revolt, SNESup had become profoundly divided. It generated a particular version of the FEN-tendency system, the 'bureau 68' being opposed by the vigorous, communist led 'Action syndicale', that would use all means to regain its former stronghold.

If the '68 events hardly disrupted the *Fédération des Syndicats autonomes*, at least as far as their internal structure and their overall ideology is concerned, things were quite different within SGEN and SNESup. Both unions entered a period of severe crisis, be it with very different results. Eventually, in both cases, the leading teams of 1968 were to be eliminated. Within SNESup, the political accounts were settled almost immediately, the take-over-process being completed in 1969. The 'bureau 68' had immediately joined the student's movement by an order for a general strike in the 'facultés'. It is well known how the SNESup secretary general Alain Geismar became

¹⁴ A. GEISMAR, "La FEN et le SNESup en mai 68", Lecture at SUDEL, Paris, 8 October 1998.

¹⁵ *Bulletin du SNESup*, June 1967, 145, pp. 1-20; June 1967, 146, pp. 1-23, 33-46.

one of the faces of the May revolt¹⁶. But quickly, internal divisions weakened the leading 'gauchiste' team. Indeed, the option for a political role of SNESup necessarily raised the question of the precise meaning of the May revolt and of the possible role of a trade union, be it a transformed one. Was a real revolution at hands or was May only a fortunate but non-decisive occasion for union sponsored university transformation? The ideological discussions, largely along the lines of the divers 'groupuscules', subverted the unity of the 'bureau 68'. Geismar's resignation in favour of Bernard Herszberg was just the first sign of this process¹⁷. At the 1969 congress, the divers 'gauchiste' fractions presented separate lists and were eventually outnumbered by the well-organised 'Action syndicale' tendency¹⁸. If the union's atmosphere remained highly conflict-ridden, the communist led group started a normalisation process within SNESup, reintroducing reformist bargaining strategies.

Curiously enough, the SGEN-direction was to be pushed aside because of its supposed inability to adapt its options to the set of May-related reorientations advanced by its younger rank and file, whereas the 68 SNESup-bureau was voted out of office because it was accused of having gone too far in its advocating of this more politically biased action. For SGEN, the tensions created by the May-events were a time bomb, eventually exploding in 1972. The principal SGEN-leaders took a hesitating, suspicious attitude against the student uprising. This created a growing malaise, fostered by the arrival of young militants advocating May's heritage against the old generation, mainly by stressing the 'autogestionnaire' ideology. In 1972, this younger group eventually minorised the old guard¹⁹. Its university subsection recuperated part of the contestatory wing of SNESup who gradually left after the 'Action syndicale' take-over. This input of youth had a dynamic effect for SGEN, which became far more present at 'faculté' level than ever before. Apparently, it was more successful in its strategies of collaboration with the category-related action groups than SNESup. In both cases however, the maintenance of a militant climate at the newly created

¹⁶ *Bulletin du SNESup*, June 1968, 161, pp. 2-10.

¹⁷ J. SAUVAGEOT, A. GEISMAR, D. COHN-BENDIT, J.-P. DUTEUIL, *La révolte étudiante. Les animateurs parlent*, Paris, Seuil, 1968, pp. 39-59; A. GEISMAR, S. JULY, E. MORANE, *Vers la guerre civile*, Paris, Premières, 1969, pp. 226-227, 298-310.

¹⁸ *Bulletin du SNESup*, March 1969, 0, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ *Syndicalisme universitaire*, 27 January 1972, 569, pp. 8-11; 20 April 1972, 576, pp. 1 & 5; M SINGER, *Histoire du SGEN, 1937-1970*, Lille, Presses universitaires, 1987, pp. 486 e.s.

'Unités d'Enseignement et de Recherches' was no longer threatening for the basic structures of university hierarchy. The union's negotiators first and for all pressed the minister or the universities state secretary to keep the whole staff in service, i.e. even those who only had a contractual status. So, if the ever-present menace of a massive strike in the universities had any serious effects upon decisionmaking, it was a major element in the policy of *de facto* tenurizing of the global staff and eventually in the recruitment stop of the late '70s.

Even if it was to gain a rare 'aura' at a given moment, one must stress the late appearance of a specific trade unionism within the academic profession in France. Weakened for a long time by the 'amicaliste' tradition and by the structural segmentation of the higher education system, it was only in the '60s that unionism *stricto sensu* became a central strategy of junior staff in fostering its interests. Significantly, the '60s appeared to be the only decade when category related interest groups of assistants and the like were quasi completely marginalised, as the unions, SNESup first and foremost, were predominantly manned by junior staff. At least a part of them tried to use trade unionism to subvert the classical mechanisms productive of the academic hierarchy. These mechanisms appeared to be at odds with pedagogical realities within the 'facultés'. Furthermore, they were part and parcel of the 'crise des successions' engendered by the government's personnel expansion policy. Subversive stratagems were opposed to structural subordination. But not the whole of B-cadre was into this. Not all were union members, to start with. And even amongst SNE-Sup's rank and file, a substantial part of the junior staff shared the PCF's hostility to May and adhered to reformist strategies. They accepted the existing schemes of academic classification and tried to cope with the effects of the bottleneck situation by dint of older revendications, i.e. by demanding 'more of the same'. Individual interest could be defended by union representatives in the evaluative organisms of the CCU. As such, trade union strategies, even of the post-'72 May-invoking SGEN, were participating in the bureaucratic traditions of the French state. After a potentially subversive intermezzo, university teacher trade unions tended to become, once again, part of a "société bloquée" —according to Crozier, the central explanation of the virulence

of France's May²⁰— and to contribute to the quintessential incapacity of France's (educational) bureaucracy to transform itself, rather than to contest it.

²⁰ M. CROZIER, *La société bloquée*, Paris, Seuil, 1970, passim; J. CAPDEVIELLE & R. MOURIAUX, *Mai 68. L'entre-deux de la modernité. Histoire de trente ans*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP, 1988, pp. 199-206.