

## Letter to the Editors

I have frequently consulted *ILWCH*, but when I looked at the most recent issue this morning, I was shocked and greatly saddened by the inaccuracies, distortions, and omissions contained in the report by Judith Wishnia on the 1984 meeting of French Historical Studies (*ILWCH*, 26, Fall 1984). Wishnia wrote:

The three papers were all strongly criticized by Michael Seidman of Rutgers University who maintained, as he has in a previously published article, that workers were not politically supportive of the Popular Front, that their participation in the 1936 strikes and their interest in labor legislation emanated not from their desire to improve and control the workplace, but from the desire to avoid it as much as possible, indeed to avoid work.

First, Ms. Wishnia's statement that I "strongly criticized" all three papers is somewhat imprecise and needs elaboration. While I did raise some points of disagreement, I thought that Theresa McBride's paper was excellent and that Herrick Chapman raised issues which were very challenging to me. I think that we all agreed with Joel Colton, the chair of the panel, that it was a very valuable session.

Second, I have *never* (nor has anyone else to my knowledge) written or stated that "workers were not politically supportive of the Popular Front." What I have tried to argue in my articles in *French Historical Studies* and *Temps Libre* and at the 1984 meeting of French Historical Studies is that Parisian workers often refused to sacrifice and work harder during the governments of the Popular Front despite the calls of its leaders—whether Socialist, Communist, or CGT—for more work and higher productivity.

Third, I do not view the struggle for control of the workplace and the desire to avoid work as mutually exclusive, as Wishnia implies in her summary of my comment. Indeed, I said at the meeting (and I quote directly from my remarks):

Thus, I am in complete agreement with Herrick's statement that "the General Strike of 1938, like so much of the conflict which preceded it, was above all a struggle over industrial control." This assertion

*International Labor and Working Class History*

No. 28, Fall 1985, pp. 103-104

© 1985 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

meshes with the concept of a class struggle, broadly defined, between the workers and those who want to make them work. The question is, however, what is the content of this struggle. Herrick states, "The chief conflicts in the industry were more over problems of authority and control than over the legitimacy of work." In my view, these conflicts over authority and control directly involved the struggles against work.

These conflicts were between a management that wanted the workers to work harder and produce more at a lower wage and workers who wanted to minimize their labor and sometimes maximize their wages. Therefore, the conflicts over authority and control concerned work rhythms, work time, and productivity.

I am sure that you know that the issue of workers' control is a complex affair, open to various interpretations. However, I do hope that there might be some way to correct the most glaring inaccuracies, distortions, and omissions of the Wishnia report, which, by the way, summarizes my own position in one sentence; whereas, the other papers (including Ms. Wishnia's own) received at least an entire paragraph and sometimes two.

Michael Seidman  
*Rutgers University*