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The case of SUD-Rail: The limits of ‘radical political unionism’

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Abstract

This comment on the article by Connolly and Darlington suggests that the experience of SUD-Rail is more ambiguous than these authors assume. Though the union is certainly committed to militant industrial action and to broader social struggles, it is misleading to describe its orientation as ‘political’. Its militancy also has two consequences which may prove self-defeating. First, it is unable to appeal to the full range of employees in the French railways. Second, the demands imposed on its activists can prove exhausting and result in ‘burn-out’.

Keywords

activists, politics, militancy, SUD-Rail, trade unions

Is political radicalism a route to trade union revitalization? This question underlies the reflections by Heather Connolly and Ralph Darlington, based on their comparative analysis of railway unions in France and Britain: SUD-Rail and RMT. It contributes to current debates in most industrialized countries over the ‘strategic options’ available to trade unions in order to halt their decline. Among the multiplicity of suggested pathways – transforming union organizations into social movements, redefining the models of solidarity which they encompass, reconstructing their social identity and legitimacy, reviving their internal democracy – that of political radicalization seems at first sight, at least in France, the least evident. Here the dominant tendency is the deliberate depoliticization of the main union confederations, which have narrowed the basis of trade union legitimacy to ‘the fields of intervention designated by the terms “industrial relations”, “economic” or “social” action, in every case insisting on a demarcation from “politics”’ (Yon, 2008).

Translation by Richard Hyman

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This explains the interest stimulated by the upsurge from the 1990s of trade unions which position themselves in opposition to this dominant tendency. This is indeed the case with SUD (*Solidaires, unitaires et Démocratiques*), and amongst its member unions, including SUD-Rail. This phenomenon raises two questions. The first is the 'ideological' and 'programmatic' foundation for its emergence; we need to scrutinize not its 'militant' aspect, which is fairly clear, but its 'political' aspect, which is less so. The second question is the scope, achievements and limits of such a model of trade unionism.

In their article, Connolly and Darlington use the term 'radical political unionism' to characterize the stance and action of SUD-Rail, and that is my focus here. Is this the correct way to define the organization? The ambiguities surrounding the use of the term 'political' in the trade union world are well known; and equally, when unions declare themselves apolitical this is largely a myth (Mouriaux, 1985). Likewise, the relationship between unions and politics is historically conditioned (in France, with reference to the *Charte d'Amiens* of 1906 which declared trade union independence from political parties) and also institutionally (involving a division of labour between the respective form, content and locus of intervention of political parties and trade unions). This does not preclude links between parties and unions – both between the *Parti communiste* (PC) and the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), and between the *Parti socialiste* and the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT), nor the blurring of the boundaries between their industrial relations and political domains. Despite its paradoxical elements, such a framework matches the self-definitions of what trade unionism is or should be, to the extent that this dual dimension of 'radicalism' and 'politics' today seems almost anachronistic. In any event the notion has a very normative character, often used to discredit the organizations to which it is applied. How can one privilege the 'balance of forces' when concertation and negotiation have today become the dominant mode of regulation in industrial relations, and how can one assert broader concerns than the company and workplace when the clear trend is to the decentralization of collective bargaining?

Connolly and Darlington are completely right to use the term 'radical political unionism' in relation to SUD-Rail, though I prefer to speak of militancy rather than radicalism, a less normative concept which relates back to the traditions of French trade unionism marked by anarcho-syndicalism. Within the French rail company SNCF, the union conducts a 'non-cooperative' strategy (often linked to management obstructionism), attempting in part to escape the institutional role imposed on unions by the rules of the game of workplace industrial relations. But to some extent it is also willing to take part in the game of the representative institutions, which gives it a position of simultaneously 'insider' and 'outsider' (Damesin, 2001). Viewing industrial relations in terms of class relationships, it views discussions with the management of this public enterprise as an arena of confrontation and struggle.

Struggle is the central point of reference, both practical and ideological, of a union which says it has chosen this path because of a 'rejection of collaboration and fatalism' (SUD-Rail, internal document). Such struggles are obviously the point of reference within SNCF and its subsidiaries, but are also advocated for other sectors, and were invoked in the founding declaration of the *Union Syndicale Solidaires*, of which SUD-Rail was a driving force. They are also conducted within a broader social movement framework: the unemployed, anti-globalization, anti-racism. Surveys undertaken at the

4th congress of *Union Syndicale Solidaires* in June 2008 and the 5th congress of SUD-Rail in October 2009 (270 and 125 respondents respectively) provide more detailed information on this question (Bérout et al., 2011). In these surveys involving workplace representatives – the most militant and active members – 66 percent of SUD-Rail respondents said they had become involved in this specific union because of its orientation to struggle. In identifying the challenges facing the trade union movement in general, the most important was ‘to inspire class struggle trade unionism’ (53%), followed by ‘building a real mass organization’ (46%) and ‘creating new generations of activists’ (34%).

Despite these aspects, one should be very careful in identifying SUD-Rail as a highly politicized trade union, for a number of reasons. First, as already noted, SUD-Rail, like the other SUD unions, declares itself an heir to the party-political independence of the *Charte d’Amiens*. Second, the relationship with politics varies greatly according to the particularities of the different sectors. In the postal sector, for example, the sorting offices were important centres of political engagement in the 1970s: there was an active presence of a variety of leftist groups, with regular workplace leafleting and political discussions. A different relationship with politics existed in SNCF: there was a pervasive communist influence, propagated by CGT activists but normally as a background element, not as powerful a reality as industrial militancy.

This is demonstrated in the following extract from an interview by the author with a national official of SUD-Rail:

There is less of a tradition of political engagement than was possible in PTT [*Postes, télégraphes et téléphones*, the French postal service] where, in the 1970s, even the tiniest leftist organizations had activists in the sorting offices. Until the 1980s, the PC was still issuing workplace circulars, as was LO [*Lutte Ouvrière*, one of the main Trotskyist parties]. But in terms of national visibility there was no political voice at SNCF. There is no such tradition, unlike at Renault for example. Moreover, my impression is that SUD-Rail members are less politically engaged than other *Solidaires* activists. In SNCF it was not the PC that mattered a decade or more ago, it was the CGT.

A third reason, linked to the above, confirms the comments of this trade unionist: SUD-Rail activists are less politically engaged than is often believed. The surveys mentioned previously demonstrate this. While 56 percent of activists at the 2008 *Solidaires* congress said that they were also active in other organizations, this was the case with only 30 percent of SUD-Rail delegates in 2009. Three main areas of involvement, apart from the union itself, were mentioned by respondents: political activity, anti-globalization and struggles in support of the *sans papiers* (undocumented immigrants). But while 19 percent of *Solidaires* activists said they were members of a political party, this was the case for only 12 percent in SUD-Rail.

Hence the proportion of union activists who are politically involved is not particularly high in *Solidaires* and even lower in SUD-Rail. A quick comparison with findings in other unions tends to contradict the widespread media image of *Solidaires* as a union dominated by political activists. A survey of delegates to the 47th CGT congress in 2003 showed that a third were members of a political organization (Bérout and Garibay,

2004). A similar survey at the 20th congress of *CGT-Force ouvrière* (FO) in 2004 found that 31 percent of delegates were members of a political party (Yon, 2008).

These results show that the great majority of SUD-Rail activists are involved exclusively in the industrial arena. This does not necessarily mean that they *reject* political commitment: their trade union activity is demanding and time-consuming. Moreover, involvement in the political sphere is not simply a question of membership of a party: the other types of non-union bodies mentioned by delegates in their responses to the questionnaires are in almost every case campaigning organizations. And a significant number engage in political campaigns at specific moments of time, as for example in the groups calling for a 'no' vote in the 2005 referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty. Twenty-nine percent of SUD-Rail respondents said they were involved in these groups, which brought together political activists, trade unionists and those with no organizational affiliation. These figures are higher than for those who are members of a political party.

There is another reason to be cautious in attributing politicization to the union: the very strong reluctance among young trade unionists to be associated with anything akin to politics. While older activists do not necessarily distinguish between the ideological and occupational motives which inspire their involvement, few of their younger counterparts say that they joined the union for ideological reasons; their motives are exclusively employment-related. Moreover they say that they want to avoid using exaggerated 'ideological' or 'political' language: this would set them apart from their fellow workers, particularly the younger ones, and would reduce their influence. This does not mean that they do not share the same values as the older activists: the surveys shows that all are in accord with the ideas expounded by the union. But more specifically, they do not interpret and express them in the same way: thus their relationship to politics is different.

What are the limits of this model of trade unionism? There are two which stand out. The first and most obvious is that it is a very exclusive model, given its 'radicalism' which inevitably distances it from workers with more moderate opinions, towards company policies and politics in general. Its opponents, in management and in other unions, understand this well and have no hesitation in depicting in the press and the media the image of an extremist union which fights to the bitter end. This makes it difficult for the union to expand its membership base or its support in workplace elections. In particular it is cut off from staff in supervisory and technical positions (*cadres*¹), in contrast to the CGT which despite its equally 'militant' posture is better represented among these grades. That is the significance of this comment:

Our representatives, members and those who vote for us in workplace elections form a pyramid with a very broad base, and that is a real problem for us. Nationally, we have 17 percent of the votes in all the occupational constituencies combined. But among *cadres* the figure is only 4 percent, and this proportion barely improves. Here, the CGT is better implanted than us. The same is true among supervisors. We have been working on this recently, but that causes internal debates within the union. There are fears that if we orient ourselves more to the *cadres* we may alter the content of our message in order to appeal to them. Obviously we do not want to do this. But it is very complicated, because we do not have many activists in this category, and this makes our work even more difficult. Officially, this is one of our union's priorities, and frankly

it is difficult to implement. Insofar as the image propagated of SUD-Rail is a union of maniacs who cause chaos everywhere, that doesn't help. On the other hand, since we are strongly rooted in the workplace, many of our mates are fighting the *cadres* every day. So for the *cadres* who have been screwed by SUD-Rail delegates for years to join us would require a revolution. The difference with the CGT is that it has specific organizations for supervisors and *cadres*, so that they do not have to propagate exactly the same message to each group. We don't want to do this, but we pay for it in terms of workplace elections.

A vicious circle: lacking a sufficiently broad occupational base, the union is deprived of mobilization capacity which regularly forces it to reach agreement in advance with the CGT.

The second limitation is that the trade union model represented by SUD-Rail is very demanding and hence very testing for those involved. Animating the union structure from day to day and developing an approach based on very strong commitment, refusing to delegate activity to officials, strong requirements to circulate information and take decisions democratically, all this is a heavy burden. As a result, the activists engaged in this day-to-day trade union activity express at one and the same time a kind of personal fulfilment, notably through mastering the legal technicalities and through success in building the union; and a kind of weariness or exhaustion. Being always in management's line of fire, a trouble-maker, as one activist put it, reinforces the sense of membership of a union oriented towards struggle and confrontation with the dominant social order, but creates very difficult conditions. The great majority of the activists in the survey mentioned above thus explained that their working life had previously been restricted, and that they would otherwise never have acquired the technical and legal knowledge which they gained through their representative functions. From this stems a kind of total commitment, involving the whole of their working – but also personal – lives, sometimes experienced heroically as a kind of test.

From this perspective, the predominant mode of operation in *Solidaires*, including SUD-Rail, being founded on the dynamism of mobilization around workplace demands, leaves little space for more limited forms of involvement. Again, in the risks taken by the activists, their permanent exposure to victimization by management and the way in which the latter, but also other unions, stigmatize the acronym 'SUD', we see a series of elements which in the past characterized other workers' organizations, notably the CGT. The cumulation of these difficulties can sometimes induce fatigue, particularly outside periods of mobilization. In this respect, one wonders whether the decision in 2010 by the managing director of SNCF to forbid any negotiation during a strike was not targeted strategically to weaken the most militant organizations such as SUD-Rail. To resist this, the organization would need to possess a critical mass of activists and be able to renew them regularly. In this period of famine for trade unions, this is a dangerous path.

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Note

1. The term *cadre* is not literally translatable, because French occupational classifications and career ladders do not match those in English-speaking countries. Roughly, *cadres* encompass junior managerial and technical grades. Elections for works committees take place in separate 'colleges' for operational staff, supervisors (*maîtrise*) and *cadres*. [RH]

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