#### FACING DE-INDUSTRIALISATION

### Immigrant coal miners and car factory workers' struggles in France (1980s)

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Our goal, in this paper, is to contribute to a political history of immigration in France, based on the perspective of labour. The archetype of the immigrant worker emerges in France in the 1950s-1970s (Dreyfus-Armand and al. 2000; Vigna 2007). In this period, immigrant workers go on strike separately from native workers, although they mobilise around issues that are similar to the entire working class's: wages, working conditions and hours, union rights (Pitti 2001; Pitti 2006; Pitti 2008). However, the 1980s' immigrant workers' mobilisations are still in the shade because of a lack of interest toward working class issues in the social sciences from the 1980s to the 2000s, and a relative dismiss by sociologists and historians, of the question of labour in the analysis of migratory experience.

In the 1980s, the economic situation changed in most industrial sectors in which migrant labour were concentrated. Major industrial restructuring were implemented, leading to a steep decrease of industrial employment, notably for less qualified jobs. Workers did not stay put, when confronted with these major disruptions that affected working class conditions (Beaud and Pialoux 1999): new claims emerged, in response to the new economic and social deal. Immigrant workers were at the outpost of these transformations. They were highly concentrated in economic sectors, at the lowest positions and level of qualifications, where transformations were most intense. They were also the object of specific policies from the French state apparatus and employers. Therefore, their mobilisations revolved around dual claims: specific to their economic and political status, and common to the whole working class.

In this paper, we confront two sequences of immigrant workers mobilisations, in two different contexts of production decline/restructuring. We seek to analyse the

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effects of industrial restructuring on migrant workers and their struggles, in the coal mining sector in Northern France, and in car factories in the Paris region. Two major industrial sectors, in which immigrant workforce was numerous. Two sectors confronted with major economic turmoils in the 1980s, leading to a series of strikes, in which immigrant workers played a major role.

# 1. Immigration and industrial restructuring: the remaking of the archetype of the unskilled migrant worker

The usual representation of immigrants during the "Golden Age" (*Trente Glorieuses*) amongst sociologists has often been the unskilled worker of the big industry, maintained in the tougher and worst paid positions, without any career perspectives (Richard and Tripier 1999; Tripier 1990). Immigrant because unskilled, and unskilled because immigrant, coal miners and car factory workers were stuck in "the almost systematic conjunction of the immigrants' and workers' conditions" (Sayad 1999). After 1968, conflicts revolved around claims regarding salaries, careers and the recognition of skills, as summarised by the slogan, popularised during these strikes, "Equal job, equal pay". But in a context of industrial restructuring, and the growth of unemployment, the archetype of "unskilled worker for life" evolved: the recognition of skills was snowed under the problem of maintaining the level of employment. The perspectives for immigrant workers were less, or even no longer, the confinement to least qualified jobs, and more the threat of unemployment, a difficult professional reconversion, or the perspective of going "back home".

# 1.1 The migrant workers in car industry: the swan song?

Since the 1930s, plants in Paris and its suburbs have hired migrant workers who came from the colonies. But it is during the post-war economic growth that the recruitment became huge. The figure of the unskilled foreign Arabic worker appeared in the 1950s, particularly in the Renault factory of Billancourt, where a lot of Algerian workers had been hired since the late 1940s (Pitti 2002). Other companies later shifted towards non-European immigrants, who were not exclusively Algerian. Citroën, Simca, Chrysler or Renault-Flins, notably, recruited a majority of Moroccan workers, in the second half of 1960s especially. The recruitment procedures took different forms, but

most of Moroccans, Turks and workers of the Reunion were hired in their home countries. Recruiters went across countries, chose people they wanted, and then regularized their situations with the National immigration office (Office National d'Immigration, ONI). This specific type of recruitment stopped in 1974.

After 1968 and even more after the unskilled workers' strikes of the late sixties end early seventies, employers used migrant workforce "to fill up the labour gap which was due to low salaries as well as dreadful working conditions" (Bouquin 2006), and continue assembly-line work which needed massive and unskilled workforce. While the plants' work organisation changed in the late seventies, the number of unskilled workers remained high, despite a significant reduction in the number of employees of some of the plants. In the overall car industry, the proportion of unskilled workers dropped from 69% of the entire workers' group in 1970 to 58% in 1980. But, in some plants, this ratio was much more significant. For example, in Talbot-Poissy factory, in the early eighties, there were 10 000 unskilled workers out of a total of 16 000 employees; in Citroën-Aulnay factory, unskilled workers made up 65 to 70% of the 7000 people staff. The proportion of migrant workers varied according to factories: 52 % of workers in Talbot-Poissy, 67% in Citroën-Aulnay, while they made up approximately 25% of Renault and Peugeot.

Thus, in the car factories of the suburbs of Paris, the proportion of foreign unskilled workers was very significant. Yet, these factories are the first of their kind to be confronted to industrial restructuring, massive redundancies, and social conflicts. These conflicts highlight the cumulative effects of preservation in the most depreciated jobs, lack of training, and bad French proficiency. For a diversity of actors, all these factors made the continuation of a career in the car industry even more unlikely, as the industry was undertaking a process of modernization which implied using new technologies and the adjustment of workers. The ethnicization of careers, which produced further inequalities at work, had immediate repercussions when jobs were being destroyed.

## 1.2. Coal recession and immigration: Moroccan coal miners in Northern France

Coal mining is another sector in which immigrant workforce was highly concentrated: from the Poles in the interwar period to the Moroccans in the 1960's-1990s, the coal miners population was constituted of a mosaic of nationalities (Italians

before and after WWII, German war prisoners just after WWII, workers from Algeria, Yugoslavia, Spain, etc.) (Cegarra and *al.* 2004; Ponty 1988).

From mid-1950s until late 1970s, against a background of progressive extinction of coal production in Northern France, approximately 80 000 Moroccan workers were recruited by the Houillères du bassin du Nord-Pas-de-Calais (HBNPC)<sup>3</sup>, and the Moroccans became the quasi-exclusive source of workforce (their share in the influx of workforce amounted more than 85 % in the end of the period). The recruitment was operated in the same manner as in the car industry: workers were selected in Morocco by the firm's recruitment officers, according to specific criteria and procedures of control in Morocco and in France (medical examinations, transportation, housing, work permits...). The Moroccans provided the company with the flexible workforce needed to decrease production in good order: whilst coal extraction decreased from more than 27 million tons in 1949 to 4.5 millions in 1980 (-84 %) and the total number of employees dropped by 90 % in the same period, the number of Moroccan miners increased by more than 300 %, peaking at 11 330 in 1964 (four years after the first "recession plan" implemented by the French government). The Moroccans were provided with 12 or 18 months contracts, without any guarantee of re-hiring, and they were deprived from the benefits of the Status (Statut du mineur) voted in 1947. They were mainly assigned at the coalface: in 1949 they represented less than 1 % of coalface miners, 30 years later more than a third. In 1980, 93 % of the Moroccans worked at the coalface, whereas only 43 % of the whole employees, and 32 % of French workers, did. This assignment of Moroccan miners at the coalface was even reinforced in the 1980s, because French miners were incited to leave the pits, through various measures from which Moroccan workers were initially excluded (special leaves before retirement, help and subsidies for professional conversion or entrepreneurship). As a result, in 1987 (three years before the closure of the last pit), 3 000 Moroccan miners held the majority of positions at the coalface.

The pattern of the relationship between the system of production and immigration differed, in the 1960s-1970s, between coal mining and car factories. Moroccan miners were indeed massively recruited in a context of long term planning of the extinction of coal extraction in Northern France and, as a result, they were maintained in a precarious status. The corresponding image of the "unskilled worker for

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The HBNPC are the bigest entity of *Charbonnages de France* (CdF), a public company created in 1947 after the nationalisation of private coal mining companies (Trempé 1987).

life" of the car industry, was the temporary coal miner at the coalface. Moroccan miners eventually acquired a more stable status after a strike in 1981, despite the fact that their employment was doomed to disappear. It is only in the late 1980s that their situation became analogous to their car workers counterparts: too numerous in a context of deindustrialisation. From two different patterns, a similar situation emerged in the 1980s, with the conjunction of modifications of the conditions of employment and work of the immigrant workforce, and a structural transformations of the conditions of production.

#### 2. Immigrant workers' mobilisations in the 1980s

As they were hit by the industrial restructuring, immigrant car and coal workers participated in large scale social conflicts, in which French workers virtually do not take part. Their mobilisations drew on the classical repertoire of contention (Tilly 2006) of the working class (strikes, working place occupations). The motives were diverse and evolved from one strike to another, but they all referred to a principle of equality, integrating claims that were specific to the status of immigrant. Workers' fights, located in the space and at the stakes of industrial production, these mobilisations cannot however be reduced to working class struggles without further investigation. Like a few years before, the categories "worker" and "immigrant" were "in tension" in these struggles (Pitti 2001, 465). But contrary to the strikes that occurred in the 1970s, mobilisations in the 1980s exceeded the sole working class conditions of these immigrant workers: what was at stake was the coordination between an economic policy of industrial restructuring decided by big companies on the one hand, and on the other hand an immigration policy, implemented by the French state apparatus and big companies, in order to incite immigrant workers to go "back home". Stances and claims that were made during these sequences of mobilisations politicized the question of immigration.

# 2.1. From dignity to the refusal of redundancies in car industry: a split sequence of mobilizations

In a context of a decrease in social conflictuality, as shown by the number of striked days (4 054 900 in 1976, 1 442 000 in 1981. INSEE), a cycle of conflicts occurred in the car industry from September 1981 to Autumn 1984. All companies were

affected, as well as several plants, situated in Paris region and in province. Three factories of the suburbs of Paris were particularly affected by strikes and fights: Renault in the city of Flins, Citroën in Aulnay, and Talbot in Poissy. These three factories have common characteristics but also different social histories.

In each of these, the proportion of migrant workers was significant, with several Moroccan and sub-Saharan African workers. However, since 1968, Renault-Flins had been famous for its social fights, thanks to several strikes, in particular these led by unskilled migrant workers who demanded "equal pay for equal work" (Vigna, 2000). Furthermore, in the early 1980s, the CFDT was at the forefront in the balance of power between labour unions. In 1982, it won a majority of staff representatives, more than the CGT, the most important French union.

The two other sites were characterized by very different social relationships. Since 1973, when Citroën-Aulnay opened, no social conflict took place in the factory. Talbot-Poissy did not go on strike when the general strike of May 1968 broke out, and the factory had appeared quiet since 1954 (Hatzfeld and Loubet, 2004). In there, social relationships were organised according to double hierarchy: on the one hand, a hierarchy in work organisation, with French foremen who managed workers thanks to a coercive system of rewards and duties which guaranteed allegiance. On the other hand, a union hierarchy, which was dominated by a very specific trade-union system; this so-called "independent union" defended workers' collaboration with employers, and it was supported by companies' executives. Fiercely anti-communist, the independent union represented an effective way to prevent other trade-unions to develop.

The variety of factories' histories explains the differences between conflicts which took place there, both regarding the demands of workers and collective action repertoires. In Renault-Flins, different workers' categories led strikes to have better career developments, wages and working conditions. While these claims were also important in Citroën and Talbot, the issues of union liberties and of the transformations of social relationships were at the core of the strikes which started in Spring 1982, and in which unskilled migrant workers were almost the only protagonists.

A word summarizes their expectations: dignity. This term crystallized the workers demands which had been hidden for many years: dignity in the relationships between workers and supervisory staff, dignity at work, in particular in a context of frenetic production rates, recognition of skills acquired through several years in the factory, and also equality whatever their unionist, political or religious ideas.

These strikes started in April and lasted until July 1982, when they were successful. This victory impacted unions' balance of power, as the CGT became the first union. It also sparked a very surprising situation: the protest was almost permanent, and foreign workers had much greater freedom, freedom even unheard of up to this time. Their grievances targeted foremen and members of the independent union, whose attitude, and even sometimes presence were no longer accepted.

However, the bad economic situation which affected the car industry at the time is a background for this conflictual period. This specific context was used as an argument to justify managerial projects so as to transform industrial structures, by reducing the number of employees and the size of factories. Between 1979 and 1989, employment in the car industry decreased from 164 000 people to 81 000 in Paris region. The causes of social mobilizations also changed: employment and mass redundancy became the main problem from the middle of 1983 in Talbot and Citroën, and some months later at the Renault Company.

In December 1983, a massive strike began in the Talbot-Poissy factory against the mass redundancy. But on December 17, the company management and the left government, who was facing his first important conflict to defend employment, came to an agreement which led to 1905 redundancies. The strike therefore continued, but important dissensions among workers appeared, as some of them felt that they had been betrayed by the government and partly by the CGT too. Then, a specific demand became stronger among foreign workers: they called for an allowance to go back to their home countries. Yet, a similar measure had been repealed in 1981. While employers saw it as a soft way to reduce the workforce, a new version of the measure was under scrutiny. The end of the strike in Talbot-Poissy sparked a surprisingly very high level of violence, between the strikers who occupied workshops and the foremen who wanted to take over control of the factory by using force. Violence were intensified by racist slogans ("Arabic people to the Seine", "Black people to the crematorium"...)

The expression of rejection by migrant workers, the interweaving of social and racial issues, the deadlock on the proposals about training and redeployment of many foreign workers, fostered the idea that going back to their home countries could be a lesser evil than industrial restructurings. Some months later, the Citroën factories encountered a similar problem. The announcement of a mass redundancy plan caused strikes and sit-ins in several factories which helped workers to get a three-month adjournment. But, during summer 1984, the government authorized 1909 lay-offs in the

Parisian plants. Before that, the company's management had promoted the idea of return allowances, in addition to training opportunities.

Thus, in a relatively short period of time, a cycle of social conflicts were divided into two very different phases. On the one hand, a struggle for dignity unified various claims (wages, union liberties, production rate, and respect in human relationships...), and was successful; on the other hand, a struggle to defend employment which failed to prevent mass redundancy plans. A vast majority of these lay-offs affected foreign workers, and return allowance became essential to employment policies which were drafted at the time, along with other.

### 2.2. Moroccan miners on strike: from formal to real equality?

Social history of coal mining is marked by two emblematic mobilisations in the 1980s. The first one occurred in the very end of 1980, and beginning of 1981. Moroccan coal miners from Lorraine (Eastern France) mobilised, backed by the union CFDT that was strongly implanted in Lorraine. Their main claim was the equality of rights with their French colleagues, namely obtaining the *Statut du Mineur* (coal worker status), that guaranteed a stable employment, an access to the benefits of the special social security system in the coal mining sector, and benefits in kind (free housing and heating). The goal was to put an end to the regime of 12 or 18 months renewable contracts, that maintained Moroccan miners in statutory and professional instability. This situation had become unbearable for most Moroccan miners who, eventually after a high number of contracts, had settled in France. Some of them had even their family settled in France, and they did not want to think of going back to live in Morocco in a near future. Two weeks after it started in Lorraine, the strike spread in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, were it was backed by the CGT. One week later, strikers were victorious: they got, formally, the same employment conditions as the French miners.

However, this conquest of formal equality was rapidly challenged by the necessities of the politics of closure of extraction pits. The objective was already known: to stop all coal exploitation in Northern France by the end of the decade. But the managers of the company had to face a new situation: the number of Moroccan workers had to decrease, but it was not possible any more to just send them back in Morocco in the end of their contract. One of the solutions was then to incite the Moroccans to go "back home" on a voluntary basis, in exchange of a small amount of money and a

promise to succeed in the creation of a small business in Morocco. This politics materialised in the signature of a convention between Charbonnages de France and the Moroccan government in 1985, and the creation of a special team dedicated to the follow up of these "voluntary departures". From 1985 to 1992, less than a third of the total number of Moroccan workers chose to go back to Morocco. Most of the Moroccan miners were not keen with the perspective of "returning home". For them, "home" was here, in France, where they worked, where their families lived and where a number of their children were born.

A second mobilisation occurred in October and November 1987. The motives corresponded to this new situation and testified for the strong worry of Moroccan miners regarding their future, when the last pit closes (which happened in December 1990). Claims therefore revolved around the conditions of professional conversion and of "voluntary departures". They were defended for two months by the Moroccan miners, during the longest strike of miners of this period.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1987 the CGT called for a national inter-professional day of action in defence of coal miners. In Nord-Pas-de-Calais, only one pit out of five still in activity was touched by the strike. However, despite the fact that the strike was initially supposed to last one day, the Moroccans decided not to go back at coalface the next day... and the day after, until December 2<sup>nd</sup>. This one-day strike initiated by the CGT had only lit the fuse of a latent discontent, provoked by the announcement in September of the forthcoming closure of two pits (3-5 Courrière on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1987, and Ledoux on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1988), as well as by a series of pressures towards Moroccan miners in order to make them accept a "voluntary departure".

The strike started at Courrière and extended within the next days to the rest of the pits. Picket lines forbid the Moroccan workers to go back to work until the end of the strike, but the other miners could resume work from October  $8^{th}$ . As a consequence, as the number of Moroccan strikers increased, the number of non Moroccan strikers decreased. All the Moroccan miners were on strike from October  $6^{th}$ , but from October  $9^{th}$ , all the other miners were back to work. The Moroccans stayed isolated until the end.

On a photography of a banner held by Moroccan miners during the strike, one can see the slogan: "Miners on strike for employment, Status, salaries, and respect of human dignity". Saïd Bouamama and Jessy Cormont give the detail of the demands: "For those who would like to go back to Morocco: an increase of the return bonus, or

the guarantee of a retirement pension; a medical check up and free treatments if needed; the payment by the company of tuition fees for children. For those who would like to stay in France: a real professional training; a guarantee of employment through professional reconversion; the continuation of the benefits in kind acquired with the *Statut du Mineur* (Bouamama and Cormont, 2010, p. 51).

The main issues of the fight were an opposition to pit closures and the loss of employment that it implied. And also an opposition to the unequal conditions of "conversion" that were imposed. Moroccan miners fought as they did in 1981, but this time for real and not only formal equality. The claim for the respect of dignity became, as in car factories, the catalyst of a set of demands revolving around the conditions of employment and the treatment of immigrant populations.

A protocol of agreement was signed by the CGT and the management of the HBNPC on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1987; it put an end to the conflict. The agreement consisted mainly on the restatement of already existing measures (notably the extension of conversion measure to the Moroccan miners whose careers would be to short). Promises were also made regarding some of the claims (medical check up, housing, children schooling). But the main perspective remained the "return to Morocco" and the bonus was not increased. Furthermore, repression was strong: days of strike were not paid, and 10 Moroccan miners were revoked. Strike was suspended by decision of a general assembly of 1 500 Moroccan miners on December 2<sup>nd</sup>.

#### **Conclusions**

To conclude, let's draw some general ideas from this cross analysis of two economic sectors and two sequences of immigrant workers mobilisations.

First, immigrant workers were not the passive victims of de-industrialisation. In two different economic and productive contexts (industrial restructuring of the car industry; definitive closure of coal exploitations), mobilisations essentially led by immigrant workers put on the political agenda claims that were linked to their double status of immigrants and proletarians, in particular the equality of employment conditions and the equality of treatment.

Second, a common claim emerged in these two sequences of mobilisations: the recognition of dignity. This slogan synthesised heterogeneous claims on the material conditions of employment, professional conversion, "voluntary returns", but it was also rooted in the subjective experience of unequal treatment, discriminations or even

racism, at work and outside work. Claiming the recognition of the dignity of immigrant workers was at the same time demanding the equality of rights and expressing the rejection of discriminations.

Third, the question of whether one should "return home" or not was one of the main issues of these conflicts. On the one hand, return policies were seen by the government and the management of big companies as an answer to the destructions of employments in sectors were immigrant workers are numerous. Indeed, the making process of the measures aiming to facilitate the return, and the schedule of industrial restructuring was entangled<sup>4</sup>. Such a policy questioned the legitimacy of immigrant workers in France, from the moment their workforce was no longer needed in the industry. But on the other hand, return policies also challenged the positions of immigrant workers regarding the "bonus" granted in case of a return: some demanded such a bonus, some wanted to negotiate its amount, and others rejected it. But all of them expressed the demand of a choice, even if partly illusory: choice of staying or leaving, and at which conditions.

Fourth, beyond the question of the return, economic sectors that were the most intensive in immigrant workforce, were the laboratories of politics dealing with the social consequences of plant closures and employment reduction in the industry. The questions of the reduction of the number of workers, training, reconversion, elder workers, early retirements, got to a new dimension as soon as migrant workers were at stake. The game involved four players: the French state, French companies, the workers and the authorities from the country of origin (namely Morocco in our case). The history of this game is still to be written, and is rooted in a long-term history of the political regulation of labour markets. The moment of crisis, in the 1980s, revealed, to this respect, logics of destabilisation with long lasting effects.

Lastly, the history that is sketched in this paper, is an invitation to enrich a political history of migrant workers struggles, as well as a social history of the 1980s. We hope we could contribute to a double shifting: from a history centred on the archetype of the Algerian worker towards a history of other migrant populations with other temporalities and logics; from a history and sociology of immigration in the 1980s often oblivious to the specific types of conflict of the period (Bantigny 2013) towards

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In 1984, the French socialist government re-established a modified version of the "return help" that had been abrogated in 1981 after the election of President Mitterrand (GISTI 1988; Weil 2005).

an analysis of the reconfigurations of working class mobilisations confronted with the questions of unemployment, lay-offs and the rise of precariat.

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