

The Strike Movement of 1898

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Published in 1996 in Victor Griffuelhes and French Syndicalism, 1895-1922

Topics: [general strike](#), [France](#), [CGT](#), [history](#), [strike tactics and analysis](#)

What made the strike movement of 1898 [in France] so riveting, not only for workers but for a frightened public as well, was the spread over the previous decade of the notion of the “general strike” as labor’s epic weapon for the overthrow of the class system. Although the theory of the general strike had its roots in ideas bandied about during the 1789 Revolution, its modern formulation came largely from anarchists in the trade-union movement. The most visible proponent of the general strike in the early 1890s was the anarchist carpenter, Joseph Tortelier, who traveled about France like an itinerant evangelist, preaching the gospel of “The Great Day.” According to a police report, “By general strike Tortelier means the immediate and simultaneous stoppage of the whole system of production and exchange: factories, mines, canals, railroads, telegraph, the postal service; in a word, everything.”¹

By 1898, however, the earlier libertarian conception of the general strike as a spontaneous and universal folding of workers’ arms had been refined somewhat. Vaillant, the Blanquist leader, and [Fernand Pelloutier](#), the anarchist general secretary of the Bourse du Travail movement, had concluded that the proper strategy to pursue was that of the “generalized strike,” *i.e.*, a work stoppage kicked off by a union in a leading sector of the economy, in which the rest of the trade unions would join. Vaillant had originally argued that the role of catalyst should go to the foodworkers’ unions, apparently believing that the quickest way to the bourgeoisie’s heart was through its stomach. Later, however, he came around to the view that the mission was best assigned to the miners or railway workers.² The strategy adopted by the CGT in 1898, as it turned out, was a variant of the generalized strike, but one dictated more by opportunity than by actual planning. Its lessons were not lost on young Victor Griffuelhes, who would formulate a generalized strike strategy of his own in preparation for a second, more successful general strike eight years later.

Despite a promising beginning — some sixty thousand construction workers were idle in Paris the first week of October — the general strike of 1898 proved a dismal failure. Few other trades put down their tools, and the much-ballyhooed national strike of railwaymen lasted only three days, involving just 135 strikers.³ Worse, it appeared that the ministry of interior, which had moved quickly to cut telegraph traffic between rail union headquarters in Paris and the provinces, had been tipped off to the strike plans by someone high up in the union. Suspicion fell on the union secretary, André Lagailse, who also served as general secretary of the CGT. The subsequent uproar, which resulted in the dismissal of Lagailse from both posts, devastated morale in the trade-union movement. The charges against Lagailse were never proved, but feeling ran so high against him, including in his own union, that he was obliged to retire from trade-union life.⁴

The 1898 general strike has the appearance of a dress rehearsal for the larger, more serious May Day general strike of 1906. In 1898 as in 1906, the government’s response to the strike action was massive. Sixty thousand soldiers were drafted into Paris in October, 1898, to occupy struck building sites, a ratio of one soldier per striker. In 1906, the mining districts of the North were patrolled by thousands of troops, and Paris became an occupied city. And in both cases, the government sought to discredit the strike leaders by accusing them of plotting with the Right to overthrow the republic. In 1898, the government alleged a “plot” that brought together the Orleanists and the leaders of the building workers’ and railwaymen’s unions, Lucien Riom and Eugène Guérard respectively, while in 1906, the “conspiracy” involved the CGT leadership, including Griffuelhes, and the Bonapartists. Admittedly, the State’s motives differed in the two cases. In 1906, the interior ministry’s main concern seems to have been to secure a Radical victory at the polls. In 1898, though historians have generally ignored it, the government’s action was dictated to a great extent by international considerations, namely the threat of war with Britain over Fashoda. At the very time the railwaymen were preparing to walk out, French troops were being entrained for the Mediterranean ports, en route to Africa.⁵

The 1898 strikes were also linked to the Dreyfus Affair. Dreyfusards were divided over whether to support the building trades’ strike. Some like Georges Clemenceau, the future represser of the 1906 general strike, lent

monetary and moral support to the strikers.⁶ Others such as the reformist socialists around the newspaper *La Petite République*, perhaps the most important socialist journal of its day, saw the building trades' and rail strikes as provocations that could lead to a military coup d'état.⁷ In a move that poisoned relations between the reformist wing of the socialist movement and the CGT for some time, the newspaper supported the charges of collusion between union leaders and the Orleanists. Six years later in 1904, Griffuelhes revived the issue during a feud with the reformist socialist leader, Jean Jaurès, accusing him of having inspired the *Petite République* campaign against Riom and Guérard.⁸

Endnotes

1. Archives de la Préfecture de Police (APP), Paris, B/a 76, note of November 15, 1889, quoted in Robert Brécy, *Grève générale en France* (Paris, 1969), 25.
2. Vaillant's evolving strategy for the general strike is recorded in two of his articles quoted in Jolyon Howorth, *Edouard Vaillant: La Création de l'unité socialiste en France: La Politique de l'action totale* (Paris, 1982), 208-209; Pelloutier's strategy is given in Maxime Leroy, *La Coutume ouvrière, syndicats, Bourses du travail, Fédérations professionnelles, coopératives. Doctrines et institutions* (2 vols, Paris, 1913), II, 522.
3. The most detailed account of the 1898 building trades' strike is in Daniel Blume, "Recherches sur le syndicalisme ouvrier dans le Batiment à Paris (1892-1906)" (D.E.S., Université de Paris, 1957), 111-21. Blume's conclusions are conveniently summarized and commented upon in William E. McMechan, "The Building Trades of France, 1907-1914: An Exploration of Revolutionary Syndicalism," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1975), 221-35. For the railway strike fiasco, see Syndicat national des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer, *Compte rendu du X Congrès national, convoqué extraordinairement à Paris . . . 20 et 21 janvier 1899* (Paris, 1899), 7-22.
4. Jean Maitron (ed), *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier français*, Parts 3 and 4, Vols. 10-, XIII, 174-75 (Lagailse).
5. Joseph Reinach, *Histoire de l'Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris, 1901), 7 vols, IV, 288; Maitron, XII, 342-43 (Guérard), XVI, 59-60 (Riom); Roger G. Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered: The Impact of Domestic Politics on French Policy in Africa, 1893-1898* (Baltimore, 1970), 104.
6. APP, B/a 1397, note of October 6, 1898, quoted in Brown, *Fashoda Reconsidered*, 105.
7. The reformist socialists' fears were similar to those expressed by Captain Dreyfus' brother, Mathieu, in his unpublished "Souvenirs sur l'Affaire Dreyfus": "We were extremely uneasy because we knew that the General Staff desired disturbances in the streets. Grave trouble would justify the proclamation of a state of siege. And once the state of siege was decreed, all power would pass into the hands of the military" (*ibid.*).
8. For Griffuelhes' attempt to implicate Jaurès in the smear, see his article "Pas de réponse," *La Voix du Peuple*, no. 170, January 17-24, 1904.

Additional Information

This is a selection (pp 30-32) from Chapter 2 of Vandervort's biography of Griffuelhes (Louisiana State University Press); we invented the title.