

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

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THE MÉLINE TARIFF AS SOCIAL PROTECTION: RHETORIC OR REALITY?*

Introduction

The Méline tariff of 1892 is traditionally credited with ending France's experiment in free trade and returning the country to a policy of high protection. As such, it was arguably the most important piece of economic legislation in the history of the Third Republic. Identifying and explaining the causes and effects of the tariff remain important tasks for historians of modern France.

In my 1980 book, *Tariff Reform in France, 1860–1900*, I argued that the Méline tariff resulted from the efforts of certain industrialists and agriculturalists to strengthen their hold on the domestic market, stabilize domestic prices, and thereby maintain the profitability of their enterprises in the face of intensifying foreign competition by winning increases in the import duties on the goods they produced. In other words, I argued that the increased protection embodied in the Méline tariff was sought mainly to ward off a perceived external economic threat. At the same time, I also placed the making of the Méline tariff in a political context, portraying it as a crucial step in bringing the industrial bourgeoisie together with big landowners and peasant farmers in a conservative alliance to defend the Third Republic against the attacks of the disaffected, notably the rising industrial working class.¹

In an article in this journal² and more recently in his book, *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat in the Third French Republic, 1860–1914*, Herman Lebovics has reopened the question of both the origins and the results of the Méline tariff. There is much that we agree on. In particular, Lebovics also sees the Méline tariff as a key ingredient in the building of a conservative social

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¹ Michael Stephen Smith, *Tariff Reform in France, 1860–1900: The Politics of Economic Interest* (Ithaca, 1980), especially pp. 23–25, 197–235, 239–254.

² Herman Lebovics, "Protection against Labor Troubles: The Campaign of the Association de l'industrie française for Economic Stability and Social Peace during the Great Depression, 1880–1896", 31 (1986), 2, pp. 147–165.

alliance in the 1890s. However, we part company when, in addition to viewing the Méline tariff as a means of accommodating and uniting industry and agriculture, Lebovics also sees the tariff as an effort to conciliate labor. Indeed, by applying to the French situation the concept of “social protectionism” that has been developed to explain the tariff politics of the German Empire, Lebovics argues that the industrialists’ quest for higher import duties was mainly a response to growing worker militancy in the 1880s – that is, a response to a domestic social threat rather than to a foreign economic threat.³

Which view of the French protectionists’ motives and which explanation of the origins of the Méline tariff are more justified? In addressing this question, it is logical to start with what the protectionists said they were seeking at the time. From the 1870s to the 1890s, few questions in French politics generated as many ministerial and parliamentary inquiries or occupied as much newspaper space as the tariff. The great bulk of the resulting testimony and commentary focussed on the trade effects of increased protection and the secondary effects on prices and profits, thus supporting my view of tariff politics as a matter of promoting and balancing domestic economic interests in the face of foreign competition. However, there is also evidence to support the tariff-as-social-protection thesis. In 1884, the protectionist *Association de l’industrie française* changed the name of its press organ from *L’Industrie française* to *Le Travail national* and thereafter increasingly portrayed its campaign for higher import duties as beneficial to workers as well as their employers. Moreover, in the tariff debate of 1891 Jules Méline, the leader of the protectionist forces in the Chamber of Deputies and the principal author of the tariff bill, explicitly linked increased duties to higher wages and job security for workers and promoted tariff protection as an antidote to socialism. Lebovics quotes the salient passages:⁴

What we have to defend by means of the tariffs is labor, that is, the jobs and bread of our workers [argued Méline] [. . .]. It cannot enter any one’s head further to reduce the pay of our workers, which in certain branches of production is already manifestly inadequate. On the contrary, we have to bend all our efforts to raising wages. To do this, we have to maintain the prices of our products at a profitable level by thwarting the excessive inroads of foreign competition. That is how customs duties are linked to the social question itself in its most acute form.

I believe [. . .] that the best form of socialism – I do not shrink back from the

³ Herman Lebovics, *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat in the Third French Republic, 1860–1914: Origins of the New Conservatism* (Baton Rouge, 1988), especially pp. 51–96.

⁴ Lebovics, *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat*, pp. 5, 91–92.

word – would be that of providing work for our workers, of improving their conditions, and, to the degree possible, of raising their wages and improving their welfare.

The question is, how do we interpret such public statements by protectionist leaders? Lebovics seems to take them at face value, as evidence that industrialists were seeking higher import duties to secure “protection against labor troubles”. By contrast, I see them as rhetoric, a smokescreen concealing the protectionists’ true goals and part of an effort to win popular support for a policy – higher import duties – that would certainly help industrialists but that would likely hurt workers and all consumers (by raising domestic prices on food and manufactures) without necessarily leading to higher wages. In other words, we agree on what the protectionists were *saying*, but we disagree on their motives and intentions. Beyond that, we disagree on whether or not the Méline tariff played a significant role in labor-management relations in France at the end of the nineteenth century. Settling these disagreements requires that we look more closely at French industrial relations in the decade leading up to the tariff of 1892 and in the years following it. Was the Méline tariff intended primarily to pacify labor? Intentionally or not, did it ultimately serve that purpose?

Labor troubles and the making of the Méline tariff, 1881–1891

There can be no doubt that labor-management relations were deteriorating in France in the 1880s as strike activity and unionization burgeoned in many industries. Moreover, as Michelle Perrot has demonstrated, it was precisely the years that the tariff was up for legislative review, in 1880–1881 and 1889–1891, that were the most strike-filled in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁵ So it is hardly surprising that labor concerns spilled over into the debate on tariff reform and raised in some minds the possibility that solutions for labor unrest might be found in increased protection. At the same time we must take into account the nature and motivation of strike activity in the 1880s. Perrot points out that, whereas offensive strikes outweighed defensive strikes in most years between the 1870s and 1914, there was a definite shift toward defensive strikes in the hard times of the 1880s with defensive strikes actually out-numbering offensive strikes in 1884–1888.⁶ What this means is that, in a growing number of cases in these years, strikes arose not from worker initiative but in reaction to what employers were doing. In the cotton weaving center of Roanne, for exam-

⁵ Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France, 1871–1890*, 2 vols (Paris, 1974), 1, pp. 48–72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 82.

ple, the strike wave of 1880–1882 was largely a response to the tightening of work rules and the lowering of wages by employers. In January 1882, when workers walked out of one plant to protest wage cuts, eleven factory owners responded with a lockout and persevered in it despite pleas from the mayor, subprefect, and prefect to call it off. Ultimately in late March, the workers returned to work on the employers' terms.⁷ Similarly, in the slumping iron and steel industry of the Loire, strikes at Marine steelworks, Firminy, and other plants in 1884 followed directly upon efforts in the previous year to reduce labor costs sixty percent.⁸ In the coal industry, efforts by mine owners to increase management control of the workplace and reduce labor costs precipitated a rolling barrage of often violent strikes in the 1880s, the most famous occurring at Anzin in 1884 and Decazeville in 1886.⁹

In general, what seems to have been happening in the 1880s was that, in response to continuing and intensifying price competition in industries like textiles, metallurgy, and coal, industrialists who, as Lebovics says, were unwilling or unable to cut other costs decided to cut wages in order to stay competitive. But, despite some early successes, this strategy proved to be increasingly difficult to sustain as workers rose up in reaction against it and began to find allies in the Gambettist and Radical wings of the Republican party (reflected not only in the law of 1884 legalizing unions but also in the instructions sent more and more frequently to prefects to act as arbiters in labor disputes).¹⁰ By the end of the decade, the rising tide of unionization and labor unrest had sufficiently reduced the industrialists' field of maneuver and restricted their ability to solve their problems directly at the workers' expense that many industrialists were looking to tariff protection as part of a more circuitous strategy for dealing with labor costs. As we shall see below, that strategy involved using the proceeds of higher protection not so much to maintain existing jobs and wage levels (as Méline promised workers) but to finance the adoption of labor-saving technology that would allow the substitution of low-paid workers for high-paid workers.

For now what must be emphasized is that labor unrest in the 1880s was more the result than the cause of what the industrialists were doing and was not the primary stimulus for the growth of the protectionist sentiments that led to the Méline tariff. The National Assembly's failure in 1881–1882 to undo the system of trade treaties and the moderate conventional tariff created by the Second Empire had already determined, well before the crescendo of labor violence in the late 1880s, that the protectionists would

⁷ Marcel Goninet, *Histoire de Roanne et de sa région*, 2 vols (Roanne, 1975), 1, pp. 232–237.

⁸ L.J. Gras, *Histoire économique de la métallurgie de la Loire* (Saint Etienne, 1908), pp. 352–381.

⁹ Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), pp. 72–113.

¹⁰ On the French state's increasing intervention on behalf of labor, see Reid, *ibid.*

again be on the offensive in 1891, when the trade treaties expired. No firm and no industry that had not already been protectionistic in the previous decade became protectionistic in the 1880s simply because of labor problems. In itself, labor unrest neither changed the purposes of French protectionism nor increased the number of protectionist players.¹¹ At most, it raised the intensity of protectionist feeling among industrialists already long committed to higher import duties as a tool against foreign competition.

The impact of the Méline tariff on labor relations

In addition to looking at the events that preceded the passage of the Méline tariff, anyone seeking to clarify the connection between labor unrest and the return to protection in France should also consider the aftermath and consequences of the new tariff. If social protectionism was really behind the drive for higher import duties, then there should be indications that, in those industries that received increased tariff protection in 1892, the gains from higher domestic prices were passed on to workers. Did this in fact happen? Lebovics suggests that the framers of the Méline tariff intended to pass on at least some of the benefits to workers, but he offers no specifics.¹² Instead, he notes that there were renewed strikes in various industries in 1893 and 1894, and he focusses on the industrialists' efforts to find new allies and build new bulwarks against labor militancy in the course of the 1890s, especially their efforts to head off a possible worker-peasant alliance by drawing the peasants into conservative rural *syndicats*.¹³ While noting the lack of pacification of workers in the 1890s, he continues to assert that the new tariff worked to pacify labor,¹⁴ but he never explains how this worked in practice.

In point of fact, how might increased tariff protection work to "pacify labor"? The immediate economic effect of any non-prohibitory increase in the level of import duties is two-fold: (1) an increase in state revenues from customs (provided that the tariff does not reduce the quantity of imports so

¹¹ The stability of the protectionist forces from the 1870s to the early 1890s is reflected in the membership lists of the *Association de l'industrie française* reprinted in Lebovics, pp. 193–201. On the protectionist campaign of the 1880s as an extension of previous efforts, see Smith, *Tariff Reform in France*, pp. 196–210.

¹² "Tariffs promised to stabilize existing industries, increase prices and profits, and permit concessions to pacify the growing militancy of the new class of industrial workers of the provinces", Lebovics, *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat*, p. 93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 97–123.

¹⁴ "In the early years of the 1890s, the defenses of the social order of the Republic were nearly completed. In place was a tariff policy and an ideology of National Production to pacify the working class" [emphasis added], Lebovics, *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat*, p. 123.

much that it nullifies gains from the higher rate of duties), and (2) an increase in the price of imports. The latter can either lead domestic producers of the protected goods to charge higher prices on their share of the goods sold domestically (the subsidy effect), or, if they can sell their products at a lower price than the imports, it allows them to increase their domestic market share (the production effect). Either way, the domestic producers of the newly protected goods are likely to enjoy increased revenues and profits. This means that, in the absence of any government effort to channel its increased revenues from tariffs into benefits for workers (and the French government made no such effort in the 1890s), any benefit for workers from increased protection must come from the industrialists who directly benefit from higher prices on imports. Is there any hard evidence that French industrialists did in fact pass on some of their monetary gains from the Méline tariff to their workers in fulfillment of the promises made in 1890–1891 (which would *post facto* add credence to the notion that the industrialists were seeking greater tariff protection all along to pacify workers)? And is there any evidence that such concessions in turn softened the militancy of the workers? In other words, is there evidence that the passage of the Méline tariff represented the kind of watershed in labor relations in the Third Republic that Lebovics says it must have been?

To answer these questions, we must focus on those sectors of French industry that actually received a meaningful increase in protection as a result of the Méline tariff. The so-called “return to protection” in France was, in fact, highly selective. Import duties remained the same for coal and many forms of iron and steel (bar iron, pig iron, sheet iron, and steel rails) and were even reduced for steel sheet and bars, so we need not look for tariff-based benefits for coal miners and steelworkers. In metallurgy, increases in import duties were limited to iron wire and more complex fabricated products such as boilers and steam engines, coaches and bicycles, textile machinery, and various spare parts (wheels, axles, gears, and the like). Higher duties were also granted to the textile industries – notably on linen products, cotton yarns and threads, and various forms of woolen and cotton cloth, including blends of cotton and wool and cotton and silk.¹⁵ So the best places to look for social protectionism in action after 1892 are the metal fabrication industries and the linen, cotton, and woolen textile industries.

Unfortunately not much can be said at present about the metal fabricators. With the notable exception of Michael Hanagan’s book on the Loire,¹⁶ there is little recent work that focusses on what was happening to labor in these industries in the 1890s, and Hanagan was not specifically

¹⁵ See the tariff rates in Smith, *Tariff Reform in France*, pp. 253–258.

¹⁶ Michael P. Hanagan, *The Logic of Solidarity: Artisans and Industrial Workers in Three French Towns, 1871–1914* (Urbana, IL, 1980).

looking for the effects of the Méline tariff on wages and benefits. So, without delving into local archives and company records, it is difficult to go beyond generalities. Certainly the 1890s witnessed growing worker militancy in some sectors of metal fabrication, often led by skilled workers resisting the effects of mechanization. But this in itself would not rule out the possibility that the patronat was trying to improve their workers' lot by passing on gains from increased tariff protection after 1892. We simply need more evidence.

Fortunately, much more can be said about the French textile industry and its labor relations in the decade following the Méline tariff. Although company papers for this era are not abundantly available, the secondary literature is much richer than for the metals trades. In addition, there are the published proceedings of a major parliamentary inquiry into conditions in the textile industry, conducted in 1904 by a committee of the Chamber of Deputies created at the urging of Jean Jaurès following the violent linen workers strike in Armentières in 1903. Unlike the parliamentary commissions that investigated economic questions in the first two decades of the Third Republic and that consisted almost exclusively of capitalists or their representatives, the Chamber Textile Commission of 1904 drew its membership from both sides of the capital-labor divide, and this was reflected in the even-handedness of its proceedings.¹⁷ The commission sent questionnaires not just to employers' associations and chambers of commerce, but also to labor inspectors, *conseils des prud'hommes*, and labor unions, and in its visits to the major and minor textile centers of France – from Armentières in January 1904 to Amiens the following December – the commission took testimony from a wide range of interested parties. The result was five volumes of largely undigested data and opinion on the state of the industry and its workers.¹⁸ Although often contradictory, the depositions and testimony nonetheless yield valuable information on the effects of the tariff reform of 1891–1892 on labor-management relations.

In their testimony before the commission, the linen manufacturers of Lille and Armentières fully credited the Méline tariff for saving their industry.¹⁹ Indeed, after years of contraction in the face of foreign competition and the equally harsh competition of domestic cotton, the linen indus-

¹⁷ The membership of the commission included industrialists such as Jean Audiffred (Roanne), Henry Boucher (president of the Epinal Chamber of Commerce), Jules Dansette (Armentières linen spinner), and Eugène Motte (the mayor of Roubaix). It also included such pro-labor deputies as Gustave Dron, the Radical mayor of Tourcoing, and the Socialists Jean Jaurès, Edmond Charpentier (Loire), Léon Mirman (Reims), and Gustave Delory (mayor of Lille).

¹⁸ *Chambre des députés, Procès-verbaux de la Commission chargé de procéder à une enquête sur l'état de l'industrie textile et la condition des ouvriers textiles*, 5 vols (Paris: Imprimerie de la Chambre des députés, 1906). [Hereafter cited Chamber Textile Commission.]

try of the Nord stabilized in the 1890s at 500,000 spindles with an average annual output of 72 thousand tons of *flis* – all for the protected home market.²⁰ It is uncertain, however, that this did much for the workers. Fluctuations in Russian flax prices chronically threatened to push linen prices so high that customers would shift to cheaper cotton substitutes and bring on production cutbacks and layoffs, as happened in 1894 and 1898–1900. And even in good times, the Armentières workers syndicate complained that seasonal lay-offs, the use of inferior materials, and the reduction of the workday from twelve to ten hours in 1903 (the proximate cause of the 1903 strike) conspired to lower workers' earnings, although the paybooks made available to the commission seemed to show a slight increase in wage rates in the Lille–Armentières region after 1892.²¹ What is clearer is that, despite heavy union membership within the Armentières workforce, the linen workers enjoyed no pensions, no *caisse de secours*, no unemployment insurance, no subsidized housing, no profit-sharing, and only two worker cooperatives as of 1904. Patronal authoritarianism and fear of reprisals pervaded labor-management relations. No one took complaints to the *conseil des prud'hommes* because, according to the union, those who did “were sure to be fired”.²²

For workers in the French woollens industry, improvements in the years from 1892 to 1904 were even more problematical. The increased import duties in the Méline tariff did secure the home market for domestic producers.²³ But for woollens centers like Reims, which had long depended on exports, this did little good, as growing competition and rising protectionism abroad – especially in the American market – continued the contraction of foreign sales that had begun in the previous decade.²⁴ Meanwhile, those

¹⁹ As the president of the Armentières Chamber of Commerce put it, “without the Méline tariff, our industry would no longer exist”, Chamber Textile Commission, II, p. 19.

²⁰ Smith, *Tariff Reform in France*, pp. 225–226; T.J. Markovitch, “L’Industrie française de 1789 à 1964: Analyse des faits”, *Cahiers de l’ISEA*, AF 6, no. 174 (juin 1966), Tableau de base XVI (Industrie textile).

²¹ Deposition of the *Association syndicale des ouvriers de l’industrie textile d’Armentières et d’Houplines*. Chamber Textile Commission, II, pp. 61–67; on wages at Lille and Armentières, Chamber Textile Commission, IV, pp. 266–270, 293–302.

²² Chamber Textile Commission, II, p. 67.

²³ Imports of woolen cloth fell from an annual average worth of 77 million francs in 1877–1886 to 40 million francs in 1897–1906. Emile Levasseur, *Histoire de commerce de la France*, 2 vols (Paris, 1911–1912), II, p. 771.

²⁴ The value of French woolen cloth exports declined from an annual average of 349 million francs in 1877–1886 to 226 million francs in 1897–1906 (Levasseur, II, p. 771). After the United States enacted a tough new tariff in 1883, the value of French woolen cloth exports to the USA fell from an annual average of 73 million francs in 1881–1885 to 17 million francs in 1901–1905, a decline of 77 percent. See Michael S. Smith, “France’s Commercial ‘Decline’, 1871–1914: A Re-examination”, in E.J. Perkins (ed.), *Essays in Economic and Business History*, IV (1986), pp. 21–22.

woolens centers dependent on the home market found that higher protection did nothing to shield them from the murderous competition offered by the expanding center of combed wool production at Roubaix-Tourcoing. The plight of these industries and their workers is seen in the case of Fourmies, site of the infamous massacre of 1891. As Roubaix and Tourcoing expanded, wool combing at Fourmies declined from 722 firms employing 2170 workers in 1882 to 220 firms employing 660 workers in 1904. Its wool spinning capacity contracted from a peak of 944,000 spindles in 1892 to 822,000 in 1904, and its weaving plant fell from a high of 16,796 power looms employing 24,820 workers in 1897 to 14,732 looms and 20,440 workers in 1904. As production declined, so too did the bargaining power of the workers. There were no strikes after 1891, and even the employers' syndicate admitted to the textile commission in 1904 that wages had declined since 1892.²⁵

Meanwhile, even in prosperous Roubaix, conditions were hardly ideal. According to Eugène Motte, who opened his books to the textile commission, wool spinners were earning 38–40 francs per week (versus 24–30 francs per week for Fourmies spinners), but most workers continued to work 72 hours a week (versus an average of 54 hours per week in the English woolens industry) in spite of the 1900 law reducing the workday to ten hours, and the introduction of new machinery and speed-ups on old machinery led to a reduction in the number of *rattacheurs* from four or five per team to two or three, thereby reducing the number of children employed and thus family incomes.²⁶

Perhaps the best test case for the Méline-tariff-as-social-protectionism thesis is the French cotton industry. Unquestionably, the increases in import duties enacted in 1891 inaugurated an era of prosperity and expansion for French cotton, particularly the three centers that had come to dominate the industry since the beginning of the Third Republic: upper Normandy, the Vosges, and the Nord. All three increased their plant and production in the course of the 1890s to replace the foreign imports excluded from the domestic market by the higher duties and to serve the colonial markets assimilated to the metropolitan customs system.²⁷ Yet, for all the good news in the industry, the evidence assembled by the Chamber Textile

²⁵ Chamber Textile Commission, IV, pp. 336–410. The employers said that the daily wages of spinners fell from 5.5 to 4–5 francs per day from 1893 to 1903 while the daily wages of weavers were falling from 4.4 francs to 2.5–4 francs per day. The union, the *prud'hommes*, and others indicated it was much worse, with weavers' wages declining fully 50 percent (4 francs to 2 francs) and with spinners in the poorest mills earning only 1 franc per day.

²⁶ Testimony of the *Chambre syndicale des ouvriers de l'industrie textile*, Chamber Textile Commission, II, pp. 161–177.

²⁷ Imports of cotton yarn fell from 101,500 *quintaux* in 1890 to 38,800 *quintaux* in 1902, and imports of cotton cloth fell from 24,510 *quintaux* in 1892 to 12,670 in 1903 (Chamber

Commission in 1904 does not paint an unambiguous portrait of material gain and declining militancy for the cotton workers.

To hear the cotton manufacturers of Lille tell it, the Méline tariff had been an unalloyed benefit for their workers. On the one hand, it made their jobs more secure; on the other hand, it allowed wages to rise ten to fifteen percent even as the length of the workday was falling from twelve to ten hours. To be sure, even the patrons attributed the wage increase less to their own largesse than to a growing demand for workers as British cotton masters built new plants in the Lille area to get around the heightened tariff wall. Still, “one can conclude”, wrote the Lille Chamber of Commerce, “that the worker’s share in the establishment of the tariff of 1892 has been a perceptible augmentation in remuneration for much shorter hours of labor”.²⁸ In turn, higher wages – coupled with no appreciable increase in living costs – made for peaceful labor relations. According to the manufacturers, strikes since 1892 had been infrequent and mild (“ni longues, ni sérieuses”), and problems had been easily resolved by arbitration.²⁹

The Lille textile workers union, however, had a different story. Without contradicting the quantitative data of the patrons, it pointed to qualitative problems. Yes, said the union, wages and working conditions were good in the modern, technologically progressive mills in the Lille area, but conditions in older mills were deplorable, with no ventilation, no drinkable water, and poor sanitation (“chez Barrois Frères, les cabinets d’aisance [sont] un trou noir, sans air”). Yes, said the union, wages for weavers were higher in Lille than elsewhere, but only because they were now tending two looms instead of one, so that, even with piece rates declining, many earned more per day and per week than before. But only at the cost of greater physical exertion and a higher level of fatigue. Overall, insisted the union spokesmen, “working conditions and living conditions [were] becoming insupportable”.³⁰

The cotton industry of Rouen and Upper Normandy seemed to benefit as much as the Nord from the Méline tariff. As the declining importation of foreign yarns and the growing exportation of their own woven goods to the colonies bolstered their market position at home and abroad, the *grands cotonniers* of Rouen invested in new equipment (ring spindles and Northrop automatic looms) and expanded production.³¹ Yet this seemed at best to be a mixed blessing for the workers. On the one hand, largely because of

Textile Commission, IV, p. 38). Meanwhile, cotton cloth exports rose from 14,720 to 27,717 *quintaux* of which 50 percent went to the colonies (Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français* (Paris, 1984), p. 54).

²⁸ Chamber Textile Commission, II, p. 253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 245.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 267–284.

³¹ Total power looms in Normandy rose from 17,400 in 1890 to 24,500 in 1903 (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, pp. 42–73).

the increased productivity of the new machinery, daily and weekly earnings remained constant or improved slightly for each occupational category.³² On the other hand, piece rates were declining and a growing sense of insecurity led to increased strike activity in the late 1890s and early 1900s (without notable success).³³ Moreover, the new technology allowed the substitution of lower paid female machine tenders for higher paid male spinners and weavers, so that total income for established textile worker families may well have been declining.³⁴

The cotton industry of the Vosges, which had expanded steadily through good times and bad since 1871, enjoyed perhaps the greatest success of any segment of the French cotton industry in the decade following the passage of the Méline tariff.³⁵ Given the industry's long and close association with Jules Méline, it is not surprising that its spokesmen, testifying to the Chamber Textile Commission, claimed that the tariff had fostered a dramatic rise in wages for workers since 1892.³⁶ Moreover, the continued lack of unionization and strike activity within the Vosges labor force through the 1890s lent additional credence to the patrons' claims that employers and employees had benefitted equally from the post-1892 prosperity.³⁷ However, testimony from the small but militant *Fédération des syndicats ouvriers des Vosges* cast the apparent improvements for labor in a harsher light. Noting that piece-rates were falling in the Vosges as elsewhere, the secretary of the federation attributed any increase in earnings not to beneficent

³² According to the *Syndicat de la filature de coton*, daily wages of male mule spinners rose from 4.75 francs to 4.83 francs, 1892–1903; wages of *rattacheurs* went from 2.86 to 2.93 francs and wages of female spinning machine tenders went from 2.91 to 3.01 francs in the same period. According to the *Syndicat du tissage de coton*, wages of *bobineuses* rose from 2.2 to 2.4 francs per day and wages of *tisserands* rose from 3.02 to 3.2 francs per day (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, pp. 22–92).

³³ The *Conseil des prud'hommes* reported to the textile commission “une légère baisse des taux de la main-oeuvre” (IV, p. 98). In the previous five years there had been four strikes lasting four to six weeks each, three of which protested the lowering of piece-rates when new machinery was installed. All had failed as the cotton masters refused to negotiate and summarily fired the workers' spokesmen (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 100).

³⁴ Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 101.

³⁵ From 1892 to 1903, the number of spindles in the Vosges increased from 1,116,000 to 2,236,000 and the number of looms increased from 33,000 to 54,700 (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 269).

³⁶ According to an index provided by the *Syndicat cotonnier de l'Est*, wages for men in the Vosges cotton industry rose 40 percent, 1890–1903, while women's wages increased 17 percent and children's 47 percent (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 259).

³⁷ Henry Boucher, president of the Epinal Chamber of Commerce and deputy for the Vosges, maintained that “patrons and workers [in the Vosges] lived on terms of such intimate collaboration that conflicts were relatively rare” (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 244). This is confirmed by Georges Poull, *L'Industrie textile vosgienne, 1765–1981* (Rupt-sur-Moselle, 1982), p. 430, who speaks of the Vosges workers as “notoriously passive”.

patrons passing along the fruits of the Méline tariff but rather to the speed-up of machinery and to weavers tending four looms where before they had tended two.³⁸ According to the union, the reputation of the Vosges cotton industry for good labor-management relations was unwarranted. "In most factories", it insisted, "relations between workers and owners are generally bad."³⁹

Despite all the contradictions in the testimony, certain conclusions can be drawn from the proceedings of the Chamber Textile Commission. First of all, nowhere in the French textile industry do we find a scenario that would perfectly and unambiguously verify the notion that the Méline tariff in itself served to reduce labor militancy. That is, nowhere do we find a labor force that was in revolt in the 1880s becoming docile after the return to protection in 1892. Textile centers that enjoyed labor peace in the 1890s – such as the Vosges – already had a tradition of labor peace in the 1880s. Centers that suffered labor unrest in the 1880s (Roubaix, Saint-Quentin, Roanne) continued to have labor unrest in the 1890s.

Consistent with this observation is a second one. While there were improvements in wages and benefits in some instances, there was no clear upward trend industry-wide that can be attributed to the Méline tariff. Of course, the industrialists testifying before the Chamber Textile Commission asserted that wages had risen, 1892–1903, and many opened their books to prove it. But what the books mostly revealed was marginal increases in weekly earnings for certain categories of workers. The textile workers unions replied that such information did not take into account the number of weeks of work per year (the unions argued that yearly earnings were falling even when weekly earnings were up). The unions also pointed out that, even if pay was rising on a daily or weekly basis, piece rates were falling so workers were working a lot harder for marginally higher income. More importantly, it was often the lower-paid workers who were receiving marginally higher wages while higher paying jobs were being eliminated. This last point is crucial. From the Nord to Normandy to the Vosges, it was technological change that shaped and controlled labor-management relations in French textiles after 1892. The 1890s witnessed the re-tooling of both spinning and weaving, in particular the substitution of the ring spindle for the self-acting mule, with a corresponding shift from skilled male spinners to unskilled female machine tenders; the introduction of various automatic looms (especially the American Northrop loom), which reduced the manpower needed per machine;⁴⁰ and an increase in the speed at which machines were run throughout the industry. Given the persistence of

³⁸ Thus at David, Maigret, et Cie where piece rates fell 40 percent, workers still earned 3.75–4 francs per day tending four looms instead of 3.5 francs tending two (Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 281).

³⁹ Chamber Textile Commission, IV, p. 287.

piece-rates in the industry, these developments resulted in an increase in the take-home pay of low-paid workers who managed to keep their jobs (compared to what they would have earned ten years before), but they also eliminated many higher paid jobs. So in terms of total nominal family income, most textile workers were probably not better off by the early 1900s although any decline in the cost of living – if such a thing in fact occurred in this period – would have improved workers' real wages.⁴¹

Beyond the question of wages there is the question of fringe benefits and working conditions. From the testimony to the Chamber Textile Commission, it appears that workers in some regions were relatively well provided for (the Vosges), others much less so (Rouen). But, again, there is no clear trend toward improvement in this area as a result of the Méline tariff.

All this leads to a further conclusion. The Méline tariff represented a watershed in the history of the French textile industry in terms of market control, profitability, and sheer survival, but it did not represent a corresponding watershed in the history of labor relations. Even in those industries that clearly enjoyed greater prosperity after 1892, there was no dramatic change in how the patronat dealt with their workers. In the Vosges, the docile work force continued to take whatever management chose to give it, while, in regions with a history of bad blood, improvements in wages and benefits continued to be extracted through confrontation and negotiation. In other words, passage of the Méline tariff did not lead the patronat to act any more benevolently toward their workers than they had before. If the chief motive of the textile protectionists in seeking higher tariffs was the conciliation and pacification of their labor force, it is hard to find compell-

⁴⁰ On the development and diffusion of the Northrop loom, see William Mass, "Mechanical and Organizational Innovation: The Drapers and the Automatic Loom," *Business History Review*, 63, 4 (winter 1989), pp. 876–929.

⁴¹ Research on the cost of living and the computation of real wages was in its infancy in France at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and available data tends to be drawn from Paris, as is reflected in the work of Halbwachs and Singer-Kérel (Maurice Halbwachs, *La classe ouvrière et les niveaux de vie* (Paris, 1913); J. Singer-Kérel, *Le coût de vie à Paris de 1840 à 1954* (Paris, 1961)). See the discussions in Emile Levasseur, *Questions ouvrières et industrielles en France sous la IIIe République* (Paris, 1907), pp. 523–600, and Michelle Perrot, "Les classes populaires urbaines", *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, IV (Paris, 1979), 1, pp. 483–505.

V. Zamagni recently computed a new real wage index from Phelps-Brown's wage index and Singer-Kérel's cost of living index. It shows stagnation in French real wages, 1891–1896 (with the index fluctuating between 92 and 95), followed by steady improvement, 1896–1907 (with the index rising to 108), followed by a severe decline in 1911–1913 when the cost of living rose dramatically as wage rates held steady (V. Zamagni, "An International Comparison of Real Industrial Wages, 1890–1913: Methodological Issues and Results", in Peter Scholliers (ed.), *Real Wages in 19th and 20th Century Europe: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York, 1989), pp. 107–140). Of course, the behavior of such general indices tells us little about what was happening to the specific occupational groups discussed here.

ing evidence of that in their post-1892 behavior as revealed in the testimony to the Chamber Textile Commission.

Conclusion

The notion that tariff policy in late nineteenth century France was thinly disguised social policy, the direct result of labor troubles in the years of the Great Depression, has its roots in the belief that the mind-set of the French patronat was more or less as Marxist critics portrayed it. According to the Marxists, capitalists are preoccupied with their workers – preoccupied in quiet times with squeezing the last ounce of “surplus labor value” from them and, in times of labor unrest, preoccupied with controlling and pacifying them. By contrast, my view is that capitalists at any given time have many balls in the air, and labor relations is just one of them. French industrialists in the late nineteenth century were trying to survive and prosper in the face of intense competition from home and abroad. They had to cope constantly with changing cost functions, changing technology, changing market conditions, and a changing political climate. Compared to all the threats and problems that the world presented to them, dealing with their workers did not seem particularly difficult. As Patricia Hilden rightly points out in her study of women textile workers in the Nord⁴² (and what she says could easily be applied to other regions and industries), French industrialists were self-confident, arrogant men who often viewed their workers with contempt. They were not cowering under their beds in fear of labor violence, and they were not obsessed with winning their workers’ favor. They generally expected to deal with worker discontent as it occurred and however necessary. Because there is no direct or necessary connection between the level of import duties and the level of wages, French industrialists never saw tariff protection as their principal means of pacifying labor. When they sought an increase in tariff rates in 1891, they did so for the same reasons they had always sought tariff protection: to secure control of their home markets against foreign competition and to maintain and enhance prices and profits for the benefit of themselves.

⁴² Patricia Hilden, *Working Women and Socialist Politics in France, 1880–1914: A Regional Study* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 76ff.