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The Carmaux Strike

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NOTES AND MEMORANDA

THE CARMAUX STRIKE.

THE *Times* asserted that the Carmaux strike was one of the most extraordinary struggles between labour and capital ever witnessed. It had been unique in its origin; it might be so in its results. If it were to end in the overthrow of the Loubet Cabinet, no one would feel surprised.

There is but one exception to the accuracy of the great English journal's estimate. The Carmaux strike tended to establish, rather than upset, the Ministry, inasmuch as the Premier, M. Loubet himself, was chosen arbitrator. It is however precisely in this entirely unforeseen *dénouement* that the extraordinary and truly unique character of the strike has reached its climax. Some account of the manner in which that strike arose and of the course it took may therefore prove interesting to the readers of the *Economic Journal*.

Carmaux is a little town of 9,000 inhabitants, situated in a mountainous district of Southern France, not far from Toulouse and Montauban. Its population consists almost wholly of the workers in the mines, 2,800 in number, with their families and their attendant tradesmen. In spite of a somewhat violent strike which broke out in 1869, it had constituted a very peaceful centre of industry. It was not only free from Socialism, it was not even Republican, voting meekly for the candidates nominated by the Company, that is to say, for Baron Reille, the President. At the parliamentary elections in 1889, Baron Reille caused himself to be succeeded by his son-in-law, the Marquis de Solages, he himself standing for another constituency in the department. It was a sort of "electoral fief" in the hands of the powerful Company, who, it was alleged, distributed their favours and their frowns amongst the workmen according as they showed themselves more or less submissive or independent. For their part the condition of the workmen was satisfactory. Wages averaged 5 francs a day for married men, and varied from 2 to 4 francs for children and youths; hence it was possible for a family to live in relative comfort, especially if the moderate cost of living in that part of France be taken into account. The thriftiness among the workmen,—and most of them some

ten years ago deserved to be so called,—were able to buy a small cottage, and even in some cases a small plot of ground, which they cultivated during such leisure time as was at their disposal. They came out of the mines at two o'clock.

Then, some ten years ago, the gospel of Socialism was preached to them by, it is said, one Madame Paule Minck, a woman-apostle living at Montpellier, but frequently travelling about to hold meetings, at which she displayed some talent. The proximate result was a strike in 1883. A failure in other respects, it had as its positive effect the organisation of a *chambre syndicale* or trade union, pacific in its procedure and concerning itself solely with corporate interests. At this time the glass-making industry, which was of long standing in the country, underwent a great expansion and infected the population with additional germs of fermentation. It is known that the workmen in this trade, who were even recently termed 'gentlemen glass-makers,' are usually highly picked men, very well paid, but very extravagant, and deeply imbued with advanced ideas. Their influence made itself felt about the Carnaux district, not only in the development of revolutionary ideas, but also, alas! in the growth of public-houses and drink stores, of which the little town contains now no less than 131.

It was at this juncture that the hero of the story, Calvignac, made his appearance. He began to work in the mines in 1872 in place of his father, who had been the victim of a colliery accident. Thus in engaging him the company were only in some sort paying a debt. Ambitious and restless, but not blameworthy as such, he got himself chosen as President of the Union, and delegate to various congresses of working men. He founded a 'club for social studies,' became the leading man of his neighbourhood, and was finally elected mayor on the 15th of last May, and shortly afterwards member of the district council (*conseil d'arrondissement*).

Meanwhile, as far back as the month of March, a strike had broken out on the subject of wages. Under pressure of public opinion the Company had accepted arbitration, in which the workmen had been declared to be in the right. The Company had to consent to a rise in wages of 5 per cent., and to establish a minimum wage of 4·75 fr. This repulse did not put the Directors into a good humour, the more so that they were not long in noticing, if their statistics are accurate, that the workmen, relying upon the minimum wage, worked less and turned out less coal. According to the correspondence in the *Temps* newspaper, the produce per workman fell from 716 kilog. to 651 kilog.

Nor could the election to the mayoralty of a workman like Calvignac, known for his Radical opinions, be a welcome event to the Directors, who saw in it a menace to their political position and the likelihood of their being deposed from that quasi-sovereignty which they had hitherto exercised in the country. Their relations with Calvignac became strained. He, possibly a little intoxicated with his new

functions and with his tricoloured scarf, the badge of his magistrature, assumed a high tone with the Company, and became very irregular at his work, giving for excuse the duties of office. It is a confirmed fact, that, from the day of his election as mayor to that of his discharge as employé of the Company, *i.e.* in two months and a half, his attendance at work amounted only to seventeen days. He had obtained leave of absence on eighteen days, and had caused to be handed in, purely, it would seem, as a personal favour, a certificate of illness for twenty-six days! The Company summoned Calvignac to choose between his functions as a miner and those as mayor, and on his refusal, couched, as they aver, in insolent language, they discharged him. It is difficult to think that Calvignac had not put himself in the wrong; and for that matter, the best proof that he felt this was so is, that he took good care not to prosecute the Company at law and claim damages for dismissal without just grounds, to which he would have been legally entitled. Neither, however, is it possible to refrain from the thought that the Directors of the Company acted with extreme want of tact, and even, in all probability, yielded to a feeling of spite or political rancour. Still, in the cause of impartiality it must be added, that the irregular attendances of the workmen and their insubordination to rules had been seriously prejudicial to the Company, and had increased the expenses of production from about 2 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. They wished therefore to make an example by aiming a blow at the leader. If however they had been patient, they would probably have succeeded in discrediting Calvignac in the eyes of his own comrades. Workmen are in fact greatly disposed to pass severe judgments upon one another, and they would soon have grown tired of seeing the man of their choice occupying himself in doing nothing, or rather, to use the witty phrase of a local paper, 'playing in turn the mayor in the mine and the workman at the *mairie*.' But when they were discharging the object of the workmen's choice two months after his election, the Company knew that they were inflicting keen annoyance upon the latter; they knew that they would be charged with having lent themselves to an act of political reprisal; they even knew, and their supporters admit that they knew, they were provoking a strike. But they deemed their position was sufficiently strong to brave it out; they may even have thought they might profit by it to the extent of regaining in part what the previous strike had wrung from them.

In this they were vastly deceived. On the 15th August the enraged workmen forced their way into the house of the Director, M. Humblot, and summoned him either to revoke Calvignac's discharge or to sign his own resignation. The unhappy Director, feeling the knife at his throat, resigned himself to the latter alternative. Calvignac, who, as mayor of the commune, was responsible for the maintenance of order, had the adroitness to intervene in time to save the Director's life, but late enough to allow this deplorable scene to be carried into effect.

The strike began at once. An admirable watchword was hit upon,

—‘The vindication of manhood suffrage.’ What is the use, they said, of the Constitution recognising the people’s right to vote for such representatives as they like, if their right may be made null and void by Companies and masters forcing those representatives either to renounce their mandate, or to lose their bread-winning? And they called upon the Government, as guardians of the Constitution, to insure the people in the free exercise of their right by intervening between them and the Company, in case of need even by dissolving the latter.

Thus it came about that the question was transferred from industrial ground, on which strikes are usually fought, to the arena of politics. On this platform it had a marvellous success. From every part of the country the Radical press inveighed vehemently against the resuscitation of feudalism in the shape of great Companies, which would crush out universal suffrage unless reduced to order. All the deputies in the Chamber belonging to the Socialist or Radical section of the labour party, all those agitators, who swarm at the sound of a strike like vultures at the smell of prey, betook themselves to Carmaux, and there held public meetings every evening, protesting against the occupation of the town by gendarmes and soldiers. One of them in particular, Baudin, a working-man deputy for the department of the Cher, who had made a speciality of taking strikes in hand, fixed himself permanently at Carmaux, came to fisticuffs with the gendarmes, and had such a success amongst the workmen that his popularity caused that of Calvignac to wane, and called forth a sentiment of jealousy in the latter. Lafargue, the son-in-law of Karl Marx, might also be seen there, who had once asserted in the *tribune* that it was useless to ask if a strike was just or unjust,—‘labour was always in the right when fighting capital.’

In their turn came the Anarchists. But the Socialists, annoyed to see them poaching on their hunting grounds, got them driven away by the workmen themselves.

September and October are, as we know, the season for congresses; and in every French town when a Labour Congress was sitting, notably at the International Socialist Congress at Marseilles, when the German deputy Liebknecht made his famous speech, the first act of the assembly was to bestow an ovation on the deputy of the Carmaux Trade Union, unanimously naming Calvignac honorary president *in partibus*.

The passionate partisanship of the Socialists in this cause is easily explained, if it be remembered that their tactics are to avail themselves of manhood suffrage, so as to introduce the greatest possible number of labour representatives into communal councils, and then, once they have got a majority in the municipalities, to begin applying collectivist principles. This programme had begun to be carried out with some success at the last municipal elections in the month of May, but it ran some danger of being checked, if the labour candidates found themselves placed, as was the mayor of Carmaux, under the necessity of losing their employment on entering municipal office

With public opinion thus at fever-point, the situation was difficult, not only for the Company, but also for the Ministry. The former, taken aback by the unexpected turn of affairs, possibly regretted their decision, but were too far involved to draw back. They rejected a request for arbitration made by the workmen, pointing out that the dismissal of a workman was not an act on which arbitration could decide. This answer was scarcely satisfactory, since arbitration might very well have been applied to the inquiry, whether Calvignac's discharge was in consequence of failure to fulfil his professional duties or of his election as mayor. They refused moreover to consider Calvignac as on furlough during his term of office, that is to say, to engage to re-employ him as soon as he ceased to be mayor. In order however to prove that they had no intention of disqualifying workmen from civic functions by taking the bread out of their mouths, they offered to maintain at their own costs the mayor of the commune, in such wise as to exempt him from the necessity of working for his living. This proposal was unacceptable. A commune which had its mayor kept by a Company might well seem to be in a state of dependence upon the latter. Besides, for that matter, the Government itself could not allow a mayor, a public official and the representative of authority, to be remunerated by private individuals. Finally, the Marquis de Solages resigned his position as deputy, thus replying to those who reproached him with exercising political pressure and attempting to turn the mines into an electoral fief. The miners were now at liberty to choose whom they really wished, but the Marquis act, generous and politic though it was, came unluckily too late to soothe their heated minds.

The Government, distracted by the Conservative press, on the one hand, upbraiding them with weakness towards the agitators, and the Radical press, on the other, accusing them of complicity with the Company, were in an awkward pass. They had proposed arbitration, and the Company, as we have seen, would have none of it. They had had the mines and the town occupied by infantry and cavalry for the purpose of maintaining order, but dared not render the service, ordinary enough in such circumstances, of insuring liberty to work to such workmen as were desirous of doing so. On the contrary, it was the Unionist workmen who organised patrols to watch the pit-mouths day and night, and prevent any workman from entering, while the soldiers remained with grounded arms. It should be noted here, that French law differs from English law in not considering *picketing* as penal. Nevertheless, the Conservative press became so clamorous that the Government sent orders to put a stop to these patrols, and disperse all street-gatherings, and even all perambulations of groups amounting to several persons. The mayor of Carmaux (Calvignac) refused to post up these orders, but they were none the less put into execution by the gendarmes. It was moreover necessary to prosecute before a court the workmen who had forced their way into M. Humblot the Director's house and threatened him

with death. They were accordingly tried and condemned to various periods of imprisonment, some for days, some for weeks.

Fortunately for the Ministry, the two months during which the strike lasted happened to fall in the parliamentary recess. The Chambers, however, met again on the 18th October, and it was generally thought that the first sitting would be the last day of the Ministry. The Carmaux affair was in fact down in the order of the day at the first sitting: speakers on the right and on the left rose in succession, giving notice of motions of censure against the Government, when, at a solemn challenge from M. Viette, Minister of Public Works, Baron Reille, the President of the Company, ascended the tribune and declared that, for the sake of peace, the Company consented to arbitration, and elected as its arbitrator, M. Loubet, President of the Council. Great was the amazement of the whole Chamber at this *coup de théâtre*, especially of the advanced party, who saw their prey slipping through their fingers; however, the only thing to be done was to close the debate, and closed it was forthwith. The newspapers friendly to the Ministry congratulated them on the dexterous fashion in which they had succeeded in turning the contest both to their own and the public advantage. Other friends more sagacious found cause for uneasiness in seeing the head of the Government undertake a mission of so delicate a nature.

The Miners' Union accepted the arbitration, but in a lukewarm spirit, and only at the pressing instances made to them by the deputies on their side. They even declared that the strike should continue till the result of the arbitration was made known, thus showing pretty clearly that they meant, before submitting to its verdict, to know whether it would be in their favour!

The demands of the workmen comprised three points:—

- (1) Re-instalment of Calvignac in his employment at the workshop.
- (2) Dismissal of M. Humblot, the director.
- (3) Re-employment without distinction of all the workmen on strike.

The decision of the President of the Council gives satisfaction to the workmen on the first point. The Company is to take back Calvignac, 'because his discharge, so soon after his election as mayor and as one of the District Council, may reasonably appear to be a blow dealt at manhood suffrage; in which case the Company has exceeded its rights;' but he will be considered as on leave until the expiry of his term of office. His decision on the second point puts them in the wrong. The Company is to retain the director, 'on the condition that nothing has been alleged of a nature to justify the discharge of that agent.' Finally, as to the third point, the judgment distinguishes between the workmen who had struck simply, and those who had been sentenced by the court for any act of violence; the Company must take back the former—'they have only used the right conferred on them by the law'—but not the latter—'because in

resorting to violence they have exceeded their rights.' It would, we think, be hard to imagine a more impartial and more moderate decision.

And yet it was no sooner known than it raised a serious tumult. The Miners' Union rejected it as the work of traitors, and moreover, —a sadder symptom of our political morals!—the three leaders of the Left in the Chamber, whom the miners had chosen as their counsel, MM. Clémenceau, Pelletan and Millerand, held up the decision to public indignation in a manifesto published in all the papers!

The grievances put forward by the miners and their counsel are, in the first place, that the solidarity binding together all working men does not suffer them to separate their cause from that of comrades whose only crime has been that of fighting in the front ranks. Next, that, inasmuch as the Company has been pronounced guilty, by the award of the arbitration itself, of having dealt a blow at manhood suffrage, it ought to be punished, and the only punishment which could possibly be inflicted would be the dismissal of that director who was the agent responsible for all this disturbance.

The refusal of the miners to accept the arbitrament placed the Government in a critical position, since the head of the Government, after having presented the olive-branch, could not with decency replace it by the sword; it was feared he would be compelled to resign, by which the presage in the *Times* would have found fulfilment. The common sense of the majority in the Chamber saved him. Confronted once more with the question, in the form of a petition, that the prisoners sentenced at Carmaux might receive an "amnesty," the Chamber rejected the proposition by a strong majority. The Government only undertook to extend a "grace" to the prisoners¹ on condition that the miners should accept the arbitrament, and immediately recommence work. The three Radical deputies, discouraged by the vote, and agitated no doubt at the general reprobation they had incurred by their conduct, went to Carmaux on the 31st October, and, better inspired this time, persuaded the Union to yield, while congratulating it on the admirable spirit of wisdom it had displayed, and engaging themselves categorically to find work for the condemned strikers, either in the Carmaux mines or elsewhere. It would be an interesting spectacle if the Government were to place them in its bureaux! In any case it is probable that the Company will change its director, M. Humblot. Hereby the strikers will have ended by scoring on all three points, and a somewhat dangerous precedent will have been created.

Thus ends the Carmaux strike. By it the miners will have lost three months' wages with no other advantage than that of having

¹ The 'amnesty' is a measure by which, legally and generally, the crime is rendered null and void as such. A 'grace' is simply a decision of the Government remitting the penalty which the criminal is to undergo.

vindicated manhood suffrage. Unquestionably the fact that a working-class population consented to suffer and undergo cruel sacrifices for the honour of a principle, is highly remarkable. It proves that henceforth the working classes in France,—and probably in every country,—have fully grasped the importance of manhood suffrage as a powerful weapon which is theirs to wield, and are firmly resolved to avail themselves of it to win the mastery, and not suffer it to be wrenched from them. It proves, too, that the political patronage exercised by masters and companies hitherto towards their employés is past and gone, and that any attempt to restore it is dangerous. “If the Company had not gone in for politics,” said Jourde, a working-man deputy, “the strike would not have taken place.” This is the motto of the whole matter.

“To point a moral” in the tale of the strike is in part a satisfactory task, namely, when we regard the feeling acquired by the working classes concerning their political rights, but less so from another point of view. I refer to the light thrown by the struggle upon the deplorable nature of the organization of our working-class population. These Carmaux miners have been directed by a Union, which did not include many of them, and which by these outsiders was obeyed reluctantly. And this Union itself was led solely by Socialist agitators and by Labour or Radical deputies, who made use of it as a weapon against the Government.

The probable practical result of the strike will be the passing of three bills, which for that matter have long been pending. The one is to extend the power of the State to work mines. It must not be forgotten that in France, different in this respect from England, mines constitute a grant from the State, and that consequently the ownership of a mine is to some extent *sui generis*. Another is to establish arbitration in case of contests between masters and men, and perhaps, to render it even obligatory. But experience has shown that arbitration cannot be efficacious, except in proportion as the organization of labour societies is sufficiently powerful, their economic education sufficiently advanced, and their leaders sufficiently obeyed to insure respect being paid to the decision of the arbitrator. Now the story of this strike just shows that such is not the case with us. We have therefore to fear that the Arbitration Law will not have much effect. The third bill relates to the remuneration of municipal representatives. Members of Parliament in France are in receipt of a State salary, but the mayors and municipal counsellors are not paid at all. The labour party demand that this should be done by the communes. And as those functionaries number over 400,000, this is no trifling matter!

Some of our readers may ask what has become of the hero of the story, Calvignac. Alas no one now takes any notice of him, and when the meeting of electors was called to choose a successor to the Marquis de Solages, the miners proposed several candidates, amongst

whom no choice has yet been made, but no one was found to propose the name of Calvignac. This proves that the Carmaux miners are by no means such bad judges of men.

CHARLES GIDE

Translated by CAROLINE A. FOLEY, M.A.

FRIENDLY SOCIETY FINANCE.

THE important subject of Friendly Society Finance has attracted a good deal of public attention in relation to burning social questions of to-day, especially in its bearing upon provision for old age and the economic position of the wage-earning classes under the consideration of the Labour Commission. A brief statement and examination of the present situation may, therefore, be well timed. The new Chief Registrar in his report (lately issued) for 1891 has incorporated a return asked for by the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P., in the beginning of that year, and issued, as a Government paper, over twelve months ago. It is not a little remarkable, considering the nature of the document, that no mention, in Parliament or out, appears to have been made of its rather startling statistics. The preparation of the return occupied a branch of the Registry Office, to the delay of its ordinary work, no less than six months; a serious abuse of the time and talents of servants of the Crown, if, after all, a labour in vain. This return gives the total number of societies, in three divisions, the number of members, the amount of funds, results of the latest valuations to hand, and number of defaulters to their legal obligations to make annual and quinquennial returns. The tabulation is restricted to England and Wales. I give below the summary:—

I.

	Number on Register.	Number of Members.	Amount of Funds.
Independent Societies.....	10,426	2,133,710	£ 9,289,361
Collecting Societies, under Section 30	39	3,318,942	2,289,858
Societies with Branches.....	16,400	1,727,809	12,121,202
Total.....	26,865	7,180,461	23,700,421