The meaning of trade union activism: women union activists in a lingerie factory and in childcare centers.

Trade union activism is socially constructed as a “manly business”. Being a trade union activist supposedly requires masculine qualities, such as strength and courage. Women are rather assigned to care related activities, paid or unpaid, which supposedly better suit their feminine skills, such as tenderness and softness.

Many social science researchers have explored the multiplicity of the processes, inside and outside trade union activism which tends to exclude, both practically and symbolically, women from trade unions1. As Joan Scott puts it in her famous contribution to gender theory, “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power”2. The two sides of gender work as a system which places men in most powerful positions and defines powerful positions with manly attributes. From this perspective, all organizations, trade unions included, are gendered3.

1 The external factors concern the assignation to domestic work, the subordinate positions in work organization, and the inside factors relate to processes of sexual division of activist labor which tend to relegate women to subsidiary positions. FILLIEULE O., « Travail militant, action collective et rapports de genre », O. FILLIEULE et P. ROUX (dir.), Le sexe du militantisme, Paris, France, les Presses de Sciences Po, 2009, p. 23-72.


While numerous researches describe this situation from the unions’ point of view to identify the way discrimination towards women works, we would like to look at these issues in a new light by focusing on a contradictory case: women trade union activists evolving in exclusively female employment sectors. On the basis of two case studies – a lingerie factory and childcare centers – we will explore what union activism is like for these women factory workers and childcare assistants. Involved in trade unions in their workplace as union or staff representatives as well as leaders of several strikes, they are neither union officials (except for a few cases) nor rank-a-file activists. But from the workplace perspective, because of the relative “success” of unionism in both cases, they are the leaders who emerged from the activist group. These 4 women, in each case, are public figures invested with expectations from their coworkers and responsibilities from their union. Their “in between” positions or “bridge leaders” positions are worth studying for themselves and not only as the results of unions’ “glass ceiling”. What does activism represent, in symbolic and materials terms, for these women? What do they do of it? What does the job do to them?

This perspective appeals to sociology of work since the resources brought into play in the militant engagement process “are not independent from the professional contexts in which they are activated”. What is their relation to work and how does activism reflect and

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5 We will therefore leave aside the analysis all the unionized and non-unionized workers who involve themselves punctually in strikes or other forms of collective action but don’t emerge as activists. Our field work, as explained later, was not constructed as a strict comparison between activists and non-activists and the study of activists’ careers in themselves is relevant for our analysis.

6 In Chantelle, four activists, two CFDT and two CGT, clearly emerged as leaders in the 1970s' and remained both in the factory and in the leading position until the closure in 1994 (even longer for the two CGT leaders who remained in the other Chantelle’s factory as union leaders until 2005). In childcare, 4 activists are nowadays in leadership. Two are clearly identified leaders (the two who became union officials) and are around their early fifties and two others are a little less involved (one of 56 years old, the other of 34 years old) but still identified as part of the leading team of the childcare centers.


affect it? What is these women’s relation to activism (which supposedly requires masculine qualities) in comparison with their regular job (which supposedly requires feminine qualities)? How do these different types of work – factory work, care work, activist work – respond (or not) to each other? Therefore, the relations between gender of work and gender of activism will be crucial to our demonstration.

The analysis of the ways these women workers become activists will rely on the description of militant careers where, following Howard Beckers’ understanding of this concept, the collective and individual aspects as well as the objective and subjective ones are interrelated. Consequently, we will not focus on strikes, but mostly on the day-to-day militant activities which are often hidden behind the exceptionality of collective action in these feminized sectors. More specifically, we will put forward the caring dimension of activism often made invisible behind the more conflicting dimensions of it. This step made aside from the most visible spaces of unionism – union officials and strikes – and the focus on specific individual careers will indeed lead us to question the way this role and the practices attached to it, are socially constructed and gendered.

9 Indeed, the garment industry and its sewing women workers and the childcare centers and its childcare assistants sectors are traditionally feminine occupations.

10 Considering activism as work allows us to put away the ideal of a vocation in order to describe the exact tasks it relates to and to compare it with regular work, knowing that women we are talking about experience the two activities simultaneously.


13 The point of view adopted puts aside the question of the little probability of unionism and mobilization to grow in that type of sectors that global findings on militancy stress frequently. We can however note for the record that 7.2% of women are unionized while 9.1% of men are and that 36% of women declare the presence of a union on their workplace while 40.7% of men do. Source: AMOSSE T. et M.-T. PIGNONI, « La transformation du paysage syndical depuis 1945 », Données Sociales, INSEE, 2006, p. 405-412.
We will here explore the experience of French female union activists (affiliated to the CGT or the CFDT) in two female dominated employment work places: the lingerie factory “Chantelle” and the public childcare centers, both located in the city of Nantes, France.

Case 1: Chantelle, a lingerie factory

Chantelle is a French lingerie firm which orientates its production towards bras in the 1960s’, after decades of girdle production. The factory we will focus on opens in 1966 in Saint-Herblain, an outlying city of Nantes, West of France. Men represent at best 7% of the approximately 300 workers of the factory. They are mostly supervisors and mechanics while women are mostly machinist, working on a sewing machine, gathered in one and only large workshop. During the strikes of May-June 1968 in which they get involved by occupying their factory for several weeks, some workers – women, always women – create a CFDT\textsuperscript{14} local branch. A few years later, some other workers create a CGT\textsuperscript{15} local branch, because, as they say, theirs fathers were affiliated to this trade union “and no other”. All the trade union activists are working-class workers.

From this moment on, the factory will regularly be agitated by protests led by the staff and union representatives – still women – through institutional bargaining but also, and quite often, through strikes. These protesting women workers – called by the press “Les filles de Chantelle” – are locally known for two main strikes: the first one occurs during the 1981-1982 winter. Contesting a new technic of production control\textsuperscript{16} and facing a new manager decided to remain firm, they go on general strike, and then occupy the factory for 5 weeks. Christmas and New Year’s Eve are celebrated in the factory canteen. They finally get mostly satisfaction on their demands in January and go back to work. After that episode, the

\textsuperscript{14} CFDT : Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail. It is the second trade union in France. Created in 1964, after the secularization of the former Christian trade union CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens). In 2006, 45% of its members are women.

\textsuperscript{15} CGT : Confédération Générale du Travail. Created in 1895, rooted in a communist and industrial tradition, it remains today the first French trade union. In 2006, women represented 28% of its members.

\textsuperscript{16} This new system implied that if 4% of deficient products were found in one package, the worker who was responsible for the mistake had to do the whole package again whereas, before, all the products were controlled and only the deficient ones had to be fixed. The other demands which came along during the strike concerned a rise of wage, an improvement of union rights and the cancellation of disciplinary sanctions.
workers are divided between those who participated in the strike and those who did not. The twenty or so most committed activists are also divided between those affiliated with the CFDT and those affiliated with the CGT, knowing that the two unions were equally powerful in the factory. These divisions eventually weaken as the years go by and the fear of a closedown grow stronger as the firm opens more and more factories in other countries (Tunisia, Costa-Rica, Hungary, etc.).

The closedown is actually announced in November 1993. During one year, the workers – mostly machinists but also supervisors – struggle to keep the factory open, and, when hope is no longer allowed, to get the best planned redundancy scheme they can. They don’t go on strike. They demonstrate in the streets of Nantes, and Paris, they all go to the bargaining meetings with the managers, they call for local councilors, among which Jean-Marc Ayrault, todays prime minister, then mayor of Nantes. The conflict lasts 12 months. They succeed in keeping a small factory in another outlying city of Nantes (Couëron) which will employ approximately 40 persons. Another 60 of them get re-employed by another lingerie industrial. Both these factories close a few years later. The majority “takes the money” and will eventually find employment as industrial workers, but also nannies, school or local authorities employees, etc.

Methodology: I conducted rigorous research in trade union (CGT, CFDT) and administrative archives in order to trace the history of union activism in this factory. My search spans from its opening in 1966 to its definitive closure in 2005. I also conducted in-depth interviews with former workers (union activists, unionized and non-unionized workers) and men union officials from both unions. The discourses these women and men have today on ancient facts are obviously influenced by the position they have now, and more specifically the consequences, positive or negative, activism had on their life. However, the confrontation of multiple sources (archives and interviews) allows to verify some facts and to retrace trajectories.

Some of the later created during this strike a new FO (Force Ouvrière) local branch in the factory strongly opposed to the strike and the occupation. This union gathered workers and women supervisors but was led by the supervisors, who got less and less numerous through the years until the union withdrew completely in the early 1990s’.
**Case 2: Childcare centers**

In order to study the issues at stake here in a more contemporary situation and most of all in a care activity, I chose to study the trade union activists in the public childcare centers of Nantes. This sector is even more identified as a feminine sector than the lingerie factory: taking care of children is highly a female business. The interest for this field of activity started in 2010 when a national protest emerged in the world of childcare in opposition to a public decree changing the legal terms of childcare activity\(^{18}\). Several demonstrations happened, in Paris, Nantes and most of the main cities of France, putting in light workers usually so discreet. Trying to see behind this exceptional mobilization, I met the CFDT activists of the public childcare centers of Nantes, leaders of the protest and active for several years in this field of work\(^{19}\).

Childcare centers are characterized by the diversity of professionals working in generally small workplaces: in one unit (gathering generally 20 children), an early childhood educator (three years of formation after A-level leading to a diploma), several childcare assistants (one year of formation leading to a diploma, A-level not required), and cleaning employees (no diploma required) work together on a daily basis. Among the 80 unionized workers declared by the trade union\(^{20}\), a large majority is childcare assistants. The four “leaders” of the union are childcare assistants as well. One strike occurred in 2010 concerning this occupation only: a two months protest in January-February 2010 in order to obtain a subjection bonus for all childcare assistants in the public childcare centers. In two months, 5 days of strike with demonstration in front of the city hall were organized. It is, to this date, the most important labour dispute they went through. This protest took place in

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\(^{18}\) The most contested measures of this “Décret Morano” concerned the rise of the legal proportion of unqualified workers in childcare centers and the possibility to welcome more children for the same amount of adults.

\(^{19}\) The focus on this local branch only was a consequence of the domination of this CFDT public trade union in the whole sector and results from the difficulties which could have been raised if I ran a parallel ethnographic enquiry in the rival CGT union, which happens to have its office in the same building as the CFDT. The study of one labor branch in itself remains relevant for our demonstration.

\(^{20}\) As the city council employs around 400 persons in its childcare service, this means that 20% of them would be unionized to the CFDT. This rate is at a very high level in regards to the average union rate in the public sector of 15% all unions included. Source: AMOSSE T. et M.-T. PIGNONI, « La transformation du paysage syndical depuis 1945 », *op. cit.*
reaction to the creation by the managers of a new status under which people with no
diploma could be hired to do the same job as childcare assistants. We will see that in fact,
the lack of recognition of this category of workers is the core of their activism.

Methodology: In order to describe their practices, I spent several days among the
activists in the union office and in the childcare centers that they were visiting. These
observations were the occasion for many informal conversations with them and the
childcare workers they were interacting with. I conducted interviews with activists and non-
activists, men union officials and childcare city council manager. The main childcare woman
leader gave access to the trade union archives and I could trace the history of activism from
1990 to 2012. Here again, the interest of this field work relies in the confrontation of the
different sources.

First, we will analyze, in both cases, how activism influences the relation the activists have
towards their regular work. More specifically, we will see that the politicization of work but
mostly the rewards activism provide make their work “look bad”. Second, we will
demonstrate that the possibility for them to become union officials, that is to benefit of a
“way out”, is differentiated between the two cases. More than social resources, this will be
interpreted as a result of trade unions’ organizational context. Finally, this will lead us to
study the ways they invest the activist role and especially how care can become a strategy to
negotiate a “safe place” within trade unions.

1. From Work to Activism? Politicization Of Work And Rewards For
Militancy

Relation To Work

We must, as a first step, give a few basic indications on the relation these activists
have towards their regular work. Women union activists we’ve met have on one side a
strong attachment to work (in the sense of having a job) but feel dissatisfaction about the
job they actually have. Following sociology of work and employment’s findings, this would
be a typical relation to work for women who tend to have a strong attachment to work as an 
access to the public sphere\textsuperscript{21} but a strong sense of dissatisfaction since their job are mostly 
less qualified, give less career perspectives and are more often concerned by non-chosen part-time activity\textsuperscript{22}.

Women activists at stake here distinguish themselves from this global picture of 
women’s employment by a stable and strong relation to work: in the lingerie factory, they 
work, for most of them, all their professional career in Chantelle (until the factory eventually 
closed) and among the diversity of childcare facilities, the childcare assistants who become 
union activists are the ones employed by the public sector, that is local government officials 
with job security\textsuperscript{23}.

The other noticeable aspect of their relation to work is the fact that they, at some 
point in their education, hoped for a “better job” and had to, for several reasons, fall back on 
here the Chantelle factory and there a childcare assistant job. Several activists in Chantelle 
wanted to become secretaries or anyways to put forward their education but because of a 
lack of social and economic resources, had to follow a garment industry course and to work 
early around the age of 17. Childcare assistants, who are, on a general level, more satisfied 
with their work than Chantelle workers, still wanted, for most of them, to become early 
childhood educators\textsuperscript{24} or nurses. As, we will see later, this feeling that they could have done 
better is not a cause but a spring of their activism\textsuperscript{25}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Researches on women’s work and employment in France tend to question the idea that women’s work is a 
new phenomenon. \textsc{Tilly L.A. et J.W. Scott}, \textit{Les femmes, le travail et la famille}, Paris, France, Payot & Rivages, 
2002; \textsc{Maruani M. et M. Meron}, \textit{Un siècle de travail des femmes en France: 1901-2011}, Paris, France, la 
Découverte, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textsc{Maruani M.}, \textit{Travail et emploi des femmes}, Paris, La Découverte, 2006.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Unionism is not as active in private childcare centers. It is even often non-existent.
\item \textsuperscript{24} A study on French childcare workers highlights this characteristic for all childcare assistants: \textsc{Odena S.}, \textit{Les 
professions et leur coordination dans les établissements d’accueil collectifs du jeune enfant : une hétérogénéité 
source de tensions au sein des équipes}, Dossier d’études N°121, Allocations Familiales, 2009. This is thus not 
something that particularly specify them from their coworkers. Our field work unfortunately doesn’t allow us to 
confirm or infirm this statement because we didn’t do a survey among the whole group of public childcare 
assistants.
\item \textsuperscript{25} If dissatisfaction provoked immediate commitment to a union, there would be much more activists in trade 
unions. However, it is clear that those who find in this occupation a “good” position related to their social
\end{itemize}
Finally, their relation to work has something to do with their relation to family. None of them stopped working when they got married and had children (for the ones who have)\textsuperscript{26}, and none took a partial time. Whereas gender traditional roles are known to be stronger in working-class families, these women are less than other “taken by” heavy domestic work\textsuperscript{27}. In the lingerie industry, the two CFDT leaders are single and live together and the two CGT leaders are married with one child. In the childcare centers, they all live with a man, married or not, but one chose never to have children, two of them are separated or divorced from the father of their one and two children, and the youngest (34) expresses doubts about her desire of having a child.

This relation to work and especially this limited investment in family are intimately interrelated together, and with their relation to activism. To unfold this knot would lead us far beyond the limits of this paper. We will here focus on the effects of activism on work.

**The Politicization Of Work**

Getting involved in a trade union can be seen as both a result and a cause to a greater awareness of the political issues of work. Sociology of union militancy showed that those who become activists are the most resourceful ones – these resources, socially related, being as diverse as an ability to speak in front of an audience, a familiarity with trade unions inherited from family or previous experiences, an interest for the political matter\textsuperscript{28}, etc. Indeed, women union activists in Chantelle and in childcare are all, in some ways, socially prepared to be interested in unions whether through the influence of militant parents (often fathers), militant companions or previous militant experiences. Nevertheless, background and their gender socialization that, together, taught them that having a job is “good enough”, would have less probability to get involved in trade unions.

\textsuperscript{26} It is clear nowadays that women professionals careers are more and more close to men’s in terms of continuity. Nevertheless, the heavily feminized working-class jobs are spots of resistance to this progressive wave.

\textsuperscript{27} In Chantelle, those of the workers we met who didn’t get involved in trade unions often justified it with domestic responsibilities, especially children to take care of.

\textsuperscript{28} All of those could be referred to as a « militant capital » MATONTI F. et F. POUPEAU, « Le capital militant. Essai de définition », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2004, vol. 155, n° 5, p. 4-11.
once they get involved, the way their work – as a factory worker or a childcarer – is politicized\textsuperscript{29}, that is related to political issues and denounced as the result of unequal division of labor, has an influence on their relation to work.

The type of work and the way it is organized in Chantelle factory reminds to the workers that they are to do well but mostly to do fast. The main union demands are, as in other clothing industries, the abolition of efficiency related system of pay and the rise of the time allocated for the different operations. If they can be attached to the product they manufacture – especially as Chantelle is a high quality brand of lingerie – they don’t see any positive feature in the work itself. Since then, the politicization reinforces a feeling of exploitation.

In the childcare sector, the situation is quite different. As carers, childcare assistants face the “stubborn ideology of natural feminine tenderness”\textsuperscript{30} which leads to a devaluation of their work. Their main demands are therefore to obtain better work conditions, that is a rise of the adult/child proportion, the replacement of the absentees (which is not automatic) and better recognition for their work through more training courses and better wages. Activism participates in deconstructing caring norms as processes of devaluation of their skills. This reflects in their vivid humor when they are together (“Since when taking care of children is a profession?”) and a wider consciousness of gender related discrimination in the recognition they lack. But caring norms are not rejected through activism. On the contrary, they are reinforced and reinterpreted into professional skills and thus worthy of recognition. Care is politicized\textsuperscript{31}. Their political credo is to fight against a cold financial rationalized logic in the name of a politicized conception of care as a valuable and worthy dimension of society (they are conscious for instance that their strikes are efficient because it reminds the parents and society of the crucial role they play within social organization). However this concerns childcare as an activity and not their particular professional position which places them in

\textsuperscript{29} The way work is politicized respond to many factors, among which the influence of the trade union as a formal political organization with its history, its culture, its public stands.


the bottom of the hierarchy. Therefore, as for factory workers, the negative material aspects of the job (lack of autonomy, low wages, etc.) and this insistence on the lack of recognition for what they believe worthy can lead them to the same dissatisfaction towards their regular work.

Our argument is not to reproduce the idea that activism lead mechanically to a rise of political awareness but that, for these committed activists endorsing the role of union militant, the politicization of work has an effect, in a long term basis, on their relation to work. But this wouldn’t operate if not rooted in objective positions. Dissatisfaction is not a process emerging only from ideas and discourses but mostly from a concrete tension between two kinds of work and social positions.

The Rewards For Militancy: Learning A New Role

The union activists we are talking about here are involved in one or several mandates of representatives, either staff or union representatives on their workplace. Their day-to-day activity consists in relaying the demands of their co-workers to the direction, and the managers’ positions on this or that subject to their co-workers. In order to do that, they gather the co-workers or seek information via surveys for instance and they take part in institutional meetings with the managers. The activists also have desk work to do, such as studying files to prepare a meeting, writing reports of these meetings, sending and responding to emails, etc. Sometimes, one issue leads to a conflict. Then, their position becomes publically visible, they are the ones interviewed by journalists (with men union officials more often), they send leaflets to mobilize their coworkers and sit at the bargaining table with managers.²²

The gap between that job and the one they do all day long on sewing machines or among young children is wide. Their activist activity provides them with symbolic retributions that make their work and their social position within division of labor “look bad”: they face their managers in a more equal relation, they come to circulate in the factory or between childcare centers, they meet union officials, other activists, local government

²² Representatives can be swamped by events during strikes but in the two cases described here, the representatives are also the leaders of protests when such events occur.
representatives, etc. These rewards are mostly symbolic and are stronger during strikes. Following the 1994 strike against the closure of the factory during which the media coverage was high, some Chantelle leaders were recognized in the street by passers-by. After the 2010’s strike of childcare assistants, activists organized a party where more than 50 persons thanked publicly the strike leaders.

On the side of these symbolic rewards, union activists objectively acquire new skills while being an activist. First of all, they use professional based resources such as a good knowledge of the difficulties of work, a good integration among coworkers… resources that tend to grow with the years of activism along with new ones such a knowledge of the recurrent issues and the “ways” of the managers. But the role asks them to acquire new abilities such as writing a leaflet or speak in front of an audience. They follow union education courses but also learn on-the-job. Strikes are critical to that point, at the image of one CFDT Chantelle activist who, in 1981, while she was young and mostly inexperienced, got propelled at the lead of a strike since the acknowledged leader of the CFDT local branch was hospitalized at that time. She had to endorse the role and she says today that it was her “baptism of fire” where she proved herself she was capable of doing so.

However, they all stress the difficulties attached to the role and to the diversity of skills required. Their “in between” position creates a tension between their work-related position and their union-related one. They tend to use of strategies to reduce the effects of this situation. As unpaid activists working in a collective situation (they rely much on the group of activist), they can avoid some desk tasks, such as writing leaflets or using a computer, with which they would have particular difficulties. But, as their commitment grows, they can be driven away from this work-based activism. From the moment one becomes representative of a wider group than its own, this type of strategies becomes much more difficult as one childcare assistant activist who got involved at the city council level and ended become a union professional explains:

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33 One has to notice that in the local government public sector, trade unions gather in one local branch all the professionals of the city council. Activists tend to take care of other professional sectors than their own much quicker in their activist “career”.

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“You don’t have the same language when you are on your workplace, a place you know and with politics and managers. You don’t talk the same way. You don’t have the same language and you don’t talk of the same things.”

This frontier between the only work-related, here heard as related to the specific work and workplace known and familiar, activism and the more political one is high because that represents the sort of first organizational “glass ceiling”. From that point on, a strong difference appears between Chantelle and childcare: in the first case, their commitment to activism doesn’t lead them to improve their material situation whereas this possibility is more open in childcare activism.

2. A “way out”? Social resources and context opportunity

If, as said earlier, some activists took responsibilities in the union local branch of garment industry and even in the union central organs, they never got to any paid position in the union (except for one staff representative affiliated to the CFDT who, after the factory closed, got hired by the CFDT local branch as a…reception secretary). They remained “stuck” in the factory. On one hand, they don’t expect much from work knowing that they would anyways be left aside any promotion offered by the managers precisely because of their activism and on the other hand, they were never offered a paid position in the trade union. Therefore, and paradoxically, activism attaches them to that job. They eventually become committed to the role in a strong sense, this commitment being also a sustained one. This is reinforced by the fact that, in Chantelle, the representatives’ team doesn’t change much over the years, there are no younger workers to take over. Some activists remained in mandate for more than 20 years. Their social position as an activist was strongly attached to this particular factory: they were “Les Filles de Chantelle”.

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34 Interview with Pascale Perrin, 2012 March 27th, in the local branch office [our translation]

On the contrary, the CFDT local branch of the city council, upon which the childcare activists depend, seems to be more open. Some were rapidly offered some “union time” beyond the legal time attached to their mandates and for two of them a full time job at the union\textsuperscript{36}. One of them, Myriam, who got hired by the city in 1996 and joined the union in 1998, rapidly took part in the union activities directed toward the childcare centers. From 2004, she took responsibilities beyond childcare sector, more and more through the years reaching the point where the time spent on activism was too important to remain in good terms with hers colleagues and especially her manager. She expressed the wish to become a full time professional in 2010, wish which was fulfilled in 2011. Finally, in December 2012, she became the general secretary of the union in the city council.

These differences between the two sectors in terms of militant careers are to be understood in regards to the social characteristics of women activists but mostly to the context of union organizing in the sector concerned.

Gender and class associate here to withdraw these women from a feeling of ambition and a will to invest unionism as a career path. Socialization, primary and secondary, is known to structure the scope of possibilities one consider having and one objectively has. Being a woman and being working-class doesn’t favor their relation to leadership positions, even though they are strongly committed both to work and to unionism. But obviously, all women don’t make the same experience of gender depending on where they stand in social hierarchy. In terms of social origins, Chantelle factory workers and childcare assistants are on one side not very far from one another\textsuperscript{37} but on the other, not so close since all childcare assistants’ families could finance a little education to their daughters when it wasn’t an option for factory workers\textsuperscript{38}. Becoming a more qualified worker was actually a possibility for childcare assistants. Moreover, childcare assistants’ professional activity put them in a position to interact on a daily basis with members of other social groups, them being co-

\textsuperscript{36} Our point of view focused on the leaders shouldn’t lead to forget that many activists were not offered such possibilities by the union.

\textsuperscript{37} Their fathers were mostly qualified workers working in industry or public services.

\textsuperscript{38} This being not only the result of economic difficulties but also to family choices concerning the necessity to give education to boys and girls and to children in general, mostly in the 1950s’ for the Chantelle workers.
workers and parents. Chantelle workers are much more isolated in their class community. Alongside with the security of employment guaranteed by their civil servant status, childcare assistants are better placed to consider obtaining another social position than theirs. Nevertheless, as for Chantelle factory workers, becoming a union professional was not a realistic option for either of them at the beginning of their activist career. They remain in the low spaces of social scale. These social resources can’t alone explain the dazzling careers some childcare assistants experienced.

Much more, their propensity to become and, before that, to hope to become a union professional depends on the organizational context of the union they depend on. The way the organization stimulates or not the ambitions and capabilities through union education and the offer of concrete perspective seem indeed crucial. As we have said, all resources are not possessed in advance and some of them (most of them?) are acquired on-the-job. But the way the job shapes the resources one can acquire depends on what the job is. The way the union activist’s role is socially constructed in either cases favors or not the propensity of women to endorse it.

The industrial trade unions don’t have much paid jobs to offer. As a declining sector, paid jobs become fewer and this tendency doesn’t favor women. Ruth Milkman notes, in the frame of her historical analysis of trade unions, that “the number of vacancies narrows as membership, and with it the size of the organization, stabilizes”39. Moreover, this working-class based unionism is strongly male-dominated. All local union officials were men when Chantelle activists were active. During their strikes, local union professionals of both CGT and CFDT were everywhere and tended to become father or husband figures for them40.

On the contrary, the city council CFDT local branch, have more means and is less “masculine”. First of all, the local branch childcare assistants depend on doesn’t match the limits of the workplace. In Chantelle, the local branch they depend on is in the factory and

39 MILKMAN R., « Gender and Trade Unionism in Historical Perspective », L.A. TILLY et P. GURIN (dir.), Women, Politics and Change, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1990, p. 103. She notes that: “This reduction in the number of opportunities for advancement in the leadership structure is even more severe in unions than in other “mature” organizations, because union officialdoms are one of the few avenues of upward mobility open to workers”

40 One couple actually declared itself after the factory closed between the women union representative and the man union general secretary of the CGT.
concerns only this factory. In the public sector, the local branch is in one of the buildings of
the city hall and concerns all the city council occupations. This differentiated organization
has great effect on the isolation of Chantelle activists in their factory and the integration of
childcare activists in the union.

Moreover, unionism in childcare is quite new. Before some women activists arrived
at the union in the 1990s’, this sector was not particularly invested by the CFDT or any other
trade unions. Therefore, following here again Ruth Milkman’s analysis, the union was
recruiting members and extending its leadership structure41. This is mostly true since the
CFDT is, as other French trade unions, experiencing a shortage of activists to recruit42. Today,
the CFDT is largely majority in this sector, in comparison with other masculine sectors of the
city council, such as the gardeners, where the CGT is dominant. Even more, childcare is the
sector where the CFDT has the largest number of unionized employees. Consequently,
several activists coming from childcare are active in the local branch and they outnumber
any other sector. This occupation of space became relevant when, in 2011, several union
professionals, as a consequence of internal conflicts, left their position. Two childcare
assistants at that time working half-time in the union became full time union officials. One of
them only expressed clearly her will to “climb” in the trade union. The other, like all the
other we met, considers her career outside of the trade union (to remain in a care related
activity) but with the benefits of the social upgrade she experienced with the trade union.

In the end, the childcare activists who became union professionals experienced a
social upgrade, even more since the city council they depended on was working with trade
unions on a way to recognize union officials’ gained skills during their mandate to recruit
them afterwards in better jobs than those they came from in the first place43.

Even for those who don’t get promoted by the trade union, the existence of such a
possibility structures the relation they have to activism, the way they conceive it. The feeling
of being “stuck” would lead to a more collective and conflicting conception of activism

41 MILKMAN R., « Gender and Trade Unionism in Historical Perspective », op. cit.


43 This marks another strong difference with industrial trade union activists who remained stigmatized as
activists, on a local scale, and often have difficult career paths.
whereas the possibility to become union officials would favor a more individual and professional conception of it.

3. Negotiating a Place: Agency and Gender Norms of Trade Union Activism.

A Gendered Role?

Discourses on trade union activists tend to focus on the conflicting character of this role: the trade union activist is the one capable of confronting the director in a face to face meeting, the one capable of mobilizing his or her coworkers to go on strike by inspired speeches and charisma. This caricatured image of activism, which activists themselves participate to foster, make the less glorious, more ordinary parts of the job unknown. In particular, a whole part of the job could be described as a caring dimension of activist work. Indeed, the activists we met talk about their job as, among other dimensions, a taking-care-of-others kind of job. This corresponds to “classical” tasks of a trade union activist such as supporting a legal request or defending an individual situation towards the managers. But this dimension also covers more interpersonal aspects, that is affective links based on trust, and can concern matters beyond work-related ones: giving advice to someone on private matters such as couple relations, providing moral support to someone experiencing a difficult situation such as grief that overcomes in the work place, etc. For instance, in the lingerie factory, when a worker is given a reprimand for a lack of efficiency, the union activist can try to meet this person in private to understand better the situation and the ways she can resolve it. Indeed, the relation between representatives and unionized and non-unionized workers\(^{44}\) is made of relations going far beyond the simple elected/elector link\(^{45}\).

\(^{44}\) If relations are stronger with unionized workers, non-unionized workers also refer to trade union leaders and these answer mostly their requests as it might be a way to precisely unionize them.

\(^{45}\) This shouldn’t lead the reader to picture a harmonious sorority space since a lot of power struggles, either work or union related, occurred also in both workplaces. Specifically, the CFDT and the CGT trade union activists had very conflicting relations towards one another.
This dimension is not only women’s. Men experience it as well. Christian Corouge, a male French CGT activist working in the car factory Peugeot in Sochaux (East of France), talks about this “social worker” role he can have towards his co-workers. On the other hand, this dimension doesn’t resume the way women activists talk about and practice their role: they insist on the necessity to fight, collectively through strikes and demonstrations, in order to hold a power struggle with the director and force him/her to answer their demands. Indeed, Chantelle union activists led a strike in 1981 when they used traditional conflicting forms of action (general strike, occupation of the factory, confinement of the director).

This is much more the focus on the day-to-day activity than on the activity of women that brought us to highlight the caring dimension of activism. However, these practices – the conflicting and the caring ones – are gendered. The conflicting practices are constructed as masculine and more valued and the caring practices are constructed as feminine and less valued and visible. Women activists reproduce mostly this categorization in their discourses by putting forward their strikes more than their everyday activity.

However, strong differences are noted between the two cases and between the two trade unions. The CGT activists in Chantelle strongly reproduce gender norms because industry trade unionism, as the oldest, traditional, almost mythical ground of unionism is much more marked by the reference to the male metal worker strong and self-taught leader (it is less marked in the CFDT). In the childcare sector, this reference is less strong and if they put forward their capacity to act collectively, they don’t insist on the conflicting side of it. In reality, their practices consist mostly in interpersonal relations: one worker alerts the activists on a problem she’s facing, they call or write to the manager who responds positively.

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46 Christian Corouge met Michel Pialoux, a sociologist, in the 1970s’ and a few publications came out of this collaboration in which Christian Corouge talks deeply about his activism but also about his work as an unskilled worker in Peugeot factory. The latest: Corouge C. et M. Pialoux, Résister à la chaîne : dialogue entre un ouvrier de Peugeot et un sociologue, Marseille, Agone, 2011.

47 Women confining their director don’t provoke the same discourses in the press than when men do. And the women workers themselves express the pride to “do like men”.
or negatively, they eventually take the problem into institutional meetings with other representatives.  

This type of practice can be interpreted by activists as a caring type of practices but, in fact, it corresponds to classical, more or less hidden, rational political strategies. In a political situation, where power is given by an election, practices such as giving advantages, answering private requests, etc. can respond to political ambitions, much more than to an ethic of care. More generally, we must note that this dimension meets a certain type of unionism where bargaining, moderation and everyday solving problem capacity are placed as driving values. Care can be used to present this type of rational and interested practices positively.

Care as a strategy

Still, the way activists we met talk about this dimension of work is not only an illusion to give a good appearance to rational interests in which they are not so much involved. Even if they, at least today, have reflexivity on this “emotional labor” and are conscious of the way it supports their unionization goals, they are “taken”, both practically and emotionally, by the role and its responsibilities towards the coworkers. However, this isn’t experienced in the same way in the two cases.

In Chantelle, activists are in fact involved in a tight network of relations in the factory, even more with the years going by and the number of workers going down. The closure of the factory in 1994 produces a lot of discourses on the crucial place of union and staff

48 A limit of the field work should be stressed here: the impossibility to observe activist work in Chantelle factory might have lead to underestimate the importance of these types of practices in their day-to-day activity.

49 The usual focus, in French researches at least, on working-class industrial unionism would tend to underestimate this other symbolic and practical pattern of unionism. In the case concerned here, we could make the hypothesis that the will of the CFDT local branch’s officials to remain in a position of power and the management orientations towards a cooperation with trade unions participate in maintaining an industrial relations’ system found on institutional bargaining, that is avoiding strikes as much as possible. This explanation would need to be verified but that is not the point here.

50 In 2010, they indeed confronted their union secretary concerning the strike they wanted to continue and that he wanted to stop, considering the fight wasn’t worth fighting. Pascale Perrin, one of the leaders, said it was a disillusion for her about how a trade union works.

representatives among union workers, but also non-union workers. The analogy with the family is recurrent: unionized workers the more integrated into union sociability networks talk of a “second family”. One worker says: “We have a family on the outside but our real family, it’s silly to say, but it’s here”. In that family, trade union activists would be mothers or big sisters towards whom the others would turn for advice and support. The CGT woman leader for more than 20 years regrets that once the factory closed the dependence some workers have towards her help on work related procedures. In the childcare sector, the analogy with the family is less strong. The organization of work where workers are divided in small work places, which don’t communicate much between one another, doesn’t allow strong and everyday life social trade union related networks to grow. Union workers come and go much easier. Therefore, caring relations tend to develop much more in a less strong type of relation and do not generate a specific feeling of belonging to a community.

Activists, in Chantelle and in childcare, don’t talk about themselves in that way. Much more often, these women workers see themselves as social workers or, in one case of a CFDT activist influenced by a catholic socialization, as a “pilgrim”. In Chantelle, as said earlier, they don’t talk much about this side of their role because it is not of much value for them and, most important, for the trade unions they depend on. In childcare, it seems that there is less affect and much more of a sense of professionalism. This has to do with, as we just said, the form of unionism promoted by the union they depend on but also because it recalls to their “carer” identity. Their activist work becomes a way to better use capacities that are not recognized in their regular activity: sense of welcome, capacity to listen and understand individual situations. Instead of taking care of children, they take care of their co-workers. In the end, activism can be a way to professionalize caring skills. In return, care is used to depoliticize activism and to make it a job like anyone else.

Finally, the deconstruction of these discourses allows us to observe these women’s strategies to endorse this role: they tend to remain in “bridge leaders”52 positions where they can rely on work-related resources and prevent themselves from more “political” arenas where they would feel overwhelmed by required skills they feel they don’t have.

52 ROBBETT B., How long?, op. cit.
These positions are obviously not completely “chosen” and determined by the limited advancement possibilities within trade unions, which continue to favor mostly men. The fact that these activists perform a leadership directed towards coworkers reflects their strong dependence to the group, their lack of social resources and the limited careers they consider for themselves. All of those are partly consequences of the position given to them as women, but also as working-class women, but these practices are not typical of women. A small-scale analysis allows to question from the bottom of reality gender categories which studies on a large scale have to use and to, somehow, reify. What is interesting to note here is that care, as depoliticized and socially constructed “feminine” practices and discourses, functions both as a “safe place” for them, because it matches the position they are given and the resources they have, and as a gender reassuring strategy towards the outside (compensating the conflicting performance they can make during strikes). The analysis of these positions from their point of view confirms the domination processes acting against working-class women workers but also reveals their agency, that is the way they can negotiate with social and gender norms to endorse positions of relative power and obtain forms of social and professional recognition.

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53 As in Linda Birskin’s analysis of women’s leadership on a world wide scale who, with a lot of rigor, explains the necessity to use gender categories even though they are somehow normative in order to get to generalized conclusions. **BIRSKIN L.**, « Victimisation and agency: the social construction of union women’s leadership », *Industrial Relations Journal*, 2006, vol. 37, n° 4, p. 359-378.


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