

The world of the blue-collar worker: changed, but not gone

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All photos \u2264 Olivier Pasquiers and Caroline Pottier/Le Bar Flor\u00e9al.

Despite deindustrialisation and increasingly acute economic difficulties in the former strongholds of heavy industry, manual workers remain a key group in French society. The photographs and text presented here describe the ways in which their work has changed, together with the reconfigurations both of manual workers as a group and the regions in which they live and work – and how these transformations have weakened them politically.

Manual workers played a central role in shaping and representing the interests of the working classes during the 20th century. At its peak, the mass factory employed the majority of rank-and-file workers and united them through their living conditions; the people who worked there were clearly identified, as much by their “class enemies” as their allies – artists, intellectuals or left-wing politicians. After 30 years of continuous deindustrialisation and the break-up of the collectives formed decades earlier, the working classes seem to have lost their cutting edge. Are manual workers in France now definitively confined to history? Are the factory sheds, with their sawtooth roofs, doomed to disappear or, at best, be converted into cultural spaces and transformed into the heritage of a bygone era? Understanding the contemporary world of blue-collar workers means avoiding both class-based ethnocentrism – which all too often overlooks the fact that one in five people in active employment in France is still a manual worker – and any longing for the past and the unifying mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s.

Photography and the social sciences: contrasting perspectives on manual labour and heavy industry

In partnership with the Paris-based photographers’ collective Le Bar Floréal (www.bar-floréal.fr), *Metropolitics* is pleased to present a new series of articles that explores themes from a dual perspective: through the photographer’s lens and from the standpoint of a researcher. In this paper, images by Olivier Pasquiers and Caroline Pottier and text by Julian Mischi and Nicolas Rehany offer complementary descriptions of manual labour and the working classes today. The photographs show the industrial heritage of the urban area around Creil in Picardy, 50 km (30 miles) north of Paris: as elsewhere in France, fears concerning the disappearance of heavy industry and the employment it provides have resulted in the widespread recording, classification and enumeration of this heritage. Buildings, brownfield sites and ruins must be measured and photographed before they are demolished. What traces have been left by the women and men that used to work here? What is the situation for those who still work here, in manufacturing plants large and small – the last remaining handfuls of workers, in place of the hundreds of labourers that rushed through the same factory gates barely 50 years ago? Rather than glorifying these deserted industrial cathedrals, Caroline Pottier and Olivier Pasquiers have sought to show what gave, and still gives, life to these places.

le bar Floréal
photographie

The decline of industrial strongholds and transformations in manual labour

Following the collapse of the textile and mining industries from the 1950s onwards, major restructuring in other sectors accelerated in the 1970s with the deindustrialisation of areas traditionally dominated by heavy industry, particularly in northern and eastern France. The strongholds of the organised working classes and whole sectors of stable, established, skilled industrial work fell into decline, dragging down with them entire towns and regions: the closure of a large metalworks or steel factory would often lead to the economic decline of the area that it supported. For those employees who are still in work, fear of job losses has become widespread, with manual workers the socio-economic category most affected by unemployment.

The magnitude of these changes has had repercussions on all aspects of workers' lifestyles and led to a profound crisis of social reproduction. Working-class families are seeing local job opportunities for their children become scarce, with "their" factory relocated elsewhere (Vignal 2005), while, in parallel, many factories' internal promotion systems have ground to a halt, wages have stagnated, and workers' skills and knowledge have been appropriated by management experts (Lomba 2013).

It has been suggested that this crisis of social reproduction will ultimately put an end to manufacturing. However, such an assertion is at odds with the fact that 20% of the employed population in France in 2009 were in manual labour roles, including one in every three actively employed men. In fact, behind the façade of general decline, the reality is more complicated and the result of major internal reorganisations within industry. The crisis has mainly affected skilled workers, not just in heavy industry, but also in light industry, construction and civil engineering, mechanical engineering and metalwork, while the proportion of warehousing, logistics and transport workers has increased. Between 1982 and 2009, the number of people employed in industry declined by more than a quarter for skilled workers (from 1.6 million to 1.2 million) and by a third (from 2.4 million to 1.6 million) for unskilled workers. Conversely, the number of workers in the trades remained relatively stable (with a slight increase in skilled workers and a slight decrease in unskilled workers), while the number employed in transport and logistics, while still small, actually increased – by 10% for drivers, and by 7% for skilled warehousing, logistics and transport workers.¹ Overall, manual workers now more often tend to work in the service sector and in small businesses. Furthermore, mass education in the 1990s has also had the effect of promoting social mobility for some children of manual workers, while raising what were ultimately false hopes for many others (Beaud 2003); it has also contributed to the transformation of work in certain factory-based sectors (e.g. computerisation, use of digital machines).

Industrial restructuring and mass unemployment mean that manual workers no longer form a single, cohesive group, with a breakdown of class structures following the development of unstable work situations. There has been a deterioration in employment conditions, mainly due to the development of underemployment (part-time work, rarely by choice), short-term contracts (fixed-term contracts, temporary work and internships) and deskilling (holders of qualifications such as CAPs, BEPs and even the *baccalauréat*² are being taken on for positions that normally require no qualifications). Accordingly, new forms of working-class marginalisation develop under the impact

¹ The number of skilled workers in the trades rose from 1.5 million to 1.65 million, while the number of unskilled workers in this sector fell from 1.06 million to 1 million. Drivers (HGV drivers, delivery personnel, public transport drivers, etc.) numbered 570,000 in 1982, compared to 710,000 in 2009; over the same period, the number of skilled warehousing workers increased from 390,000 to 480,000. Finally, the number of farm workers dropped slightly from 290,000 to 270,000.

² Translator's note: the CAP (*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*) is a vocational qualification typically completed at age 17 with the aim of leading directly to employment in a trade. The BEP (*brevet d'études professionnelles*) is an intermediate vocational qualification, also typically completed at age 17, comprising a broad curriculum and a specialisation, that may lead directly to employment or be followed by an additional year of study for a *baccalauréat professionnel*. The *baccalauréat* is an academic qualification typically obtained at the end of one's secondary education at age 18, in one of three streams: *général* (general academic stream, taken by the majority of pupils), *technologique* (technological) and *professionnelle* (vocational).

of an increased fragmentation of labour and greater social insecurity, affecting women, immigrants and young people in particular.

Despite these profound reconfigurations, contemporary workers share a similar condition. Rhythms of forced labour, job instability, low income, hardship of repetitive manual work (which translates including a high number of accidents at work and occupational diseases) and reduced promotion opportunities characterise workers jobs in most sectors.

Reconfiguration of working-class territories and class (de)mobilisation

Outside the world of work, blue-collar workers as a group have been subject to spatial segregation. While in the 1950s and 1960s working-class sociability structured many city neighbourhoods (Coing 1966), these districts have since been gentrified and workers now live mainly in the suburbs (either in apartment blocks on social-housing estates or in private developments of houses, typically on the urban fringes), as well as in more remote rural areas. They represent a particularly high proportion of the population in the villages and small industrial towns that dot the French countryside and which constitute working-class spaces where few members of the “ruling classes” live.

In the past, the spatial aggregation of blue-collar jobs was often a mobilising force for the working classes, with workers dominating the political scene in some industrial towns, thus facilitating access to municipal government for the most established and skilled workers – particularly via the networks of the CGT trade union and the French communist party³ (Mischi 2010). The current situation is quite different, though: since the 1980s, the spatial concentration of manual workers has arisen as part of a transformation of the blue-collar labour market that has well and truly broken the link between place of residence and place of employment, in a context of rising unemployment and job insecurity (Renahy 2005). In addition, it is the least skilled and most vulnerable segments of this group that have been relegated to rural areas and social-housing estates – i.e. those segments that, historically, have also been the least mobilised – while the elite of the working class tend to live in more socially diverse areas, such as private housing estates in the outer suburbs.

This spatial relegation has helped to exacerbate the gap between manual workers and the intellectual professions, contributing to the symbolic erasure of the former as a recognised group. After being at the centre of intellectual and political attention, blue-collar workers tended to disappear from dominant representations in the 1980s and 1990s. “Working-class centrality” (Vigna 2012) in political and societal debate in France has faded; we talk less and less about the working classes. This withdrawal is rooted in the decline of organisations that used to represent these classes, especially the French communist party and the CGT (Mischi 2010). In the course of this decline, not only have labour organisations lost their working-class sociological base, but they have also abandoned any reference to this base in their speeches and communications. For political parties, the working classes have ceased to be a priority target.

For its part, trade unionism has had to deal with employers’ strategies that have made the organisation of any form of activism in the workplace difficult (Pénissat 2013). Since the 1980s, factory reorganisations have split up established groups of workers, with the relocation of certain production units in order to circumvent resistance on the part of employees (Beaud and Pialoux 1999). Employment policies implemented (subcontracting, combination of skilled and unskilled labour) have divided the working community into permanent workers (who, legally, are employed directly by the company) and external temporary workers. Reorganisations help to individualise the relationships between workers and managers, and makes it easier to bypass any collective labour movements: bonuses are individual, and are difficult to incorporate into collective demands

³ Translator’s note: the CGT (Confédération générale du travail – General Confederation of Labour) formerly had close links with the French communist party, which were officially cut in the 1990s.

regarding wages. The work of the union representative, who formerly played a central role in factory culture (Pialoux and Corouge 2011), is now called into question.

Any industrial action taken by workers is now essentially defensive, with the aim of safeguarding jobs. Furthermore, union leaders, such as those of the CFDT⁴ union, have gradually adopted more of a managerial approach and have abandoned the principles of collective emancipation upon which their unions were founded.

Certain sectors and firms are, however, still sufficiently protected by union representation or a strong trade-specific culture that continues to exercise the collective force of its worker, such as the French rail operator SNCF (Mischi 2013). But, overall, labour organisations have declined as the role of elite skilled workers in large-scale industry has been challenged, including within political parties on the left whose leaders and elected officials increasingly come from the world of management and the liberal and intellectual professionals. In all likelihood, it is this profound transformation that has contributed most of all to the growing invisibility of the working classes.

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⁴ Translator’s note: the CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail – French Democratic Confederation of Labour) formerly had close links to the centre-left French socialist party.



Ink Eco company, Creil.



Chemical plant, Cray Valley, Zone Industrielle des Prés Roseaux, Villers-Saint-Paul.



Municipal public works building, Creil.



Akzo-Nobel Coatings SA, paint and lacquer factory, Montataire.



Arcelor-Mittal factory, Route de Saint-Leu, Montataire.



Arcelor-Mittal factory, Route de Saint-Leu, Montataire. Galvanised and lacquered sheet steel production line.



STILL company, manufacturer of forklift trucks and warehouse handling equipment, Montataire.



Arcelor-Mittal factory, Route de Saint-Leu, Montataire. Galvanised and lacquered sheet steel production line.



Akzo-Nobel Coatings SA, paint and lacquer factory, Montataire.



Quai d'Aval, unloading cargo from a barge for the ACOR company, Creil.



STILL company, manufacturer of forklift trucks and warehousing handling equipment, Montataire.



Goss International, printing-press manufacturer, Montataire.



STILL company, manufacturer of forklift trucks and warehousing handling equipment, Montataire.



Stokomani store, Creil.



Établissements Rivierre, nail factory, Rue des Usines, Creil.



Établissements Rivierre, nail factory, Rue des Usines, Creil.



Municipal public works building, Creil.



Montupet foundry (copper, bronze, aluminium), disused, Nogent-sur-Oise.



Montupet foundry (copper, bronze, aluminium), disused, Nogent-sur-Oise.



Montupet foundry (copper, bronze, aluminium), disused, Nogent-sur-Oise.



Arcelor-Mittal factory, Route de Saint-Leu, Montataire.



Montupet foundry (copper, bronze, aluminium), disused, Nogent-sur-Oise.



Municipal public works building, Creil.



Municipal technical services, Creil. Fichet Building.

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Olivier Pasquiers has been a member of Le Bar Floréal since 1991. He typically works in collaboration with writers, storytellers, other photographers, graphic designers, men and women at work, political and/or vulnerable exiles, and humanitarian organisations. He has published some 15 books and his work has also featured in a number of individual and collective exhibitions, both in France and elsewhere in Europe. Olivier Pasquiers's photographs can be found in public collections, as well as several private collections in France.

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Caroline Pottier was born in 1974. She joined the adventure that is Le Bar Floréal in 2003. Between her involvement in local life in Vendée in western France, where she lives, and her work on forgotten populations of Latin America, she takes her old Rolleicord camera with her wherever the world is struggling to hold itself together. Whether on her doorstep or on her travels, photography is a pretext for encounters, and a means of participating in what surrounds us and of continuing to believe in a better world. Her photographs can be found in the public collections of a number of *artothèques* (art lending libraries), as well as in private collections. Caroline Pottier's images are regularly published in the press.

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