

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with several faint, stylized leaf motifs scattered across it. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

# **A WORKFORCE DIVIDED**

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**Community, Labor, and the State in  
Saint-Nazaire's Shipbuilding Industry, 1880–1910**

**Leslie A. Schuster**

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**Leslie A. Schuster**

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The three photographs of the Riveter's strike are reprinted with permission from Patrick Pauvert.

For Adeline and Victor

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## Introduction

Shipbuilding workers in the port town of Saint-Nazaire in the thirty years before WWI hardly conformed to the stereotypical notion of workers as a homogenous class with common patterns of life and work and a willingness to battle with employers and state in the interests of a shared, radical political agenda. Instead, this workforce was divided between urban and rural settlements, fragmented by trade and skill level, armed with different priorities and dissimilar perspectives toward industrial employment, and advancing disparate, often contrary solutions to their situations. This sharp divergence in priorities, resources, and expectations is perhaps best illustrated by labor protests and work cultures. In June 1898, 118 adolescent boys who assisted the riveters in their work of fastening and sealing the hull of vessels under construction at one of the city's two industrial shipbuilding facilities struck to punctuate their demands for uniform salaries and raises. One local paper dismissed the protest, asking, "Who doesn't sing at that age?" but within a few days the young workers had convinced nearly 500 others, skilled and unskilled, adolescents and adults, all residents of Saint-Nazaire, to join the action. In that same year, a group of skilled workers from the yards, residents of a nearby agricultural region known as the Grande Brière, struck to dispense with a symbol of privilege and rank esteemed by skilled workers elsewhere, maintaining their own tools. Regarding this as an onerous and expensive responsibility rather than a badge of skill, the workers insisted that the company bear the cost of tools, as was standard policy for semi- and unskilled workers. Another protest took place in the spring of 1901, when one yard instituted its summer schedule of lengthened workdays and an extended midday break of one and a half hours. About one-third of the workforce struck to keep

the shorter midday break, while the remainder welcomed the schedule change. Finally, every fall shipyard workers from the Brière stayed home for several weeks to harvest the peat crop, the economic mainstay for residents of this community, and left shipyard management to bemoan the absence of a reliable labor force. These protest actions may appear unique and unconnected to one another, but, taken together, they exemplify some of the more notable characteristics of the workforce at Saint-Nazaire's shipyards.

This study argues that the competing identities and divergent values and objectives evident among Saint-Nazaire's shipbuilding workforce in the thirty years before World War I were fostered by the intersection between state programs, industrial production, and the patterns of work and life that workers pursued in the local realm, that is, by factors specific to the industry and to their communities. State legislation regulating the shipbuilding industry and the nature of industrial production itself shaped workers' experiences and their assessment of their position. At the same time, workers' viewpoints and activities as industrial workers were conditioned by the concerns, traditions, and values promoted and nurtured in their residential communities, in families, and in agricultural work groups. This intersection between national politics, industrial policies, and the local world of community and culture explains how and why Saint-Nazaire's shipbuilding workforce came to hold and to express divergent perspectives.

This book is thus a contribution to the expanding field of scholarship that has challenged and reformulated the traditional model of industrialization and, as a consequence, contested accepted notions of the operation of the workplace, of class formation, and of labor activity. Historians have largely discarded the classic model of industrial transformation where industrial processes and organizational structures are seen to be sudden and thorough, breaking with old patterns of production and of social relations. Recent studies have shown that the transition to industrial production followed neither a particular timetable nor a set pattern but was rather a fitful, complex, and highly variable process. In France, small-scale industry persisted throughout the nineteenth century. The standard indicators of industrialization, such as mechanization, standardized tasks, and the introduction of unskilled workers, proved uneven processes, and French workers did not share similar workplace experiences.<sup>1</sup> The repudiation of this classic model of industrialization has brought greater scrutiny to other long-standing ideas about the world of the worker. For instance, many labor studies had long argued that the transformation to industrial production included a sudden and thorough assault on the prerogatives of the skilled, promoting the emergence of a political consciousness among these workers that then gave rise to labor organization and strikes.<sup>2</sup> Reconsideration of the theory of rapid industrial change has jeopardized this depiction of the workplace interests and activity of the skilled. New studies have also criticized the practice of limiting the investigation of work to a focus on factory production and the identity of the worker to those employed outside the home, neglecting workers who were not visible in the

public arena of worker activism. Other historians have more broadly questioned the “master” narrative for labor, that is, a concentrated focus on factory production and labor activity, arguing that workers are not single-faceted, defined and understood solely by their appearance in industry or the political arena.

These criticisms have resulted in an impressive array of new approaches to labor history and some bold thoughts on reconceptualizing the field’s traditional parameters. Investigations that focus on the complex issues of how workers perceived their world and how they came to select particular strategies and activities have replaced studies that tended to foreground industrial transformation and work. Tessie Liu’s study of western France, for instance, suggests that historians’ prejudice toward notable moments and “dramatic successes” has overlooked the more widespread incidence of protoindustrialization, deindustrialization, and the social conflicts arising from these processes.<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as James Lehning and Gerald Sider suggest that a careful examination of the private realm, the world of family and community, can help unravel the complex puzzle of class, identity, and political activity. The networks, values, and patterns of life specific to a community of workers, as defined by agricultural pursuits, common residential settlements, or similar social activities, shaped identities, interests, and behaviors, just as did national policy and shop floor conditions.<sup>4</sup> Finally, scholars like Alf Lütke and Hans Medick have urged historians to begin from the experience and perspective of the worker and to “decenter” the standard historical markers. They argue that studies that rely on the traditional signposts of historical change, such as national politics and economic and industrial patterns, may describe the environment of the worker, but they cannot reveal how workers viewed or responded to that environment.<sup>5</sup>

This investigation of Saint-Nazaire’s shipbuilding workforce argues that the intersection between the national and local realm forged workers’ perceptions and choices. First, the experience of Saint-Nazaire’s workers clearly demonstrates that official policies played a direct role in fashioning the industrial climate of this city and, as a by-product, shaped workers’ relations with elites and with the state. In the case of shipbuilding, state intervention over a thirty-year period directed the pace and progress of the industry and influenced the form of labor relations. Second, this study provides the first systematic investigation of industrialization in France’s shipbuilding industry and thus expands our understanding of the experience of industrial change in France. Ship production resembled workshop patterns of production in its work processes, in the activity of the shops, and in the structure of the labor force. Consequently, relations between workers and with management did not strictly correspond to an industrial environment but instead reflected a tension between the processes and conduct of the workshop and of industrial settings. Finally, the study reveals the widely divergent cultural traditions and community practices among workers who labored in Saint-Nazaire’s yards. The shipbuilding workforce was divided between an urban workforce who had

migrated to Saint-Nazaire in search of employment and property-owning agricultural workers who commuted to the yards from the Briéron marshland. The traditions, practices and interests of these dissimilar groups of workers critically informed their experiences and responses to industrial employment and resulted in the emergence of sharply different allegiances and interests. Indeed, in Saint-Nazaire the move to industrial employment for many did not signify the dissolution of long-standing practices, work habits, and social relations in favor of a common class identity, but in some cases assured the retention of contrary interests. These different standards and contrary interests then found expression in dissimilar strike activities and objectives.

The study begins with an examination of the structural forces—urbanization, national legislation, and work processes—that fashioned the identity and political behavior of Saint-Nazaire's shipbuilding workforce. The first chapter links the erratic development of Saint-Nazaire to the economic activity generated by intermittent public works projects and irregular ship construction. In 1881 the installation of industrial shipyards brought sudden and spectacular expansion and a flood of migrants seeking shipbuilding work, yet the promise of steady industrial and urban growth was not to be fulfilled. Chapter 2 argues that the irregular development of the shipbuilding industry from this time can be traced to government programs that could only be considered ill conceived. The Third Republic's industrial policies promoted and recast the maritime industries, but over their thirty-year tenure these programs created sharp fluctuations in production, impeded technological progress, dictated construction priorities unsuited to the market, and caused frequent and elevated unemployment. Moreover, the resulting instability for the industry helped shape the focus and nature of labor activity. The frequent rounds of unemployment arising from policy shifts furthered shop floor discipline and hindered labor organizing. With government programs positioned as the primary source of employment, workers came to reject unions and socialist groups that promoted policies adversarial to management and state. Instead, workers sought conciliatory relations with state and local politicians to win shipbuilding contracts for Saint-Nazaire's yards.

Chapter 3 investigates the process of production in shipbuilding, demonstrating the complexity of the industrial transformation and the multiplicity of workplace experiences. While capitalist methods of production and organization did transform this industry, the changes did not occur steadily or affect the entire workforce. Ship production still depended upon manual labor, complex tasks, and the utilization of hand tools. Most importantly, the workforce was not composed of semi- and unskilled labor but primarily of skilled and broadly trained semiskilled workers who moved about in the yard with a great measure of autonomy. This organization undercut the development of associations along skill lines yet allowed a particular segment of the workforce the capacity to associate and to lead labor activity. Unlike other shipyard workers, riveters and their assistants were not liable to the fragmentation that arose from the physical setting, the diversity of projects, and

frequent unemployment. On the contrary, they enjoyed privileged work conditions that gave them a position of status in the shipyards and the opportunity to initiate protest.

Chapter 4 explores the role of culture and community, illustrating that industrial work did not transform the allegiances and interests of all workers. The priorities and resources of the two distinct communities that supplied shipbuilding's workforce, urban Saint-Nazaire and the Brière marshland, produced clearly differentiated attitudes and political behavior. Patterns of work and life specific to the rural Brière, including collective landownership, self-government, shipbuilding skills, and marshland agriculture, particularly the harvesting and marketing of peat, were the basis of a commanding community identity that led residents to preserve the operation of their community against outside intrusions and economic crisis. Consequently, declining marshland production from the mid-nineteenth century did not, in this instance, signal the "disaggregation" of the rural community, as many French historians have argued.<sup>6</sup> Instead of leaving their villages and their families and abandoning agricultural production in favor of employment in centers of industry, the Briérons, known as worker-peasants, turned to industrial employment precisely to maintain rural settlement and their patterns of life and work while remaining disinterested in many workplace issues and in strikes. Ship workers from urban Saint-Nazaire, on the other hand, were largely recent migrants divided by trade and place of origin and generally less skilled than the Briérons. Fewer resources and limited social networks produced a different relationship to industrial work and led them to labor organizing and strikes to achieve employment assurance, security, and stability. Thus, industrialization in Saint-Nazaire did not create a homogenous class with a similar consciousness. The two groups of workers, despite their common work experience, retained distinct identities and concerns.

The final section of the book brings the examination of state policies, work processes, and culture, to an exploration of labor issues and strike activity. Chapter 5 details the role of working-class leaders and state programs in the emergence of a workforce manifestly indifferent to unions and socialist politics. Saint-Nazaire's labor and socialist leaders, who spent much of their time enmeshed in factional disputes, could do little to ameliorate high unemployment and so failed to meet the needs of their constituency. In sharp contrast, the state's power to relieve unemployment through subsidy legislation cultivated an association and dependence on state leaders and local elites. These forces, however, did not fashion a quiescent workforce—shipbuilding workers mounted regular strike activity over the thirty-year period. Chapter 6 examines shipbuilding strikes and labor demands, detailing how they replicated workers' conflicting identities, interests, and allegiances. Strikes typically engaged the two groups of workers separately, in accordance with the needs, capacities, and concerns of each. Scarce resources of urban workers led them to target improved work conditions in the form of advancement and job security for the youngest, least skilled workers in a family. The labor activity of the

Briérons, on the other hand, reflected a desire to preserve their collective traditions and associations and to minimize the time spent in industrial employment. The shipbuilding workforce did not identify as a single working class or share a common political agenda, yet workers did on occasion find common terrain.

This investigation of community and work in nineteenth-century Saint-Nazaire makes a number of contributions to French history and to cultural and labor history. First, it demonstrates the need for a reconsideration of national politics and economic and industrial development in shaping local social and labor history. At the same time, the study argues that workers regarded and digested these structural processes from the confines of cultural sensibilities and economic considerations, factors that then shaped their response. Finally, it suggests that these diverse factors did not operate independently but did in fact mediate and influence one another. In demonstrating the importance of these avenues of investigation, this study of industrialization in Saint-Nazaire serves to expand the questions and the tools that historians bring to the study of working people.

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## Chapter 1

# An Industry Builds a Town: Shipbuilding and Saint-Nazaire

The development of the French shipbuilding town of Saint-Nazaire, located in Brittany, provides a valuable tool for examining the unmistakable links between industrial growth and urbanization. A small village known in 1840 only for its regional port and fishing industry, Saint-Nazaire became an industrial town of national importance by the 1880s due entirely to the installation of shipbuilding yards within its confines. Yet it also stands as an example of urban growth at odds with the emergence of many French cities during the nineteenth century. Here, industrialization and urbanization occurred first intermittently but became quite sudden and explosive after 1880, transforming the city and, within just a few decades, attracting thousands of working-class residents. This pattern of uneven development is most apparent in population statistics; the village of barely 1,000 residents in 1846 grew to 6,500 in 1861 and then in the next five years nearly doubled to 12,000 residents. Economic development came to a sudden halt in the late 1860s, actually reversing urban growth, and only with the installation of industrial shipyards in the city in 1881 did the population once again expand, to 16,000 by 1882, 20,000 by 1886, and 35,000 by 1903.

Given the economic climate of western France, the evolution of the town of Saint-Nazaire from a small port into a major shipbuilding center in a few decades was particularly striking. Located at the mouth of the Loire, this town