Labour/Le Travailleur

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Volume 20, 1987

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt20re02

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

McKay, I. (1987). Compte rendu de [Coal Miners and the Longue Durée: Learning from Decazeville]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *20*, 221–228.

Coal Miners and the *Longue Durée*: Learning from Decazeville

Ian McKay

Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985).

LES SOLDATS DE L'ABIME, a race apart, the purest proletarians: today one could write a large book on the images of coal miners in fiction, in journalism, and in historiography. Distinctive mining mythologies have developed in each country, yet on closer inspection they follow international patterns dictated by the fairly similar pattern of coal's rise and decline in most of the western capitalist economies. From the mid-nineteenth century to the early-to-mid twentieth century, coal miners and mining communities were thought to stand outside bourgeois conventions: one could look upon them with loathing and fear (as many middle-class interpreters did) or with profound admiration (as did many socialists, who saw in them the living fulfillment of Marx's concept of the revolutionary proletariat), or, not uncommonly, with a mixture of the two (as in Zola, who saw them as both heroically enduring and fatally brutalized by their unique working environment). Then, from the time of coal's gradual eclipse in the twentieth century by hydroelectricity, nuclear power, and oil, the coal miners suddenly seemed like people from the past, and their struggles, now so often against nationalized coal industries and public boards, could be presented as Luddite attempts to block technological progress or wanton attacks on "the general public." From being the central figures of national labour history, they were shunted into their own little ghetto: in France, in Canada, in the United States, and even (although here the rebellion against this 'shunting' has been vigorous indeed) in Britain. They have shrunk in numbers, and correspondingly in historical stature.

We used to know exactly what it was about coal miners that gave them such prominence in labour history: it was their isolation as a "homogeneous" mass, which predisposed them to mount massive and sustained strug-

Ian McKay, "Coal Miners and the *Longue Durée*: Learning from Decazeville," *Labour/Le Travail*, 20 (Fall 1987), 221-228.

gles against their generally distant employers. Their rebelliousness stemmed from slaving away in company mines, living in company houses, and being cheated in company store, in conditions which erased the divisions between workers and deepened those between workers and capitalists.[1] (In Canada, the works of John Mellor and Paul MacEwan in the East, and David Jay Bercuson in his comparative analysis of East and West, depend to a large extent on these ideas).[2] A lot of fine polemics and interesting debates have been aroused by this theory of the isolated mass, but in the last few years it has come under increasingly withering fire.

Some of the best revisionist work was done in Britain and France. In 1978 Royden Harrison edited a pivotal British collection, *Independent Collier: The Coalminer as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, which subjected the models of proletarian homogeneity in conditions of isolation to vigorous attack. The South Yorkshire pits, for example, were intimately connected with linen, pottery, and boatbuilding, and the coal towns were never profoundly isolated from other working-class communities.[3] Alan Campbell, in an article in *Independent Collier*, and subsequently in his longer study of Lanarkshire miners, developed an interpretation of the coal miners that stressed the importance of the colliers' mining skills, which, because they were almost impossible to codify and control, were all the more resistant to managerial supervision. He also emphasized the attachment of the miners to the land, which gave them an independence of full-time wage labour and a vivid sense of an alternative way of life, and the coal miners' moderate trade unionism.[4] In France, although coal miners made up a very small percentage of the national working class, they achieved an immense symbolic importance, and from the nineteenth century a series of books were devoted to them, culminating in Rolande Trempé's great and unrivalled study of the miners of Carmaux.[5] With its immaculate grasp of coal mining economics and the dynamics of class, this was implicitly revisionist because it stressed the miners' reformist socialism and laid far more stress on the gradual separation of miner-peasants from the land. But its very local focus left somewhat undeveloped an answer to the question isolated-mass theory had posed, and the British work suggested only tentative answers as well. Why, if their autonomy at work resembled that of urban or rural artisans, and if they were subject to the same complexities of social and cultural determination as anyone else, were coal miners more militant than other workers in the pursuit of their class objectives?

This is a question which calls for a comparative approach, and while some international analyses have been suggestive, what it really requires is comparison on the basis of individual *coalfields*, where such variables as the type of technology, the demographic mix, the level of earnings, the size of the collieries, the thickness of the coal seam, and the extent to which social and political power in the coalfield was monopolized by capital can be specified and studied in their complex interaction. Yet over and above these is the question of the state and of *economic and political power*. Where did the coal miners fit into the overall shape of their society? How much economic and political power did they wield? If one developed this line of questioning, and tried to understand both the waxing and waning of the coal miners' militancy and power, soon "isolated mass"

[1] Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike—An International Comparison," in Arthur Kornhouser, Robert Dubin, and Arthur M. Ross, eds., *Industrial Conflict* (New York 1954), 189-211.
[2] John Mellor, *The Company Store: James Bryson* McLachlan and the Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1900-1925 (Toronto 1983), and Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976); David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (1977), 154-75.
[3] Royden Harrison, ed., *Independent Collier: The Coalminer as Archetypal Proletarian Considered* (New York 1978).
[4] Alan B. Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: A Social History of their Trade Unions, 1775-1874* (Edinburgh 1979).
[5] Rolande Trempé, *Les Mineurs de Carmaux, 1848-1914*, 2 vols. (Paris 1971).

theory was stood on its head. Centrality, not isolation, was the key. What made the coal miners different then (say) equally "isolated" and "homogeneous" masses of fishplant workers was the clout they derived from their autonomy at work *and* their economic and political centrality, their indispensability, to the capitalist project. Once this indispensability was lost, and coal superseded by other fuels, their power was drastically diminished (although, tragically, their needs as living and breathing workers were not). Fighting against a system of industrial capitalism vitally dependent upon their labour-power, the coal miners forced capital and the state into all kinds of novel relationships and strategies—from compulsory arbitration laws to the recognition of occupational diseases as legitimate categories. But now, fighting against de-industrialization, the miners find they have fewer resources to call upon, and that their strikes have a lesser impact. Consequently their levels of militancy and political activism have gradually, painfully declined. Here is something approaching an alternative explanation to the now widely-discredited theory of the isolated mass.

Tilly and Shorter helped develop these ideas of looking at coal miners in the context of politics, and pointed out the inadequacies of the isolated mass hypothesis;[6] Trempé pushed beyond the period covered by her volumes to explore the cultural implications of de-industrialization;[7] and in the United States John Gaventa's work (which social historians rarely cite, perhaps because it was written within the discipline of political science), asked penetrating questions about politics and de-industrialization in the course of an enquiry into the minds of the most stalwart supporters of the United Mine Workers of America's corrupt leadership.[8] But no one has gone further into these broadly political implications of the miners' response to both industrialization and de-industrialization than Donald Reid, whose *Miners of Decazeville* must now be added to the shelves of all serious coal mining historians. This book is rich in implications for Canadian labour historians, particularly those who work on coal miners in the context of regional underdevelopment, and it is these implications that I explore in the following pages.

DECAZEVILLE IS LOCATED in the south of France about 80 miles from Toulouse and 100 miles from Clermont-Ferrand, Limoges, and Montpellier. It lies in the Aubin Coal Basin, which has been systematically exploited since the early nineteenth century.

One of the most innovative and important contributions of Reid's history of Decazeville is that he describes the evolution of labour, capital, and the state in this coal-producing area since its beginning. Anyone who undertakes such a task writes in the long shadow cast by Trempé, and Reid in fact refers the reader to her for a more thorough exposition of coal-mining economics. Where Trempé brought us a "total view" of the miners of Carmaux in rich, brilliant detail by concentrating on one particular period (1848-1914), Reid focusses on a much longer period (over 150 years) in a fraction of the space. He does this by focussing almost exclusively on the structures formed by the relationships of capital, labour, and the state. For historians developing closer links with "political economy," his is an interesting model. Particularly important is his emphasis on the *longue durée*. Looking at change over 150 years, "the chronicler of a coal town," writes Reid, is able "to take a comprehensive view of labor history." (216) That history, according to Reid, unfolded in three basic stages, which he differentiates by the basic configurations of labour, capital, and the state in each, and each of which was associated with a particular pattern of proletarianization, which is interpreted here as "a loss of power in the economic sphere rather than a loss of property as such." (214)

In the first period, the state and capital cooperated to end pre-industrial modes of production. Peasant-miners defended a conception of private property rights and community rights at odds with royal mining

[6] Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France 1830-1968* (London 1974), 287-94.

[7] Rolande Trempé, "Problèmes culturels autour des mineurs de Carmaux," *Revue du Tarn*, 96 (1979), 587-93.

[8] John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana 1980).

concessions and the attempts by entrepreneurs to control and exploit the resource. In the century before the French Revolution, efforts by the state to introduce large-scale enterprise failed, despite the state's legal stewardship of the nation's sub-surface, because of the stubborn resistance of the Aubin Basin peasants, defending their customary right to mine the coal.

Reid deals rather briefly with this period, but what he shows us is fascinating. Rather isolated from the major centres of French industry, the Aubin Coal Basin was not developed systematically until the 1820s. But before this time the area's peasants, who relied mainly on grapes for wine and devoted their best land to the cultivation of hemp, also came to rely on small, locally-controlled mines. Even in good years, Reid notes, "coal mining provided an invaluable supplement to the Basin's economy. It prevented some people from dying of hunger, as one priest claimed, and played a role in the lives of everyone in the Basin." (10) When the state tried to grant concessions to ambitious entrepreneurs, with the idea of replacing the primitive approach of the peasant miners with more advanced mining methods, there was an uproar. The agent of one concessionaire was decapitated; machine-smashing, riots, and arson marked other attempts to root out peasant control over the resource. The peasants' grip was loosened only after "dearth, disease and the draft" decimated the area during and immediately after the Napoleonic Wars, at the same time as interest in investing in such properties was growing outside the region.

Such coal mining by peasants and other small producers is very widely known, although it rarely gave rise to such a defiant movement of resistance. In Canada, one could develop these same themes by looking at the acts of opposition to capitalism — smuggling, illegal mining, and so on — that accompanied the initiation of systematic mining by the General Mining Association in the 1820s, which was also, as in the case of the French entrepreneurs, very much dependent on the favour of the state. Tenacious "peasant" struggles over gypsum and grindstones also brought small producers into direct conflict with the state. These peasant traditions by no means died with the coming of large-scale capital: a lively tradition of illegal 'bootleg' mining continues to this day.

In the second period, new industrial communities took shape in the context of national economic growth and local struggles over political independence and job control. Workers faced proletarianization as a loss of control over the labour process.

So far as the evolution of capital was concerned, a major turning point came in 1822, when a group of Parisian bankers joined with Duke Decazes in the establishment of the Société Anonyme des Houillères et Fonderies de l'Aveyron in 1826, with the intention of creating an "English" ironworks. In 1868 the industrial complex at Decazeville was bought by the Société Nouvelle, led by a group of financiers with close ties to the ironworks at Le Creusot. Coal mining in this Basin would have been untenable without the forges to use the low-grade coal, which, well into the twentieth century, commanded a much lower pit-head price than that obtained elsewhere. Eventually coal replaced iron as the region's primary export, which Reid considers the "first precursor of the deindustrialization of Decazeville." (50) Perhaps already stimulated by the unwillingness of local investors to take their capital out of land and commerce and put it into potentially risky industrial ventures, the underdevelopment of southern France was accelerated by the impact of the Great Depression of the late nineteenth century. Initially, the company contracted with local landowners to mine coal within the company's concessions; subsequently the firm assumed the major elements of mine supervision, while turning over most aspects of labour management to contractors. This was seen as a form of adaptation to the legacy of peasant mining. By the late 1850s, however, the firm decided to eliminate the contractors, in order to exert more direct control in the workplace and in response to pressure from the state. In an industry in which labour accounted for over 40 per cent of the sale price of coal at mid-century, this concern to establish direct discipline was understandable.

Reid has by this point already qualified older models of capitalism's emergence in the coalfields by suggesting that peasant traditions were not eradicated overnight, and he con-

tinues to challenge pre-conceptions with his analysis of the town itself. Because this coalfield was especially susceptible to market downturns, firms limited their attempts to stabilize the labour force. Devices to control the labor *force and to encourage it to reproduce itself* — that is, the trappings of the "company town" as it is conventionally understood — were not thoroughly applied in Decazeville. There was a proliferation of small traders, and the company expected the employees to pay most of the bill for creating the town themselves. In terms of mine management, reforms carried out in mid-century, which gave the local manager a greater degree of autonomy, meant imposing more direct discipline on the workers, but they were offered, in exchange, the opportunity to enter the managerial hierarchy. Paternalism, Reid suggests, was not only a way of attracting and disciplining labour, but also a more direct way of administering the labour process itself.

Labour responded vibrantly to these changes. Over a long period there was a symbiotic relationship between agriculture and mining; while there was concern that such "semi-proletarians" would not be as productive at the workplace, there was also the fact that miners who worked a piece of land after *leaving the mines were less demanding about* wages. (Here Reid develops a principal theme of Trempé and Campbell, and one which has echoed and re-echoed in Canadian rural sociology.) He also develops the theme of skill, although here, interestingly, he is far less tentative about the objectivity of the collier's skills than Trempé, who stressed their contextual nature. "Over the course of the nineteenth century the hewer's skills became an issue of crucial importance to management," suggests Reid. "The simple picking away of coal at the face soon gave way to the use of blasting to loosen the coal," (28) and this meant that the hewer's skill helped determine the amount of the more marketable "lump" coal, and ensured the safety of his crew. The miners worked in largely autonomous crews, which bargained with the company over pay either on their own or through a contractor, and miners were able to control their production in order to raise their wages during periods of rising coal prices and to protect them during depressions. Indeed, without union organization, the hewers' average daily pay nearly doubled between the 1840s and the 1880s. (This, of course, calls an older — if somewhat implicit — immiseration model sharply into question.) It was attempts *to tamper with this crew system that fed the* major strikes in Decazeville of the 1860s. "Were the strikers at Decazeville therefore 'traditionalists' in the sense that the term is employed in modernization theory?" Reid asks of these efforts to shore up an older system of control, and replies, "The answer is no, for tradition in the mines was not the product of a backward consciousness, but of a work culture built around the independence of the crew, which had been created and reaffirmed during the few decades following industrialization of the Basin." (61) In the Great Depression, workers responded with strikes when, as expected, the company attempted to reduce wages. A union was finally established in 1884, and a famous strike ensued in 1866, which was waged on a host of mining issues, such as a transition to newer modes of wage payment which rewarded miners for producing better-quality coal and the attempts to change the crew system. In the course of this strike, the assistant director, identified with these hated "reforms," was clubbed and thrown out of a *window by rioters; he died shortly thereafter.* Thanks to this strike, the miner became "l'Ouvrier par excellence," the symbol of the world of labour struggling for its emancipation (112) — somewhat ironically, given the 'traditionalism' of many of the strike's demands.

The state in this period played an increasingly important role. In the 15 years after 1860 "the state intervened directly and indirectly in the reorganization of the labor process," particularly by criticizing small-scale contracting and upper management in investigations of accidents and strikes. (70) The state intervened directly in the town's political life in the 1880s by frustrating company attempts to wrest control from moderate republicans and their union allies. The company town, Reid suggests, "fell victim to the republican state, which took on many of the duties that firms in towns like Decazeville's had previously handled." (109)

This description of Decazeville suggests a host of parallels with Canadian coalfields. The

Great Depression would appear to have had parallel implications for the South of France as for the Maritimes. The 1886 strike, which culminated in the murder of the assistant director, suggests uncanny parallels with local (although less violent) strikes (such as the Springhill Strike of 1890), waged on exactly the same issues and involving the same "personalization" of authority in the mine.

In the third period, the role of the state in the economy and in labour relations increased greatly, particularly after the nationalization of the mines. In this phase, the role of the state has been paramount, and "proletarianization" entails the removal of the industry altogether. As for the coal community, the company town has reached its final stage:

> . . .the firm, faced with a depletion of the natural resources in the area and changes in the national and international market, countered challenges to its authority in the town with threats to close up shop and depart. The large capital investments that made the company vulnerable to labour pressure in its early years had long since been amortized. The residents of the town were now at the mercy of the employer. (38)

This third phase started at the end of the Long Depression in the 1890s, and coincided with the coming of a new company. Decazeville was able to prosper despite the closing of two big customers for low-grade coal, because of the secondary manufacturing of coal by-products. Management of the mines changed in two basic ways: the central office was made independent of the board of directors and put in clear control of local management, and the firm ended the system of paternalism by insisting on a stricter definition of the responsibilities of supervisory personnel. It also revolutionized its hiring policies, expanding its labour force from 3,600 to 4,700, and hiring foreign workers from Spain.

Labour found itself placed at a disadvantage by these developments. "The native underground mine labor force at Decazeville found its means of dealing with the company sapped by large numbers of foreign workers whose cultural background and transience separated them from the French population, especially in the 1920s; by a new rigor in supervision; and by the growing importance of the mechanized open-pit mines in the town's economy," Reid suggests. (167) Only 10 per cent of the workers were in the union, although it claimed to represent a far greater number. In this situation of weakness, the union looked to its parent body for a national strategy, and its position depended very much on republican legislation designed to protect miners against the physical results of exploitation.

State intervention, previously focused on the powers and authority of management, now shifted to the enforcement of safety procedures and the rationalization of work organization. After exerting a directing role during World War I, the state subsequently withdrew. In 1946, the Fourth Republic nationalized the mining industry, but (like most of these nationalizations throughout the capitalist world) this turned out to be a savage disappointment, particularly in the wake of the strikes of 1947 and 1948. "In retrospect," writes Reid, "miners across the nation considered the defeat in 1948 the beginning of their decline from their brief tenure as France's model workers. All nationalized industries experienced a breach between organized labor and management, but in no sector was it deeper than in mining." (184) As in the Maritimes, nationalization was not a prelude to the equalization of wage disparities in coal mining nor to greater self-determination for the community; disparities persisted, and all facets of mining operations were now to be controlled from Paris.

Deindustrialization has created a heightened sense of regionalism — the "Occitan culture" of Languedoc has emerged as the symbolic expression of the wrongs that have been done to the people of the region throughout history. In the course of battles to preserve their mines, including the occupation of a pit in 1962, the coal miners were reminded vividly of their status as "second-class Frenchmen." But Decazeville, from being a city of miners, has been transformed into a center of services, administration, and commerce. No popular movement has been able to stop the process of deindustrialization. The parallels with the fate of so many coal-mining areas in Canada scarcely need underlining: even the decisive defeats of the late 1940s in France and Canada parallel each other, as does the emergence of regionalism as a response to the collapse of

the coal economy and the hypertrophic growth of the service sector in dependent regions.

As this précis of *The Miners of Decazeville* suggests, it is a book that is rich in analysis and suggests numerous parallels with the Canadian experience. It covers, in a very short space, a long and fascinating history. Few recent books in labour history have been as full of ideas or information as this one.

Yet I wish this book were twice the length and organized along different lines. What the author has attempted to do is to preserve the principles of historical narrative while at the same time bringing into play his structural economic analysis. There is an overdue re-evaluation of the importance of narrative going on in social history, but structural narrative is a difficult art. If the basic structural arguments of this book were simply laid out in different chapters, without maintaining the story-telling pretence, than they would be much easier to grasp and to remember; conversely, if the story were told in a less antiseptic, academic manner, the miners of Decazeville might emerge more as people and less as abstractions. Many of the arguments here were made more clearly and memorably, in my opinion, in Reid's numerous articles, where he allowed himself greater space to deal with them.[9] The story of Decazeville echoes with class conflict and turbulence, but Reid presents it with little sense of dramatic pacing. I doubt many readers will remember the individuals they meet here, or have much sense of the town or the coal basin as places to live.[10] (We are whisked right through the twentieth century, and I kept having the nagging feeling that Decazeville and the more rural parts of the Aubin Basin were being conflated—yet a number of statistics mentioned by Reid seem to suggest this might be misleading). This is partly a function of the severely compressed nature of the writing, and partly a function of the rigorous political-economy framework adopted by the author. Notwithstanding his best intentions, and his very real sensitivity to the critiques levelled against this type of social history[11], his analysis of coal miners in the *longue durée* seems to view them from an olympian height. The cover of the book, which features a photograph of coal miners at work neatly chopped up into rectangles on an imaginary bar graph, seems ironically apposite: it is the very image of the people of history neatly transformed into the homogeneous measurements of a histogram.

Reid is also very reluctant to generalize beyond this case study to other countries and other coalfields; there are very few references outside France, and some surprising omissions even when it comes sources in French publications.[12] So many of the things he says about work regimes, the "work culture," or deindustrialization suggest fascinating international parallels, and he might have called upon this international literature. I am unclear as to the logical status of his various periods: the criteria employed do not seem to be derived from political economy, but they are never explicitly

[9] See, in particular, Donald Reid, "The Origins of Industrial Labor Management in France: The Case of the Decazeville Ironworks During the July Monarchy," *Business History Review*, 57 (1983), 1-19, and "The Role of Mine Safety in the Development of Working-Class Consciousness and Organization: The Case of the Aubin Coal Basin, 1867-1914," *French Historical Studies*, 13 (1981), 98-119.

[10] It is interesting to compare the strengths of Reid's analytical history with the far more popular approach of Donald L. Miller and Richard E. Sharpless, *The Kingdom of Coal: Work, Enterprise, and Ethnic Communities in the Mine Fields* (Philadelphia 1985), which conveys through photographs and vivid first-person descriptions a sense of "being there" that one does not get from Reid. Ideally one would like to see these approaches combined, for (as Trempé so magnificently demonstrated) one may analyze *both* political economy and working-class consciousness. Even a few photographs would have softened the cartesian rigour of Reid's book.

[11] See his review of Jacques Rancière, *La nuit des prolétaires* in *Radical History Review*, 28-30 (1984), 445-63.

[12] For example, little room is devoted to "restriction of output," notwithstanding Joel Michel's interesting study "Politique syndicale et conjoncture économique: la limitation de la production de charbon chez les mineurs européens au XIX^e siècle," *Le Mouvement Social*, 119 (1982), 63-90.

spelled out. (Admittedly, periodizing the development of a coalfield is not easy. Many of the normal benchmarks, such as "mercantile," "industrial," and "monopoly" capital, apply only if one privileges the *context* within which the coalfield operates, and not its internal relations.) And there is considerable ambiguity in my mind as to what Reid's final argument about deindustrialization is. "The deindustrialization of these regions," he writes, "was built into the very development of the coal industry; the economics of coal mining is controlled by the depletion of the deposit and the increasing cost of extraction as operations move further from the surface." (3) This is a *critical point and no coal-mining historian* should ever forget it, yet are we right to associate so closely "depletion of the deposit" with "deindustrialization," given that some old coalfields presumably could turn to other industrial pursuits? (That few of them do might tell us more about the priorities of capitalist states and large corporations than about deindustrialization as an inevitable consequence of developing coal in the first place). Despite the ominous appeal to "genealogy" in the book's title, the sense of "de-industrialization" here is mainly descriptive, and the process is not fully analyzed. A more fully theorized account of de-industrialization would surely have to take fuller measure of dependency theory and models from Latin America (which also provides us with a number of fascinating cases of mining "growth without development").

Yet I do not want to end on a critical note, for this is a stimulating, difficult, impressive book. My copy has scarcely a page without an underlining, a note, or an exclamation mark, to mark a deft formulation, a fresh insight, or *an empirical finding eerily similar to our own* miners' history. so many of Reid's passages could be applied, virtually without alteration, to the Maritimes! Within the limits he has set himself, Reid has written a book that should inspire wide-ranging discussion and debate whenever and wherever labour historians *gather to talk about the miners and the* triumphs and tragedies of their histories.