

When the Check-Out Staff Checked Out

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Whilst staff working conditions in the supermarket industry have often been criticised by the media and social scientists alike, supermarket distribution nevertheless remains a sector largely untouched by mass worker mobilisation. In her work, Marlène Benquet shares her account of an unlikely supermarket strike, following the events as they unfolded.

Reviewed : Marlène Benquet, *Les damnés de la caisse. Grève dans un hypermarché*, (Hopeless at the check-out. A supermarket strike) Paris, Éditions du croquant, 2011, 238 p., 20€.

1 February 2008 saw the first day of strikes in the history of the supermarket sector, with different companies and unions striking together. Whilst the action was successful, no decision was made to continue on a national scale, with the exception of Hypermag Grand Large in the north of Marseilles. Its check-out staff, from whom the protest movement in this particular store had originated, went on to strike for a further sixteen days. When the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* finally put an end to the action, none of the

employees' demands had been met. Marlène Benquet's work invites the reader to better understand why and how this unlikely protest movement came about.

The supermarket sector rarely experiences staff strikes. For this reason, any attempt to study the protest movement amongst shop staff, a symbolic group which sits at the "crossroads of a triple movement of feminisation of the work place, an expansion of the services sector and increased job insecurity," represents an important contribution to our understanding of the increase in workplace protest movements, which have been on the up since 2000, as well as to our understanding of certain groups of the population which have up until now stayed largely uninvolved in such mass social movements. The author attempts to present the reasons and justifications given by the shop staff at this particular superstore, in order to explain why they chose to get involved in a mass protest movement *at that particular point in time*.

From a Discourse of Injustice to Mass Mobilisation

In her attempts to identify the origins of the sense of injustice which spurred staff into action, the author focuses her attention on the working and employment conditions of the strikers. In the first chapter, she explains the "different ways in which one is a check-out assistant" and in which this group is exposed to economic insecurity, organisational constraints and lack of career growth prospects. She distinguishes between three generations of check-out staff corresponding to varying perceptions of job insecurity, all of whom are the product of differing and diverse socio-professional paths linked to age and geographical location. Despite these differences, the shop staff nevertheless all share the same feeling of doing a job they do not value, one that they do only because they cannot find anything better, and one which offers them no shared professional identity whatsoever. What's more, the work is often inflexible, characterised by high levels of staff dependence on management due to a system of mutual arrangements, which in turn makes it almost impossible to complain. It is

precisely due to such a combination of factors that mass protest movements in this sector are all the more unlikely.

Despite this, on 1 February 2008, many of the staff at Hyper Grand Large refused to work. This went on to become the first day in the history of the supermarket sector in which staff representing different companies and unions went on strike together. The next day, while national strikes ended, a core group of shop staff voted to prolong the action, accusing their employers of injustice and protesting against their working and employment conditions. This sense of injustice amongst employees is considered by the author to be the root cause of the protest movement, and it is this sense of injustice which went on to become such an integral part of the history of the supermarket and of the entire company. When Grand Large opened in 1996, its staff were greatly committed to their work, which not only created strong ties between staff and management but also led to many employees believing that they would be promoted. When the Hypermag group purchased the store three years later, staff were left bitterly disappointed; the new management, seemingly ungrateful, had little understanding of the previous many years of hard work staff had put in for the company, and employees were suddenly confronted with the reality of their own job insecurity, as not only were they employed in roles without any prospects for career growth, they also went on to suffer wage cuts. Lack of prospects and economic insecurity merged, with the added strain of worsening work relations; while the former manager had been on particularly good terms with his staff, relations with the new management were strained, with staff using their previous working conditions, which they felt had been ideal, to emphasise why they were so unhappy with the current conditions. This anger and sense of injustice was shared by both the older and middle generations of employees, and the fact that many from these groups came from the same northern neighbourhoods of Marseilles helped create a shared sense of identity outside of the workplace, which further contributed to the formation of a collective group. This same sense of injustice then trickled down to the younger staff generations, struggling with their own

feelings of belonging to the working poor. The mass movement came about precisely due to this convergence between the different generations of employees.

Despite this convergence, their reasons for getting involved were very different. While the older and middle generations, forming the core centre of the group, were brought together by a shared sense of having been mistreated, the younger generation seemed to have few objective reasons to become involved in the protest. For many amongst them, their jobs with Hypermag were the most satisfactory they had ever held over the uncertain course of their professional careers, which meant many were reluctant to go on strike. Their involvement in the action was therefore probably less an act of rallying around any shared sense of mistreatment and instead the result of the fear of being marginalised and excluded from the social and professional group lying at the heart of this movement. Ultimately, all employees went on strike. With union backing for the first week, they also organised a store occupation, although this was not achieved without some difficulty.

From Cooperation to a Split Between Strikers and Union Activists

A gendered division formed between the strikers and the unionists, with the former, mostly made up of women, organising how the strikes were to be managed, and the latter, mostly men, in charge of dealing with external groups such as management, the media and those running the unions. While the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT) and *Force Ouvrière* (FO) union federations were against the strikes, under pressure from employees they had little choice but to show their support. The CFDT union delegate, occupying a majority seat, found himself in a particularly difficult position, torn between the strikers who wanted to continue the fight and the union bosses seeking a swift end to the affair. Perhaps the feeble support from the unions might explain why the strikers did not attempt to end their strike as quickly as possible, and instead of negotiating, opted to go on the offensive. During the second week of strikes, during which the strikers were confronted with

a significant legal and police backlash, the unions gradually distanced themselves from the unfolding events. The relations between the two groups eventually deteriorated, jeopardising the previously established division of work. What's more, a split formed amongst the strikers themselves, with a certain number of them breaking away entirely from the movement. After two weeks of strikes and one day of negotiations, the CFDT and the management agreed an end to the strikes and to promote future negotiations between unions and employers in the supermarket industry. Not one of the demands made by the strikers was satisfied.

Marlène Benquet's study does not finish with the strikers returning to work; she returned a few weeks later to meet the protagonists in this story. It transpires that the shop staff blame the unions for the failure of the strike and strongly resent the CFDT. And yet, despite this, the unions saw gains once the strike had ended, with a fifth of the strikers deciding to join the FO and the CGT. What's more, despite the failure of the strikers to have their demands met, their action strengthened and encouraged a culture of inter-generational workers' unity amongst the staff, which was then passed down to the younger amongst them, as well as showing that a collective decision to act was possible and could be positive. In turn, the older and middle generations were themselves influenced by the younger employees, choosing from here on in to adopt a more individualistic stance in terms of protest, including investing less of themselves in their jobs and using restraint, all with the aim of going against the expectations of the management.

Perceived Injustice as the Root Cause of the Protest Movement

“Why here instead of elsewhere? Why now instead of later?” These are the questions Marlène Benquet attempts to answer through her analysis of this unlikely strike. In order to do so, she emphasises the advantages of using a methodology based on ethnography, which allows one to return to the source of the shared sense of injustice which she considers to be the cause of the movement.

This perceived injustice is evidence of “a change in the subjective perception amongst employees of their professional circumstances” (p. 224) which, bearable up to a certain point, later became unbearable. This model of analysis does, however, raise a few questions. As the author herself shows, the perceived injustice amongst the employees is actually not the sole cause of the movement. A certain number of staff, in particular the youngest amongst them, joined the strikers only as a means to avoid feeling marginalised, rather than from any shared feeling of maltreatment. What’s more, there is no reason why this feeling would have been shared by all employees, since there are many reasons for why it might have developed in the first place. If the workers’ movement really was in part the result of this perceived injustice, it only partly explains the strike that followed and why it went on for as long as it did. Employees working in other shops and for other companies may well feel the same without deciding to organise such a mass movement. For these reasons, the author’s proposed model only goes some way towards answering the questions asked.

Despite these reservations, however, Marlène Benquet’s text undeniably represents a significant contribution to the sociological study of social movements, and adds to our understanding of mass organised action by sections of the population that have traditionally been absent from such movements. The focus on affiliations outside of the workplace seems particularly pertinent and deserves to be looked at in more detail as part of further research. Similarly, sociologists interested in the supermarket sector will find an excellent description of employee working conditions as well as the professional relations in this sector. Of note in the text are the rich variety of materials used by the author and the undeniable advantages of using ethnography to follow the events surrounding this improbable strike, as they unravelled from start to finish.

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