Taking It to the Streets: French Cultural Worker Resistance and the Creation of a Precariat Movement

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Abstract: This article examines the intermittent cultural workers movement in France leading up to and including the 2003 strike that paralyzed the film and television production industries. Crucial to understanding the strike are the ways workers defined their labour in the cultural industries in the decade leading up to the strike. Such ideas were often at odds with government, employer, and even union understandings of labour in the sector. In using the concepts of immaterial labour and precarity to discuss the movement, the author argues that these workers movements might be understood as examples of syndicalism, enacted outside the traditional categories of the workplace and professional crafts.

Résumé : Cet article examine le mouvement des intermittents du spectacle en France conduisant à et incluant la grève 2003 qui a paralysé les industries de production de film et de télévision. Pour comprendre la grève il est essentielle de comprendre la manière dont les ouvriers ont défini leur travail dans les industries culturelles dans la décennie précédant la grève. De telles idées étaient souvent en désaccord avec le gouvernement, l’employeur et même les vues des syndicats du travail dans le secteur. En employant les concepts du travail immatériel et du précarité pour discuter le mouvement, cet article soutient que ces mouvements ouvriers pourraient être compris comme exemples de syndicalisme, promulgué hors des catégories traditionnelles des métiers et de lieu de travail.

Keywords: Film labour; Labour movements; Post-industrialism; Precarity; Immaterial labour

In October 2003 workers in the French entertainment sector staged a series of strikes that paralyzed film and television production, theatre and music festivals, and even cinemas across the country. Guerrilla-style invasions of live television productions—including reality television shows and national news broadcasts—and the occupation of national cultural offices and labour union organizations increased pressure on the government and unions to at least entertain the concerns of workers. These protests came in the wake of significant changes to the

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country’s unemployment insurance program for cultural workers, as renegotiated by labour unions and employer organizations. But worker actions were about more than one contract. Instead, the protests were the culmination of decades of industry restructuring that effectively created a class of worker whose situation can be described as “precarious.” At the heart of these conflicts were differences in the conceptualization of cultural labour among workers, their unions, and employers. And the 2003 actions formed the basis for a new labour movement, independent and even in opposition to traditional labour unions.

This article traces the French film and television workers’ response to decades of structural realignment of their industries as the visual production sector became increasingly reliant upon “flexible” labour and production processes. First, the article provides an overview of how labour has been studied in North American analyses of the film industry. It suggests that, too often, such work has failed to analyze the relations not only between labour and employers, but between workers and their actual labour and the unions by which they are represented. The article suggests that precarity and immaterial labour are entry points to considering these relations in regard to contemporary film workers’ movements, particularly in France. Second, the article contextualizes the French film and television workers’ situation in historical developments of the industry. It provides an overview of the industry’s restructuring of production processes, demonstrating the constraints faced by workers. The third section of the article examines the divisions between French cultural unions in their approach to managing labour’s role in restructuring unemployment insurance in the country. This is followed by a consideration of a workers’ movement that extended beyond—and sometimes in opposition to—traditional labour union organizations. In creating this movement, the workers came to define their status as precarious and intermittent workers. Workers began to define their labour within a cultural framework by recognizing their role in producing taste and class characteristics that, in turn, impacted the organization of consumption and class across society. But the strategies of resistance employed extended beyond industry classifications, suggesting that their movement contains characteristics of industrial syndicalism movements of the past century. By taking their movement to the streets and sites of contemporary cultural production in the city, cultural workers are part of a movement based on the communicative nature of their work, but expanding across society’s precarious work force.

**Film and the absence of labour as a sustained point of analysis**

The international film industry receives a significant amount of academic attention, but there are few sustained analyses of the sector’s labour activities. Issues of labour remain absent from some recent studies of the industry’s international composition (Goldsmith & O’Regan, 2005; Tinic, 2005). When it is addressed, labour is most often factored in as a cost variable in economic or geographic studies of the industry. This is particularly the case in studies of regional competition and so-called runaway production, such as in Christopherson (2005), Hozic (2001), and Scott (2000a; 2000b; 2005). Others have engaged the increasingly
international division of labour that typifies film’s production process (Miller, Govil, McMurry, & Maxwell, 2001; Pendakur, 1990, 1998; Wasko, 2003). Nonetheless, these works tend to place labour in a reactionary position against, if not as victims of, global flows of capital and production. Although useful to some extent, these studies fail to recognize the agency and social nature of labour’s organization in the places of production and the engaged nature of workers’ activities.

The actual experiences and roles of workers in the film industry have rarely been the focus of research. Work from the field of geography (Herod, 1997) suggests that labour, particularly when understood in terms of its geographic location, often has an important role in shaping the industries in which workers are engaged. Moreover, Herod suggests that, in some instances, to understand the nature of labour and production in international markets, a scale of analysis at “the very local scale of organization” is required (2002, p. 83). Some writing on film begins to focus the frame of analysis on the agency of workers in the industry. In one of the most comprehensive considerations of “entrepreneurial labour” in film, Murphy (1997) argues that trade unions in the British Columbia industry not only took a primary role in attracting production to Vancouver, but have maintained a significant role in managing the region’s film activities. Although an appropriate term to describe labour union activities in the Vancouver film industry, “entrepreneurial labour” does nothing to describe the actual conditions of work or attitudes of the workers in comparison with their employers or union representations. Gasher (2002) acknowledged Murphy’s analysis, but does little to develop an understanding of labour’s role in the British Columbia film industry.

Coe provides some discussion of the nature of dispersed film production processes as well as the contributions of some workers in the industry. He develops a spatio-structural analysis of the industry using a satellite-Marshallian model of regional development (2001). This suggests that although regional economies of flexible accumulation develop in the film industry as discussed by Christopherson and Storper (1986), such activity is still dependent on investment by the dominant production firms, largely based in Hollywood (Aksoy & Robins, 1992). Thus, the Marshallian districts operate on a satellite basis in relation to the studios. Coe also examines the manner by which “external relationships and linkages” constitute the local labour market in Vancouver’s film industry (2000, p. 79). Intense interpersonal networks are characteristic of the “embodied” nature of production processes within the industry (2000b). Coe’s studies, however, largely focus on producers who co-ordinate capital investment in individual projects. This lacks an analysis of the broader field of labour made up of technicians, labourers, and actors, among others.

Outside of the North American context, a similarly small body of work has arisen around the French film production sector (Boutang, 2003; Corsani & Lazzarato, 2004; Corsani, Lazzarato, & Negri, 1996). This research explores how workers, who have been relegated to the sidelines of an industry that otherwise occupies a central position in France’s cultural sector, might be conceptualized as immaterial and precarious labourers. Immaterial labour is understood as activities
that produce cultural content and merchandise information (Corsani, Lazzarato, & Negri, 1996). Immaterial labour encompasses what is often referred to as “cognitive” labour, in which the worker “cedes” to the employer the whole product/creation of her/his language and knowledge skills” (Foti, 2004a, p. 18). Such a conception of productive work entails activity extending beyond traditionally defined workdays. Both Corsani et. al and Foti suggest that given the reliance on personal relationships to maintain employment, labouring time and free time are increasingly blurred in this conception of labour. This is paralleled by obscured divisions between conception and execution in production. Elaborate co-ordinations of knowledge are required in immaterial production, and this organization is left to the workers. Given the elaborate networks and relationships of co-ordination that fall entirely in the domain of the self-organizing workers, however, immaterial labour provides the necessary foundation for technologically and organizationally savvy workers to begin organizing against the very pressures forcing such conditions of work.

Precarity, in turn, describes the situation of labourers who are dependent on contract work, particularly as it is found in immaterial labour arrangements. Foti describes a precarious worker as “somebody performing flexible, and taylorized, service work” where workers are at the whim of employers, often being “forced to beg and pray to keep one’s job” (2004a, p. 18). In suggesting that their situation constitutes a class, some precarious workers call themselves part of the precariat. Given the corporate desire for “flexible” production arrangements, workers are increasingly hired strictly on “as needed” bases (Boutang, 2003). In situations where neither work nor a social safety net are guarantees, workers are placed in precarious positions where the uncertainty of employment causes heightened anxiety. In France, workers in the cultural industries have turned to precarity as a supplement to the traditional label of “intermittent” worker that has been used in the sector to describe the periodic employment status and frequent bouts of unemployment faced by workers. The primary difference between the two terms is that intermittence is legally defined within the French unemployment insurance program. As unions, employers, and government agencies have agreed to increase the number of hours required to qualify for intermittent benefits in recent years, a growing body of workers have found themselves ineligible for the insurance programs established for their sector, leaving them in precarious work and unemployment situations. The concepts of precarity and immaterial labour are important beyond conceptualizing contemporary labour in the context of academic writing. The strength of these terms in the present context, as discussed later in the article, derives from the fact that workers in the French film sector—in addition to workers in other sectors and other countries—have come to use these concepts to describe their own labour conditions.

One additional element requires mention in relation to immaterial labour and precarity. In recent years, individuals and groups identifying themselves as precarious workers have made links between their own attempts to organize under the banner of “precarity” and the efforts of early-twentieth-century industrial syn-
dicalist movements. In stating that “The precariat is to postindustrialism as the proletariat was to industrialism,” there is recognition of similarities between contemporary precarity movements—at least in Europe—and the effort of the early French syndicalists as well as the Industrial Workers of the World to organize unskilled workers regardless of race in North America beginning in 1905 (Foti, 2004b, p. 27). Perhaps most prominent in the similarities, apart from the broad organizing focus of contemporary movements and the historical IWW, is the manner of collective action required by both. This connection is evidenced in recent worker actions, as discussed later in this article. And recent writing on labour in North America suggests that both labour unions and those who study the unions might have something to learn from these discussions. Kimeldorf (1999) highlights that craft-defined workers are able to maintain “reserve power” or the ability to threaten action to achieve results. Unskilled workers, however, are easily replaceable by employers and must organize on a larger scale. Moreover, they must actualize their “situational power” on a regular basis through strategic timing of direct action in large numbers (p. 16). Tait (2005) is direct in her critique of the North American labour movement for ignoring and actively excluding the working poor and unemployed from the labour union movement. If precarity becomes the focal point of organizing that will renew workers’ movements, whether in communication-based work or otherwise, then the activities of French film workers detailed below warrant further analysis.

French film and the creation of precarity
The origins of precarity in the French audiovisual industry can be traced over the past 50 years. In 1970 the country had only 41% of the studio capacity previously available at the height of studio production in 1947. For much of the 1970s the occupation of the remaining studio space averaged around 50%. Although studio fortunes declined, filmmakers were nonetheless making films, but in settings that were having dramatic impacts upon the industry’s technicians—the bulk of workers who perform behind-the-scenes tasks on films, generally referred to in North America as below-the-line workers. These impacts came about as the result of increased use of on-location shooting, or the movement out of studios into natural settings, which was part of the French New Wave movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Such changes meant the elimination of many traditionally stable jobs for workers in studios, including lighting technicians, set designers, and builders and sound artists, among others. Between 1966 and 1970, the proportion of technician positions in the French film industry fell from 15.3% to 13.9% of the workforce, and studio employees declined from 9.5% to 5.43% of the overall workforce. The Parisian film workforce, as a result, found fewer production-related jobs and, when work was available, more demanding work schedules as production timelines accelerated to avoid prolonged use of external location facilities. Although there are memorable films from the 1970s (Smith, 2005), the period is not recognized as a highly innovative time. It is, in fact, a point where a structural crisis in the industry accelerated.
The structural crisis in the French film industry mirrors the urban crisis experienced by cities across North America and Europe in the 1970s as production began to decentralize and economies became increasingly dependent on post-industrial activities. Throughout this period the workforce underwent a broad transition that widened salary inequalities in Paris and experienced a growth in the lack of employment stability for many workers. Fainstein (2001) notes that between 1970 and 2000 Paris workers witnessed a decline in the “stable working class” and that those employed in the lowest salary ranges witnessed a decrease in their share of stable wages (p. 289). Throughout the period, however, there was no expansion of upper-level positions, suggesting that the region’s workforce saw little of the “professionalization” witnessed in other global city regions of other countries. By 1996, 26.9% of the French workforce worked in part-time, temporary, or freelance work, and this figure increased to 29.2% by 2000 (Foti, 2004b).

Stagnating wages and sector restructuring
The film technicians’ work situation serves as a good illustration of the increasing precarity of the French workforce. Technicians’ wages slowed in growth through the 1980s and stagnated in the 1990s. When adjusted to account for inflation, wages fell between 1995 and 2000. Over this period the sector’s employers dramatically changed the way they engaged individual workers, based on principles of flexibility and reduced costs. Denis Gravouil, secretary-general of French union SNTR-CGT, explains that audiovisual sector production times were reduced and workdays compressed over the same period that salaries fell. Firms such as public broadcaster France 3 computerized their human-resource systems to prevent workers from accumulating 140 consecutive workdays, thus to avoid mandatory permanent hiring through an ongoing contract that would be required by law after achieving such a length of service. “It’s a true precarious management system that is found at the heart of the public service,” explains Gravouil (quoted in Mieszala, 2002-03, p. 23).1

The state of employment is reflected in the unemployment periods experienced by cultural workers. In 1980, only 36% of intermittent workers experienced short periods of unemployment between contracts. More often, compensation would cover long periods of unemployment, averaging 247 days of the year. By 1985, 60% of intermittent workers were experiencing more frequent periods of short unemployment. By 1992, 90% of the sector’s intermittent workers were experiencing sporadic terms of employment, with an increased average number of days collecting social insurance; by this point, the average period of compensation was 294 days over the course of the year (Menger, 1997). Employers increasingly hired workers to cover the short segments of time for which their specific skills were required in the production process. Such human-resource practices were made easier with the computerization of processes, where workers’ hours could be tracked with up-to-the-minute precision and layoffs could be done automatically in co-ordination with meticulously managed production schedules. This meant that some workers might be rehired for the same project at different points,
but left to collect unemployment benefits—if eligible—in between. The state’s unemployment benefits became a default subsidy to a sector.

Actual unemployment benefits for cultural workers in France are different than those for the rest of the workforce. Since 1968 the country has maintained a system of social assistance specific to workers in the entertainment industries, covering workers in film and live performance. Under the program, cultural workers must work approximately 520 hours annually to qualify for unemployment insurance. Referred to specifically as Annexes 8 and 10, these two appendices to the national unemployment insurance program outline benefits specific to entertainment professionals, classified as intermittent workers. This system recognizes the intermittent nature of work in the cultural sector. Attempts to move these two clauses in line with benefits for the rest of the country’s workforce have been the key focal points of worker protests in the industry since their creation. Significant debate exists around the merit of such an insurance program. Some opponents suggest that the program only subsidizes cultural production firms, allowing them to disown responsibility for their workers, while making the cultural sector entirely dependent on state-sanctioned welfare. Many proponents argue that the program allows workers an income independent of individual employers, thus allowing for true “flexibility” in the workforce. These perspectives, however, are generalizations and are further addressed later in the article.

The result of such employment practices and unemployment benefits amidst growing entertainment sectors was the growth of a workforce whose situation can be described as precarious. The number of intermittent workers increased 243% over two decades, from 50,780 in 1980 to 68,744 in 1990 to 123,743 in 2000. Over the same period, the number of individuals who collected unemployment insurance from the regime specific to intermittent workers skyrocketed, from 7,989 in 1980 to 28,940 in 1990 and to approximately 60,000 in 2001. In 2001, 96,500 intermittent cultural workers were eligible to collect from this plan if needed. In 1991 the equivalent of 260 million euros was paid to the 41,038 individuals who received payments under the intermittent unemployment insurance regime specific to intermittent workers. This number rose to 96,500 individuals through the 1990s, who received collectively 838 million euros annually by 2001 (Les intermittents, 2002-03).

Put into perspective, a full 62% of eligible cultural workers collected unemployment insurance in 2001. Meanwhile, 16% of the workforce did not manage to work the number of hours required to be eligible for such compensation. But these figures only account for individuals who consider themselves regular workers in the cultural sector. According to French government figures, in 2001 a total of 362,000 individuals worked at least one paid hour in the cultural industry, most of whom were engaged during summer months, when production is at its highest levels (Amar & Koubi, 2004). Although this larger figure does not necessarily represent the number of people who consider the cultural sector as their primary source of employment, it highlights the significant casual labor requirements of the sector. In fact, 15% of the total number of hours worked by intermit-
tent workers in the sector were by individuals who did not qualify for any social benefits.

Over the same period, 1980 to 2000, the state of production firms came to reflect the state of the work force. By 2000, 70.5% of film-related firms in Paris had four employees or fewer; an additional 17.5% of firms employed between five and nine employees (Scott, 2000a). The small size of firms means that contract workers are brought on as required to work on individual projects. Workers generally divide their time between numerous workplaces, working for a number of contractors in any given year. As a result there now exists a situation where small firms, consisting of a core set of staff numbering fewer than 10 employees, co-ordinate production work. This core is surrounded by workers facing varying degrees of precarity in their employment status. While some will have consistent work, reflecting their skill, experience, and network resources, many others are much closer to the periphery of the industry, securing only seasonal work that often must be complemented with other employment or periods of unemployment. The neo-Marshallian production model discussed earlier is problematic due to its neglect of actual work conditions amidst the increasingly “flexible” models of industry organization.

While the work force restructured around the changing industry organization, technicians found themselves increasingly stratified into levels of artistic control. As already mentioned, the period leading up to 1970 saw a major portion of French film production move out of studios and into natural settings. Such moves took artistic control out of the hands of studio technicians and allocated more aesthetic choice to the director and key artistic positions. This moved the sector further away from collective contributions by all workers and increasingly toward the idea of artistic control consolidated in an “artist.” Throughout this period the technicians effectively lost their role as the institutional memory of film production. By the 1980s, the roles of workers—now even those of the director and other key artistic personnel—were further reduced to specialized skills alongside a few key brand-name artists who could be inserted into production when required.

As Hozic has shown (2001), the role of the producer increased significantly through the 1980s and 1990s as financing had to be cobbled together from a variety of investors, many of whom were external to the film industry. As a result, labour trends were accompanied by significant changes in the financing of film industries, placing cost-control imperatives on the filmmaking. In France, by the end of the 1980s, the industry underwent a significant change in financing as projects moved toward significantly higher budgets. Between 1987 and 1988 alone, the number of films with budgets over 20 million FF increased by 78%. Co-productions, or films financed by more than one country, represented 40% of these “mega-budgets” (Le Technicien du Film et de la Video, 1989). Smaller-budget films were rapidly disappearing in an environment where financing independent features became increasingly difficult.
Labour and discontent in France's cultural work force

Given the dramatic rise in the number of intermittent workers and the amount being paid out through their unemployment insurance program, increased pressure mounted from government and industry bodies to change the intermittents' employment system. Unemployment insurance regimes in France are negotiated between business and labour associations, rather than being structured by the government. In the case of the entertainment industry, which includes film workers, three associations constitute the business side of negotiations and five unions represent labour. In order for an agreement to become government policy, it must be passed by a majority-plus-one vote. Each side represents half of the voting rights.

The five unions are designated as “nationally representative” by the French government (Trade Unions of the World, 2005). Given this status, the five unions act as umbrella organizations, defined largely by political lines, which collectively negotiate national sector agreements with employer organizations. Union membership is not compulsory for workers covered by such agreements. Local or industry unions may affiliate with the nationally representative organization of choice. Workers who do join a union may do so based on political orientation as opposed to craft or industry categories. As a result, the five unions negotiate on behalf of workers regardless of their actual representative status based on membership. This is particularly problematic in the country’s entertainment sector.

Prior to the early 1990s, the five unions demonstrated solidarity at the bargaining table, sharing agreement on the plan. Early in the decade, however, the solidarity ended. The difficulties facing workers came to a head in 1991 when the CGT and SRF unions refused to sign a newly negotiated unemployment scheme after three months of strikes and actions. Three other unions—the CFDT, CGC, and CFTC—signed on to the reforms, effectively implementing the deal across the sector (Intermittents du spectacle, 1991). Although a majority decision approved the agreement, the three signatory unions collectively represented only 10% of the industry workforce, precipitating a decade of acrimonious inter-union relations. In 1999, prior to the last round of negotiations, the Mouvement des entreprises de France (MEDEF), a national business network and stakeholder in all unemployment insurance contract negotiations, announced its intentions to eliminate the “chronic deficit” maintained by the entertainment sector’s unemployment program. In 2002 the three signatory unions ratified an agreement that doubled the required employee contributions to the program and made at least 10% of the current applicants ineligible for aid. The reactions to this agreement were staggering. Union leaders publicly denounced each other and stated opposing intentions for reforming the public system.

Underlying the conflicting negotiating strategies are differing means by which the labour unions conceptualize their roles in relation to the workforce they represent and the government programs they negotiate. In particular, unions supporting reforms to the unemployment insurance program argue that they have responsibilities to maintain a sustainable system. They also claim an obligation to protect the “professional” status of workers in the industry. This involves main-
taining a lower number of skilled workers who are able to work steadily in a scarce labour market. Danielle Rived, secretary-general of the Fédération communication et culture de la CFDT (FTILAC), explained that the system must provide incentive and opportunity for people to work more: “How is there a profession in which one earns more when they work less?” (quoted in Mieszala, 2002-03, p. 20). The solution to this riddle is, according to Rived, a system that puts responsibility upon employers not to take advantage of the system.

Opposing unions viewed their task as protecting the country’s cultural system and worker rights, not the management of professions or the “cleaning up” of government programs. They identified the unemployment insurance program as filling a larger purpose in French society, including the protection of employment benefits for workers that should be considered basic economic and social rights. Others viewed the program as part of the country’s basic cultural policy and said that any difference between payouts and contributions for an unemployment system should be a part of the country’s support of the cultural sector.

Underlying the cultural element, opposing unions argued, was the increasing difficulty workers had in achieving basic coverage in the system because of industry employment standards. SNTR-CGT secretary-general Denis Gravouil explained that production times were reduced and workdays compressed while salaries had fallen (Mieszala, 2002-03). The argument that the union must protect professions within the sector was also problematic for opposing unions. Gravouil argued that individuals have professions, but these professions are divided along class lines. “On one side there is the elite—those who head their trades, who are needed and who are paid well; on the other side, there are the ‘small hands’—the vast majority of people who are accounted for in precarity” (Mieszala, 2002-03, p. 23). Those who do work steadily, Denys Foqueray of the French Union of Interpretive Artists explained, are employed on a seemingly full-time basis under one artistic director, thus earning the titles “permittents” or “intermanents.”

Foqueray rejected arguments that the unemployment system should be central to supporting culture. Rather, he argued, unions should lobby for government support directly to cultural production. But Gravouil argued that cultural workers are increasingly the variable targeted in financial discussions by producers who, in turn, work under pressures from distributors who control the cash flow. Technicians happen to be at the receiving ends of economic imperatives in the industry. As a result, the union must protect workers, not “clean up” a chronically deficient system that would otherwise simply benefit production companies.

Given these positions, the debates between labour unions focused significantly upon their institutional roles in the sector’s regulation. At the same time, a number of workers began to put unions aside. With the fractured union positions and a general feeling of betrayal, a new spirit of resistance began to emerge among intermittent workers. Although in support of the CGT and SRF unions’ refusal to accept concessions, a movement of workers took shape that was independent of union affiliation. This movement’s members defined themselves in relation to their capacity as cultural workers. Although not necessarily unique at
first consideration, this identification as cultural producers depended on the workers’ recognition of their labour as integral to the system in a cognitive sense; not only were their actions at work important, but the creative energy and self-coordination of their networks were an integral part of the industry’s organization. Most important, this recognition of creative potential came through interactions in a variety of activities, some political beyond the realm of individuals’ professional work and reaching back well over a decade, as discussed in the next section.

**New labour responses**
As labour unions disagreed over their roles in managing the sector’s unemployment regime, workers were engaging in a series of actions that contributed to the development of radicalized notions of their labour in the cultural sector. Some of the early public declarations of the emerging conception of cultural labour came in the early 1990s when social movements brought together cultural workers around a series of media-oriented protests. For example, Canal déchaîné, a collective of artists and media workers, was founded during Gulf War protests in 1990. By 1992, when intermittent cultural workers went on strike to protect their social security benefits following the first point of breakdown between unions, Canal déchaîné had defined a conception of creative mental labour. In particular, they identified mental labourers as a distinct section of the workforce that had become specialized over the previous decade of rapid growth in the cultural production sector: “This new layer of ‘workers’ presents radical novelties in relation to the organization of intellectual labour in industrial societies; a novelty that we call mass intellectualism” (Canal déchaîné, 1997).

The collective is careful to warn that mass intellectualism is not unique to the entertainment sector, but a part of an increasingly large number of professions. But the “professions” are comprised of workers in the throes of constant re-organization by the directions of capital; given the lack of continuity in such work, individuals are forced to organize their own work conditions and compete with one another and, as a result, are left in a category of “precarious” labour. Despite the variety of professions and functions these precarious labourers of “mass intellectualism” perform, Canal déchaîné explains that communication workers create cultural products that help define and materialize identities, tastes, ways of life, imaginations, and sensibilities for the sole purpose of consumption. As such, “mass intellectualism does not only produce the cultural product or merchandise, but also and simultaneously the public or consumer” (Canal déchaîné, 1997). Mass intellectualism is a continuously changing terrain in which the mental labourer is constantly producing the cultural product as well as the need to consume by defining the lifestyle of the consumer.

It is this recognition of mass intellectualism that has defined the movement of intermittent and precarious workers in Paris since the early 1990s. Canal déchaîné provides an example of cognitive workers merging their labour with a political outlook that spans further than the sector in which they work. The collective further questions: “This double process of concentration/integration of cultural industries and of cultural colonization by the economic disrupts not only our pro-

...
essions, but also the publics, their forms of reception, the aesthetic norms of pro-
duction, forms of distribution, etc. Can we thus limit our strategy to the defence of
our professions?” (Canal déchaîné, 1997). As a result, Canal déchaîné defines its
task as using the media and their creative capacities to break down distinctions
between the intellectual and the popular. They make clear that in their roles as cul-
tural workers, unless they are conscious of their contributions to the construction
of consumption and taste, they will only be contributors to the “brain pollution”
that constitutes commercial media.

Whether other intermittent workers initially shared Canal déchaîné’s inten-
tions is not certain. But in 1992, the work force staged a significant demonstration
of force by organizing a strike in response to the renegotiations of Annexes 8 and
10. The strike focused specifically on the theatre-oriented Festival d’Avignon,
where direct actions by workers forced the cancellation of various portions of the
festival. The strike was an important turning point in the industry’s history, par-
ticularly given the strategies employed by striking workers. By focusing on the
Festival d’Avignon, the workers went beyond simply disrupting the regular func-
tions of their workplaces. The festival is a prestigious cultural event in France,
where theatre productions are staged for hundreds of thousands of audience
members over the course of three weeks. Festivals, such as that of Avignon, not
only showcase cultural works, but are also used to produce prestige that translates
into cultural capital. The Festival d’Avignon signifies, in one sense, the elitist
nature of cultural production. Scarpetta (2004) explains that the festival itself
plays a role other than celebrating or exploring the culture of local inhabitants; the
idea of attracting international attention with “provincial culture” is somewhat
absurd. But, according to Scarpetta, a crucial question rests on the dominant
understanding of cultural production and the pending success of intermittent
movements: “Who, in France, still supports a sufficiently strong conception of
culture to justify that it provides a public service?” (Scarpetta, 2004). In other
words, the challenge to intermittent workers is to justify that cultural labour is
important beyond simply providing an economic benefit to a municipality hoping
to increase its tourism. This is the challenge posed to intermittent workers in
France who need public support, but also solidarity with the workers of “mass
intellectualism” across other sectors. Through the 1990s the challenges of concep-
tualizing cultural labour were not necessarily clarified by intermittent workers,
but they became a focal point in the political struggles around the liberalization of
markets and the transfer of cultural and employment policy from the state to the
private sector.

The tension between market demands upon workers and their own desire to
explore their creative interests came to define how many workers envisioned their
role in relation to social security benefits, the workplace, and their roles as activ-
ists. Through the 1990s workers began organizing beyond the confines of their
unions. Regional collectives of workers began approaching issues facing the
larger cultural work force. Laurent Figuière from the cultural workers movement
Coordination lyonnaise des professionnels du spectacle explained in 1997 that as
cultural workers, he and his colleagues “want to live their professions.” In fact, as
the industry came to rely on the unemployment system as a default subsidy, many
workers saw it as an independent funding opportunity, allowing them to work
independently when not otherwise employed. As such, being unemployed did not
mean a lack of creative work for many individuals. Figuière explained, “In the
movement, there is a subjective conscience, implicit in the practice of our profes-
sions, that manifests itself in the fact that we are conscious of the necessity to have
a revenue—disconnected from salary—because we exist and produce for our-
selves and for others, and not to live and work for an employer or for a finality that
places us exterior [to our labour]” (Figuière, 2001). Figuière does not see full
employment as a viable option in contemporary cultural production, if in any
industry. It is difficult to differentiate between employers and employees in many
circumstances, argues Figuière, where the individual worker is responsible for co-
ordinating their own work on an independent basis. There is no standard industry
model. The task of organizing production falls on individual workers, based on
their socio-economic networks of contacts and relationships. And, he asserts, the
cultural sector’s organizational model is becoming common among other sectors
as well. But it is within these new labour and production networks that the possi-
bility for resistance may originate.

In addition to the previously mentioned 1992 strike, intermittent workers
organized strikes in 1996 to protect their social insurance plan and again in 2000
around the negotiations of their work contract and wages. Two years later, one of
the largest mobilizations of intermittent workers began, shutting down production
in Paris as well as festivals across the country over an ongoing period, to protest
pending changes to their unemployment insurance plan. The organization of such
activities increasingly took place outside the realm of union activities—and
sometimes in direct opposition to union activities. The increasingly large scope of
labour and potential workers’ activity became the points many workers came to
recognize as separating themselves from union representatives in the 1990s.

**New labour formations**

Amidst labour unions’ debates over social insurance reform and various contracts,
workers in the entertainment sector boosted their own mobilizing efforts. This
mobilization was largely the result of a growing discontent between unions and
workers within the industry and an increasingly active and politicized cultural
work force. Leading into contract negotiations in 1999 and a pending strike there-
after, a group of 30 intermittent workers who were not members of a union
formed their own action committee to voice their concerns (Caradec & Conter,
2000). The committee surveyed 700 intermittent workers and gained observer
status in negotiations, given that unions did not view their activities as a threat to
their jurisdiction. The association soon grew to 450 members. Although organi-
zers felt they had to play “the usual union game,” they felt their presence in
negotiations forced both sides to participate with the intention of securing an
agreement.
Worker organizing went beyond efforts to keep unions accountable, however. When the new social insurance package was signed in June 2003, this time with no additional worker organizations present, workers went on strike in protest against a regime that doubled their mandatory contributions to the system while reducing their ability to access unemployment insurance. Beginning on July 8, to coincide with the opening of the Festival d’Avignon, workers effectively shut down the French audiovisual and theatre sectors through sporadic strikes, disruption of live theatre performances, blockades around contractor film production trucks, and the cancellation of festivals due to withheld labour across the country (Caradec, 2003). It was during these protests that key developments in the workers’ movement occurred.

In late June and early July, workers began to organize outside the realm of their unions and under the category of “intermittent and precarious” workers. A group of workers started the Coordination des intermittents et précaires d’Ile de France (CIP-IDF) to organize protests, research issues, and provide a common point of contact for workers in the industry. The establishment of the CIP-IDF marked a re-classification of workers’ recognition of their labour in the market system. Workers now defined themselves by the way they were employed (intermittent and precarious) and by a geographic region (the region of Paris) rather than by their sector or industry, providing a new opportunity to build a movement that involved recruiting workers from across the service industries. In a newfound solidarity, the workers recognized that their conditions of employment aligned closely with workers in industries reliant on de-skilled, “flexible” labour arrangements. They noted in public statements, beginning after an occupation of French daily newspaper Le Monde’s offices, “That which we are defending, we are defending for everyone” (Coordination des intermittents et précaires d’Ile de France, 2003).

In a text read by intermittent cultural worker Olivier Derousseau during Jean-Luc Godard’s press conference at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, the intermittent workers explained how they conceptualized their struggle in relation to other workers that began the previous summer: “Since June 2003, we have called ourselves intermittent and precarious workers rather than artists and technicians. Why? Because our practices cannot be named according to these sometimes antagonistic divisions and categories. We are a co-ordination” (Derousseau, 2004). Derousseau points to the fact that precarious employment and intermittent work are phenomena that extend far beyond the cultural industries and touch people in a multitude of different sectors. More important, however, is that the intermittent film workers recognized that in order to succeed in achieving their own objectives, they must broaden their base of action. No longer would it be sufficient to mobilize based on the type of work performed. Rather, intermittent workers proposed a project based on mobilizing around the organization of labour across the entire market economy. Cultural workers began to forge alliances with precarious workers at fast food chains, supermarkets, and retail stores, often
holding impromptu protests and even parties in the workplaces of their new allies to draw attention to work conditions faced by an increasing number of people.

Such strategies were further developed in intermittent workers’ struggles in their own sector. Following government approval of the new agreement on social insurance for intermittent workers on August 7, 2003, workers and unions opposing the agreement started a series of protests that further paralyzed the cultural sector (Drouhaud, 2003). The entertainment advocacy wing of the CGT union leafleted theatre patrons leaving their shows at cinemas in the Opera district of Paris. The union was now calling for a strike at all places of work in the industry, making a link to the cinema itself as a place of production. Around the same time, the Collectif Bellaciao, a French-Italian leftist political activist group, interrupted a film première at the Gaumont cinemas near the Paris Opera. While occupying the theatre, members of the collective provided audience members with background material on the intermittent workers’ strike. The collective was already concerned with issues around cinema, having started a project called “For another cinema” in April 2003. This involved public cinema exhibitions showcasing non-commercial productions, organized as part of the 2003 European Social Forum. The collective identified “neo-liberal globalization” as a key threat to creators and workers and became a signatory to statements and co-organizer of actions taken by intermittent cultural workers in the months following the 2003 strike.

In October 2003, the CIP-IDF organized a week of action at the cinemas and in the studios of Paris’ cultural industries. Under the name “Black screens for culture,” intermittent workers visited three multiplex cinemas in Paris, wrapping ticket booths in plastic and allowing audiences free access to films for part of the day (Villevet & Bobeau, 2003). Groups of intermittent workers raided live television broadcasts. One raid included a broadcast from the famous Moulin Rouge club, where protesters managed to broadcast a tape for one minute asking spectators to “Turn off your televisions.” At the end of the week, a group of intermittent workers interrupted the live broadcast of the top-rated reality television show Star Academy, unfurling a banner across the stage reading “Turn off your televisions” and providing a commentary on the situation of intermittent workers. Such actions invited audiences to participate in the strikes but also reminded spectators that culture is not only a screen, but a way of life. In December, groups of protesters interrupted two live television news broadcasts where representatives read statements about the state of intermittent work in the country while surrounded by dozens of other intermittent and precarious workers holding signs protesting the treatment of precarious workers.

Over the first few days of 2004, French intermittent workers occupied the French Academy of the Arts in Rome with the help of Italian activists facing similar struggles in their own local context. In February, intermittent workers were front and centre at the French film awards, the César, where award presenters and recipients used their air time to denounce the social security changes in the sector and to call for government action (Leclerc, 2004). In addition to these
actions, workers occupied the offices of the French Ministry of Culture, UNIDEC (the administrative agency for unemployment insurance), MEDEF, and even the CFTD. Additional protests attracted media attention in front of prominent monuments that symbolize Parisian and French identity, such as the Arc de Triomphe. Intermittent and precarious activists co-ordinated and participated in a new Euro Mayday in cities across Europe. Organizers identified the need to infuse celebration into the international Labour Day while drawing attention to the precarious nature of employment—thus putting forth a new “mayday” call for the contemporary worker. In their protests, intermittent workers used sites of cultural production—in the studio, in government policy offices, and on the streets of their mythologized, tourist-oriented city—to leverage their concerns and attract public attention.

Conclusion: Mobilization and the current of production beyond cultural industries

In discussing the notion of professions in the contemporary city, Baudouin (2004) argues that cities are becoming increasingly important regulators of the flows of capital in a market system increasingly reliant on the flexibility and speed of electronic transactions. The film and visual industries are prime examples, among many others, of this trend. Corsani & Lazzarato point to the process of establishing flexible regimes of accumulation where neo-liberal and neo-socialist governments “manufacture a deficit and use the populations as the variable of adjustment” (Corsani & Lazzarato, 2004). The flexibility achieved, however, is the means by which the French intermittent workers have launched their campaign. While flexibility is the key point of oppression against labourers, Corsani & Lazzarato argue that it is also the weak point of capitalism and, thus, the most appropriate point of attack. By taking back control of their mobility, the intermittent movement does not question the relationship between employment and unemployment, but demonstrates the nature of contemporary, systemic, flexible unemployment.

But what differentiates the city in visual industries is the fact that the visual cityscape of a given location now plays as important a function as the productive capacities within each city for the purpose of material production of goods and services. Within this milieu, workers are coming under pressure to provide “flexible” services in the form of their labour and self-co-ordinating functions. But, as Baudouin points out, the precarious nature of employment in this system may, in fact, be a motivating factor behind a new form of labour organizing; that is, labour movements are becoming inter-professional and inter-territorial (Baudouin, 2004). This might be true, in part, as witnessed in the Paris intermittent workers attempting to categorize their labour in relation to other precarious workers in the services industries. But the assertion also highlights tensions that exist between the local and global in regard to inter-territorial movements. In particular, as Pendakur (1998) has pointed out, work forces are often competing against each other to attract production to their locales. As such, inter-territorial encounters
between labourers are often taking place on a competitive rather than a cooperative basis, at least in an international context.

It is on the basis of flexibility or, more appropriately, precarity, that intermittent workers in Paris began defining their actions. But taking action, for example, in the form of a strike was not as simple as withdrawing labour. For many workers, the workplace could not be defined easily or with any clarity and, despite being covered by a collective agreement, resembled the situation of self-employed workers, dependent on their own networks of industry colleagues. These networks often spanned workers’ urban locations, for their places of work constantly changed, depending on the project in which they were engaged. Thus, the conception of cultural labour being developed through the 1990s promoted a new understanding of how workers might enact a movement within the cultural and urban environments in which they worked. Indeed, as the city’s space and cultural symbols became the sites of post-industrial production and consumption, they also became the sites of resistance for a new movement of cultural workers.

The direct actions taken by these workers were based on notions of labour no longer defined by industry, but increasingly by conditions and location of work. Although still focusing on their own work contracts, the new co-ordination allowed workers to create alliances with other social movements focused on unemployed and undocumented workers. Cultural workers also used their mobilization to support unskilled workers, such as striking employees of a Virgin store in January 2006. The organization outside of their sector and use of “situational power” to bring attention to their state in labour makes a strong case for relating current struggles to past syndicalist resistance movements. As such, their precariat syndicalism marks an important response to theories of flexibility and “entrepreneurial labour,” particularly as employed in studies of the North American cultural sector. As referred to earlier in Tait’s work (2005), North American labour unions could use some insight into organizing and moving beyond the pure-and-simple unionism model that has marked their activities for the better part of 50 years. If European workers, including the French intermittent and precarious activists, are able to continue to organize skilled and unskilled labourers; enact strategic, targeted direct actions; and co-ordinate workers across larger political territory, the precariat may well be the contemporary equivalent to industrial syndicalism movements of the past century.

Note
1. All translations from French by the author.

References


