

David Del Testa, Department of History, Bucknell University

## Forgotten Stories of Deviance: Vietnam's Colonial-era Railroad Workers and the Construction of a Revolutionary Heritage

For multiple reasons, it would be fair to anticipate that Vietnamese historians would treat colonial Indochina's revolutionary railroad workers as important contributors to the Vietnamese revolution. Most importantly, these railroad workers composed the most important element of a classic working class, of which there were precious few in colonial Indochina prior to World War II. Second, many railroad workers participated vigorously in the 1937 general railroad strike, in which railroad workers insisted in vain on the application of the labor and social reforms of the Popular Front in Indochina. Finally, a relatively important number of former railroad workers went on to become important political and especially military leaders during the First Indochina War and beyond. However, with some notable exceptions, these workers received hardly any attention at all within the larger discussion of the colonial period of the Vietnamese Revolution. Focusing on the 1937 strike but drawing information from the participation of railroad workers in the 1905 anti-railroad movement in Vinh and the 1930-31 Nghe-Tinh Soviets, this paper will compare and contrast the representations of railroad workers in Vietnamese scholarship and suggest some historiographic and political reasons why Vietnamese scholars have frequently ignored the upwards of 40,000 or so railroad workers. It suggests that a combination of historical and more recent intellectual trends have not created space for railroad workers because of their initially ambiguous interest in revolutionary activity and their colonial-era alignment with the southern as opposed to the northern communist movement. Likewise, their proletarianization in the 1950s flattened the contours of a revolutionary tradition in which local initiatives rather than complete subservience to a political hierarchy.

Using railroad workers as an example, this paper explores the historiographic treatment of workers in the context of the Vietnamese Revolution and why Vietnamese historians have neglected to discuss their contributions to the revolution.