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“Proletarian” Solidarity inside the Colonial State: Franco-Vietnamese Civil Service Unionism, 1935-1940 and 1947-1950

This paper explores the history of integrated Franco-Vietnamese government employee union federations during their two periods of activity: first, under the Popular Front and immediately afterward (1935-1940); second, during the first three years of the Franco-Viet Minh War (1947-1950). The Popular Front era saw the rise of the Association Générale des Fonctionnaires et Agents Locaux de l'Indochine (AGFALI). Organized by and at first limited to French civil servants (fonctionnaires), the AGFALI published a weekly newspaper, recruited thousands of members, and achieved three markers of progress. First, it coaxed the Governor General into granting it legal union status, making it the first state-recognized union in Việt Nam. Second, it affiliated with the French Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the central organization of the French labor movement. This affiliation was consonant with AGFALI rhetoric that identified civil servants as “proletarians,” and with the political orientation of French civil servants in Indochina toward the Left. Third, the AGFALI opened its membership to Vietnamese civil servants. This opening ended the longstanding segregation of French and Vietnamese occupational associations. Dissolved and proscribed by the Decoux regime, the remnants of the AGFALI re-emerged in August 1947 as the Fédération des Syndicats de Fonctionnaires en Indochine (FSFI). The FSFI not only brought French and Vietnamese civil servants together again, but took more militant action than had the earlier federation. In 1949 the FSFI threatened several general strikes and carried out warning strikes before winning concessions. The federation also aligned itself with Force Ouvrière, the anti-Communist breakaway faction of the CGT. The FSFI represents a continuation of pre-war Franco-Vietnamese solidarity and an alternative presence within the post-1945 colonial state. The fact of colonial civil service unionism, previously unknown to scholarship, challenges a number of received ideas about colonial and wartime Việt Nam. It problematizes widespread notions about the social position of colonial civil servants. French (but also Vietnamese) civil servants have been identified by historians as “bourgeois.” But the apparently self-evident embourgeoisement of civil servants is complicated by their own identification as “proletarians.” Such identification was matched by civil servants’ claims about their low wages; the idea that a civil service job in Indochina offered wealth and privilege was decried by unionists as a “colonial mirage.” Undoubtedly, colonial work did enable the upward mobility of failed Europeans through a racist system that inflated their social status and economic value, but the transition was far from self-evident and their privileges appear not to have been as important as we have been led to believe. Parallel to their image as “bourgeois,” both French and Vietnamese civil servants have been stereotyped, even by contemporaries, as corrupt, self-centered, and right-wing. A rich history of left activism by civil servants reveals a more complicated reality.

The emergence of civil service unionism in the late 1930s shows that during the Popular Front the colonial state faced challenges not only from a well-known private-sector strike wave and the increased agitation of the Vietnamese left, but also by organized dissent within its own ranks. In particular, it raises questions about the local politics around the failure of Popular Front politics in the colonial administration, notably the failure to purge the upper administration.

The FSFI's disturbance of the state functioning during the Franco-Viet Minh War likewise complicates our picture of the late-colonial wartime state.

Civil service unionism in Việt Nam highlights another commonly overlooked phenomenon: the presence of a French political left more influential than has been recognized. Civil servants, active also in the Socialist Party, the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, in Masonic lodges, and in journalism, were the mainstay of this colonial left. By casting off segregation and forming a common organization with Vietnamese civil servants, the AGFALI's French founders went beyond the largely rhetorical gestures of these groups.

The fact of organized employee solidarity among French civil servants alone upsets assumptions about colonialism wherein colonizers are imagined to form an absolute bloc pitted against the colonized. This paper thus enlarges our understanding of the social and political dynamics of French society in Indochina. Its revelation of employee solidarity across the ethnic divide and within the very ranks of the colonial state likewise suggests the need for a more nuanced picture of Franco-Vietnamese colonial relationships. In sum, the paper reveals the existence of social and political phenomena that do not fit within established historiographical paradigms.

My paper fits into the conference's topical and theoretical interests in no less than six ways.

First, it challenges scholarship that "privileges the perspectives, interests, and actions of a central state" by breaking down assumptions of the state's coherence and singularity. Most narratives of colonialism in Indochina present the state as a monolithic force colored only by the personalities of its top directors. This paper provides an alternative picture of a colonial state fragmented by the ongoing presence of inter-hierarchical conflict within its ranks. It also challenges assumptions of an inexorable divide between French and Vietnamese by highlighting an example of Franco-Vietnamese collective activity, both within, and against, the colonial state.

The second way the paper fits is by contesting these received ideas through an exploration of "social identities and political organizations beyond those that so far have been paradigmatically privileged." The civil service unionism I investigate is completely off the map of existing historiography, which has not only treated the colonial state as monolithic but also the labor movement as entirely Vietnamese. The manifestations of conflict within the state and the examples of solidarity between French and Vietnamese shown by this paper are therefore unexpected. The paper reveals not only unexplored political organizations (unions), but the social identifications that both enabled and were created by the unionization of state employees; the fact that many colonial functionaries envisioned themselves as "proletarians" is strikingly incongruous in the context of existing historical scholarship that primarily categorizes state functionaries as "bourgeois."

The paper contributes, third, to "social and intellectual histories that illuminate mentalités, or modes of thinking and being in the modernizing colonial world" by showing how imaginaries of class developed among the French and Vietnamese who carried out the orders of the colonial state, as well as how their thinking produced and was produced by the broader context of hierarchical (including colonial) relationships inside the state in both Indochina and metropolitan France.

Fourth, the paper "investigate[s] the symbolic order and semantics of colonial power" by analyzing the rhetoric of colonial state-sector

unionism. French employees leveraged their wage demands by appealing to the perceived need to maintain white “prestige,” while their Vietnamese co-workers emphasized that low wages threatened the image they provided as examples of the successful assimilation of French culture.

Fifth, the paper will “problematize teleologies of 1945” by showing how the complex French-Vietnamese colonial relationships revealed in the story of state-sector unionism before 1945 continued through the late 1940s via its successor organization, the Fédération des Syndicats de Fonctionnaires en Indochine (FSFI).

Lastly, the paper engages with the conference’s interest in Việt Nam’s south by exploring unknown aspects of the French-run civilian state based in Cochinchina during the Franco-Viet Minh war in the late 1940s.