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Women and Factional Politics in a Teachers' Union¹

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Introduction

The Fédération de l'Education nationale (FEN) is the umbrella organization in France which joins forty-five national unions of employees in the field of education (teaching, research and culture). It has more than 550,000 members. Formed after World War II, it still bears the after-effects of the divisions at that time. As one of the dominant actors in educational policy and union activity in France, its practices and stances on the status of women are important to consider.

The FEN is a union the majority of whose membership is feminine but which is masculine in leadership. This characteristic of male dominance is certainly not special to the FEN. A more unusual aspect of this union federation is that its functions (voting, policy, electing the leadership, etc.) are performed by *tendances* (factions), officially legitimated by the conventions of union life.²

In this article we shall argue that the imperatives of factional politics determine the FEN's position on women. We begin with a description of the views of factional representatives on the status of women; we describe the debate about how to structure union deliberations and actions on the status of women; we contrast with these "elite" statements the analysis of rank and file women members as expressed in a FEN questionnaire. We see the FEN's Federal Day on Women as an attempt by all factions to reaffirm their positions by involving more women in their visions of society, at the same time allowing a certain vetting of specific frustrations.³

The interplay of factional politics means that the dominant group does not want to change the status quo and therefore does not want to adjust in a major way its philosophy or practices to the new demands of women. Its rivals see women's issues as one more point of attack on the majority faction, and propose different visions of women's role in the union and society, promoting these visions with the idea of revised structures for the FEN. The concrete interests of rankand-file women members in this intra-union struggle seem sometimes lost from view.

The "ruling faction" is "Unité, indépendance et démocratie" (UID). The "official opposition" is "Unité et action" (UA). "If UID is generally characterized as socialist, or socializing, UA is characterized as communist, or communizing."⁴ There are three other tiny but sometimes vocal opposition factions: "Ecole émancipée" (EE), "Front unique ouvrier" (FUO) and "Education et Autogestion"(EA). These three factions in North American terms would be considered as varieties of Marxist-Leninism.

The vote of "orientation," which gives the direction of policy, and strategies of action and negotiation until the next Congress, indicates the relative strength of each faction at the 1980 Congress.⁵

UID	58.34%
UA	31.83%
EE-EA	6.43%
FUO	3.06%

Discussion of the status of women and how to deal with the issue took place in Congresses and other union structures as a regular but small part of normal business, until increasing interest and pressure led to the distribution of two questionnaires by the Federal Bureau and a Federal Day on Women in May 1980.

I

The first part of this article draws together views from representatives for each of the three factions (UID, UA and EE) which have made declarations on the status of women. It is the background for our theme that factional politics determine the FEN's position on women. Because we have remained faithful to the language expressing these views, the factions' positions may appear unclear, or garrulous. The factions' statements on women's status are influenced by larger considerations of factional infighting so that the development of a coherent policy on the status of women suffers.

UID'S position is that the status of women members of the FEN is due to the general condition of women in society. It is the capitalist system which has perpetuated the entrenched discrimination; economic and social structures must be changed. Legal, administrative and other discrimination must be abolished, and educational, cultural, social, legislative and political practices must evolve toward equal status for men and women. Demands for improved social services such as the reduction of work time, better transport, an improved financial situation for workers and more collective services, will lead toward this new societal arrangement. A united fight of men and women will abolish stereotyped images of woman and give her the right to work, the right to disposition of her body and other rights. UID insists that with the exception of maternity, women should not be burdened with any specific functions, that there should be a redistribution of those functions which delineate separate roles for men and women, and that the services which would change sex-stereotyped roles - daycare, for example - are not "women's questions" but the equal concern and responsibility of men. Education will lead to a sharing of tasks within the family.

UA's rhetoric is more radical. It considers women to be the victims of a society of exploitation, females to be a "proletariat" under men, both as members of the salaried class and in the family. The current crisis of capitalism accentuates even further the oppression of women. Therefore, structures must be changed; consciousness will not be changed through education but through such structural transformations as will give improved purchasing power, better employment and training, and real liberty. Women's demands must not be piece by piece, or occasional, but based in a drive for complete social identity, parental rights, and equality in professional and social life. Women need real equality in judicial and social security measures. While making global demands, UA asserts that no partial improvement should be refused. Women's demands interest men equally but since women are especially disadvantaged they require special measures to facilitate access to salaried work. UA warns, however, that government's attempts at cooptation must be rebuffed. UA sees its allies in women's organizations which share UA's vision of the class struggle. On the other hand, it refutes the idea of a classless sorority of women, and warns against a navel-gazing women's movement, individual "guilt trips," and attempts to set women off against men.

EE denounces capitalism in general for its violence against workers whether in the form of exploitation, state violence, torture or genocide. The FEN should therefore support the exploited, including women, in their own collective and revolutionary violence against the oppressor. This would be achieved by a political and union fight leading to a radical change of society. EE refuses mere rearrangements within capitalism which a change of consciousness, or one or two reforms represents. EE also denounces patriarchal structures. Socialism and feminism are inseparable and patriarchal structures must be changed. While women and men should not be placed in opposition to each other, women's specific oppression must be recognized. EE singles out the educational system for criticism because it teaches the dominant masculine ideology, and the family because it maintains patriarchy and capitalist society. In EE's new society the contradictions between "public" and "private" would fall with the right of women to work and thus escape the ghetto of the "private" world. This right to work is of course essential for the emancipation of all workers. Because this is a global struggle, workers must resist the government's attempt to coopt it with reformist strategy. The autonomous women's movement is a vital part of the struggle.

In these three sets of statements about the status of women the confrontation is not posed in terms of a sexist (male-dominated) union coming to grips with feminism or even the concrete complaints which, we will see later, are voiced by the union's own women members. Instead the highly theoretical language and a few vague policies suggest that the basic philosophical positions of each faction are being defended through the intermediary issue of the problems of women.

Π

These ideological statements about women's position are related to a more concrete question of how the FEN should organize its discussions and actions. The debate involves whether the FEN should establish within it separate, specific structures, *commissions-femmes* (caucuses on women), to consider philosophy and action on women's questions.

UID consistently refused specific structures to deal with issues particularly affecting women. It argued that the women's struggle must not be isolated from the demands of all workers through separate structures. Separate structures could create opposition between workers. The problems of women. like those of all workers, should continue to be treated inclusively in the FEN's major policy statements. For example the 1978 policy specified that apart from the specific problems linked to maternity and the care of young children, women's working conditions can be improved by the satisfaction of general demands and the development of social services, and that it would be an error to isolate women's demands or to create separate structures.

UA proposed the formation of commissions on women's status at the national level of the FEN. At the departmental section level, and in the national member unions which it dominates, it has already formed such caucuses. While agreeing that women's problems must not be isolated from the general framework of union demands, UA argued that one cannot integrate these problems without a specific in-depth study. Concern for the status of women could only be made permanent through a structural commitment of the FEN and its members. The transformation of attitudes brought about by learning respect for women would also bring respect for others. Therefore this would not be a divisional or marginal effort. In any case, caucuses on women would involve male and female unionists as equals.

EE prescribed commissions-femmes as a stage in a lengthy political and union struggle towards relieving the oppression of women. Such caucuses after study would develop policy concerning the conditions of women workers in the educational system and integrate this perspective in the general union struggle. Women must organize amongst themselves, even in exclusively female groups, although commissionsfemmes in the FEN would be open to both men and women. They must analyze the manner in which capitalism has exploited the fact that women reproduce the work force. An autonomous movement of women is an indispensible step towards women's participation in the workers' socialist revolution.

The positions of each faction are embellished with jibes at the opposition wherever possible. In other words they present a picture of factional "infighting" underlying apparently pure motives for the ideologies and related structural suggestions concerning women. UID rebuffed accusations that it was not preoccupying itself sufficiently with the problems of women, with the counter-accusation that such attacks were anti-FEN. A UID leader exhorted UID partisans not to let the rival factions, that is UA and EE, profit from the women's question at UID's expense. UA, in its support of specific structures for women, spent less time describing the philosophy and functioning of such structures than it did in attacking UID for refusing them. UA also said EE's partiality to the autonomous women's movement was "marginalizing" (just as UA, in UID's eyes, would marginalize women with specific structures). EE attacked both UA and UID in terms that reflect factional politics. It attributed a failed effort at collaboration among grass roots EE and UA activists to opportunistic interference by the UA leader and specialist on women. EE called UA's orientation on women sectarian and bureaucratic, and suggested that UA is either using this policy as windowdressing or is afraid that women's groups are manipulated by the leftists and the Parti socialiste. EE warned UID that if it continued to block the formation of *commissions-femmes*, grass roots unionists would force them into use, and those women and EE would know how to use them.

This debate over structures is largely undertaken by male leaders and is part of the "male game" of politics in this sense. We suggest that the women's movement in France as in North America should be less preoccupied with which structure would exercise the most power, and more concerned with how to allow women to express their concerns and experiences.

The leaders of each faction view the question of specific structures in terms of their positions of power. UID is the dominant faction, for whom a challenge from any independent structure within the FEN amounts to a reduction of UID's power. UID is also the faction with the control of the most heavily female union, SNI (elementary school teachers) and with the most to lose for its male leaders if any women's caucuses were to demand quotas or affirmative action to give a more just proportion of power to women.

To gain more power UA must do everything it can to undermine UID's dominance in the structure of the FEN. The workers' union CGT (Confédération générale du travail) to which many of UA's members would have preferred to be affiliated, has women's structures which UA would like to copy. While in the CGT the women's structures are expressly favoured by the leadership,

Atlantis

for UA in the FEN, women's structures would be a way of eroding the leadership's power. EE similarly could use specific women's structures for wearing down the UID majority's force; EE does not have enough supporters in the FEN to do this through voting strength, but makes full use of its prerogatives in debate. It also seeks an ally in the women's movement, as a thorn in the side of UID.

III

The factions' positions on specific structures, like their general definitions of the problems of women, are enunciated by union leaders. Our analysis so far has been largely based on speeches at congresses and statements by these leaders in union magazines, representing an elite of the factions. We also had access to questionnaire responses which included a section on "Women and Union Organizations." The questionnaire was formulated by a working group at the FEN federal level in preparation for a Federal Day on Women in May 1980. The questionnaire was completed by interested members at departmental level meetings, who would generally not be classified as belonging to the elite level of the union. (The department is the basic territorial administrative division in France, which is also reflected in the union organization.)

The questionnaire and its responses do not lend themselves to statistical analysis.⁶ However certain common elements emerge clearly in the responses. The responses to the theme "Women and Union Organization" can be analyzed as presenting four broad categories of problems: women's double day, the related problems of sharing responsibility by a couple, taboos blocking women's activism and union practices which render women's participation difficult.

The major obstacle to women's activism is considered to be the double day, which is estimated by the participants of one departmental union to be an additional 20 hours a week, added to the 40 hour professional week. The motherchild relationship is part of this problem of a double day: even with the evolution of consciousness and structures, pregnancies and the fatigue of caring for infants place women in a position of dependence. Other departmental unions expand this explanation of women's non-participation by pointing to women's desire to preserve a good family life.

Related to this question of women's double day is the problem of sharing of tasks by a couple. Here the approaches were somewhat divergent. There was a feeling expressed by one section's representatives that individual efforts towards sharing of tasks by a couple do not change society. This was reiterated in another statement that the defence of the general demands of women must come before we can expect much change in individual patterns of living.

The more individualistic approach is seen in a suggestion that the sharing of tasks in the family be encouraged by an open letter and a brochure to male and female teachers suggesting that they analyze their own behavior. Another section's members considered that the "revolution" had to be undertaken at the personal level for every woman, in terms of daily living, in her relationships to her husband, children and colleagues. Another departmental section commented on the link between women's activism and their family and social milieu. In particular, where couples do share tasks, allowing the woman to be an activist, they may meet the disapproval of their larger family circles.

This leads us to the third category discernible in the obstacles to women's activism, the whole range of attitudes about women's role. Women both feel guilty and are made to feel guilty if they take away time from their families for union activism. Their relationships with their male colleagues in the work place are analyzed by one FEN department union as the expression of "phallocracy"; rather than being marked by comradeship, these relations are always marked by courtesy.

Various opinions are expressed about the problems of women speaking in public: people think more often of the appearance of a female speaker than of the content of her contribution; women who are socially involved are often perceived as presumptuous, sometimes even abnormal and have difficulty in being accepted; women have difficulty adopting the union discourse monopolized by men; they hesitate more, are less listened to and more easily interrupted. One explanation of women asking for more union education than men is that women do not dare to speak publicly without being prepared and that they have scruples about speaking about things they do not know or do not know well.

This is reiterated by other questionnaire responses, from departmental sections, which add that while a man is judged by his speech, a woman is also judged by her appearance; people tend to take a woman less seriously than a man. Another union added that women hesitate to distinguish themselves in union activity and calculate more carefully because they are more vulnerable to the boss than their generally more specialized and less easily replaced male comrades.

One response to the questionnaire ran counter to this trend of analysis, asserting that the problems related to public speaking and the running of a meeting disappear progressively once women are familiar with a dossier, defend it and present the demands. Moreover, any beginning activist, whether in the political, union or associational domaine, has these problems. Two other responses from departmental sections also disavowed responsibility, claiming that women do not seem to be rejected, a large number do not want responsibilities, and women have to want to prove themselves. Another response put it that women must be convinced that they are capable of undertaking the same responsibilities as men. Two departmental sections responded by theorizing about the taboos we are discussing here: that men are viewed as leading the public life and women the private life, that activism is largely a male fact, particularly in the fights for political power, and women's activism is for charity.

The discussion of the obstacles to women's activism arising from attitudes and practices of daily life leads to a final category, union practices. Most of the analysis was on a very concrete level: the need for child care facilities, particularly during union education sessions; the need for other collective facilities, the need for union education during work time, and in particular union meetings during work time (rather than at the hours when women are traditionally preparing meals or on Wednesdays when many children are off school). One departmental union specified that there should be a membership meeting in the institutions on women's problems. However, the idea that time for activism for women be taken from work time was, in the eves of one national union, reactionary and reproductive of traditional models. The implication of such an idea is that raising the children and doing the housework is the woman's responsibility alone, and that she therefore can only participate in union activities if they are not outside regular work time.

Several responses indicated the problem that union work demands enormous time and energy, and these demands escalate once members accept responsibility. As a result, one section proposed a code of behavior to limit verbosity, to rotate union jobs, and to share tasks in order to prevent stereotyping without confusing equality and sameness. The national union of librarians noted its special characteristics which permit more female activism, including its nature as a small union which makes it easier for a woman to undertake responsibilities. The questionnaire which elicited these responses was elaborated by a working group open to all the national unions. This working group noted the small number of responses to a previous questionnaire, and therefore decided with this second questionnaire to use a different framework, which posed more leading questions. The first questionnaire reflected the irrelevance to many women of the discourse by factional leaders on women's status. The second questionnaire evoked responses concerning the very practical problems that women teachers have in their daily lives, rather than an analysis in large ideological terms.

IV

The questionnaire was undertaken in preparation for a Federal Day on Women. These Federal Days are a part of regular FEN programming. The Federal Day on Women was a defence against the charge that no reflection on women's issues would take place without specific structures. The leadership's keynote address was given by André Henry, then the national secretary of the FEN and therefore from UID. (Because of the factional system all members of this Secretariat are UID supporters.) Henry stressed that it would be an error to decide on measures or create structures which would isolate women's demands from those of workers as a whole. He considered the FEN Federal Day on Women a new departure, but maintained that the FEN had already taken significant action on the women's dossier. Its task now would be to prolong this profound movement of consciousness-raising. As could be expected, he reiterated the basic UID position, although the fact that it came this time from the highest elected official of the FEN is noteworthy.

The three other speakers of the morning were outsiders: Monique Halpern, "chargée de missions au Comité du Travail Féminin"; Ida Berger, "professeur à l'UER, (section de l'éducation, Paris V)": and Martine Levy, "secrétaire générale du Comité du Travail Féminin." Their talks cannot be analyzed to show the FEN's own ideology, although their ideas must to some extent have influenced discussion in each of the commissions where participants in the Federal Day discussed the four themes of the questionnaire. The use of these speakers by the UID planners of the Federal Day may be taken as another indication of factional politics: the choice of these speakers was criticized by the opposition to UID for their links with official power structures.

These theme speakers' presentations were followed in the Federal Day by three commissions on the four themes of the questionnaire. From the evidence we have, these commissions again were an opportunity for non-elite members to talk about their very concrete problems. In the afternoon, the *rapporteurs* synthesized the questionnaire responses on four themes with their own reflections and the commission discussions.

The Federal Day on Women was thus in no way exempt from the apparent armhold of the factions on all questions of policy and politics in the FEN. The UID majority used such a Federal Day structure because these forums represent normal procedure in the life of the FEN. UA criticized this form as tending toward an "attitudeday"; it should be treated like any other day and the emphasis be put on increasing the real participation of women in the FEN. UA took the day as a sign that UID had finally recognized that there was a specific area badly covered in the current statutory structures, and that this initiative was a result of the consciousness-raising role played by UA, particularly its demands for specific commissions. EE considered that the day was a UID attempt at keeping up appearances, and that the preparatory questionnaire had been a secret to most members once more proving the UID leadership's attempt to keep a stranglehold on FEN activities.

The significance for subsequent FEN policy and practices was also evaluated differently, according to faction. UID's reaction was that the main objective had been reached, raising awareness and allowing reflection, from which concrete propositions had emerged. FEN structures were to pursue this direction, and women needed to assume new responsibilities and roles as FEN militants, in spite of lacking the means.

UA complained of the lack of opportunity to express its viewpoint during the plenary sessions of the Federal Day, and therefore had distributed a broadsheet during the day and proposed pursuing the debate in its factional review. The insignificance and superficiality of such a day was contrasted by UA with its own repetition of the need for permanent and continuing structures within FEN to deal with the issues involved. UA suggested for follow-up action an increase in release from work time for union activities, the progressive increase of women to reach their proportional representation in union structures, the elimination of the male nature of statutory structures, in particular male domination of the Federal Bureau, and the encouragement of new democratic practices which would allow the eventually different approach women might bring.

EE, sarcastically noting the proximity of the FEN's Federal Day to Mother's Day, analyzed its real function as a pay-off or muzzle to those activists who had demanded attention for the problems of women in union life. EE recognized that important questions had been raised during the Federal Day discussion, but objected that no line of battle had been drawn for future action.

COMMENTS

Our review has shown that the analysis at leadership levels of the status of women is directly dependent upon factional divisions. These factional divisions are rarely apparent in middle-level unionist replies to the questionnaire, which raise instead daily problems that women face. The Federal Day on Women allowed at one level (the commission) another forum for discussion of concrete problems but was used by the factions for their own ideological goals.

Women when surveyed did not pose their problems in grand ideological terms. They illustrated that "the private is political" although that feminist slogan was never expressed as such. Their testimony of concrete problems is seldom expressed in their leaders' interventions at Congresses or meetings of the Administrative Commission. They show little concern for the organizational quarrels that we see in the debate over "specific structures" and in the after-math of the Federal Day.

The conclusion that these very concrete problems faced by ordinary women are neglected in the ideological battles of the union is supported by a study of the exceptional women who are militants.⁷These women mention the same concrete problems as barriers to activism, but admit that once in the game they are obliged to follow the male rules.

> Thus, despite their serious reservations, or their fundamental criticism relative to the existence of these factions, the "militantes" none the less respect the rules of the game. Their view is in close relation to their belonging to one of the factions.

> Either they already stand for one of the factions, or they (the "militantes") assume bit by bit one of these ideologies; otherwise "they could not be activists."⁸

A UID leader, in an effort at detached analysis, ascribed to the factions the feeling of a need for control which prevents women from uniting across factional lines or from proposing formulae which would go beyond established patterns of factional policy and actions. ⁹ In fact, we can find an explanation for each faction's position on the status of women in its organizational position. UID as the controlling faction does not want to introduce feminist ideology or autonomous power into the structures in place which it is able to control. UA as the opposition faction sees the women's question as a channel through which to undermine both the dominant ideology and the institutional arrangements of the FEN. EE is so weak that it looks outside the FEN, to the women's movement to subvert the modus vivendi that nevertheless exists between UID and UA.

The FEN provides an interesting opportunity to study a power structure, based on a distinctive factional system, and that structure's treatment of women's concerns. Women's interests within the FEN, just as in larger society, have been subordinated to "more important" political questions. The debate at the top of the FEN has been highly theoretical and highly politicized—a battle between the factions. It has been an arena for men. The responses to the questionnaire bring sharply into focus the contrast between this theoretical debate and the daily problems faced by the women at the grassroots. The way these questions were dealt with by the Federal Day on Women demonstrates how the concerns from the grassroots had first to be processed into factional political and ideological terms before emerging into union debate.

The problem is not peculiar to the FEN. It does not seem to be a function of ideology, as some anti-capitalists would have it, for the FEN's factions are all varieties of socialist ideology. Nor is it specific to a particular political culture, the French, as we know from studies of unions in other countries. In the *Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec* one of the earliest criticisms of the women's caucus by other activists was that the women were not sufficiently politicized in their analyses. There, the *Comité de la condition féminine* has adjusted itself somewhat to the type and style of union debate, still dominated by men.¹⁰

It has been hypothesized that women need a political system which is open to new social actors¹¹ or which sustains access of social movements through supportive primary or secondary groups.¹² If we extend these propositions to the micro-political system represented by the FEN, it would appear that the FEN is not propitious for new social actors in the form of women's groups. It does not foster the formation of women's primary or secondary groups which would give access to the forces of the women's movement. The micro-political system's organization into factions which determine the ideology, the structures, the articulation of problems, and the sporadic action on those problems, coupled to the intensity of the factional battle, mitigate effective voicing of women's issues.

NOTES

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- The classic study—of the "exception that proves the rule"—is Union Democracy by S.M. Lipset, M.A. Trow, J.S. Coleman (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1956). See also Frank P. Belloni and Dennis C. Beller, eds., Faction Politics: Political Parties and Factionalism in Comparative Perspective (Santa Barbara: Clio Press, 1978).
- 3. Our sources are the verbatim records of FEN Federal Congresses from 1975 to 1980, the FEN magazine (*l'Enseignement public*), the magazines of the two biggest member unions, SNI, which groups elementary teachers, (*l'Ecole libératrice*), and SNES, which groups secondary teachers, (*l'Universilé syndicaliste*), responses to two questionnaires on the status of women, the verbatim record of the plenary sessions of the FEN Federal Day on Women, some factional newspapers, and interviews. The magazines give a full summary of meetings of the Administrative Commission debates.
- 4. Réné Mouriaux, "Document de travail sur la FEN" Centre d'études de la vie politique française contemporaine, mars 1978, mimeographed, p.4, my translation.
- 5. L'Enseignement public, No. 5, février 1980, pp. 25, 28. For a political scientist's discussion in English of the divergent viewpoints in the formation of the FEN, see James Milford Clark, Teachers and politics in France: A Pressure Group Study of the Fédération de l'education Nationale, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1967). For a discussion of the feminist question in the two major French workers' unions, the CGT and the CFDT, see Margaret Maruani, Les syndicats à l'èpreuve du féminisme (Paris: Editions Syrops, 1979).

- 6. The questionnaire, under four topics ("Women and the Public Service," "Women and Society," "Women and Education," and "Women and Union Organization") poses open-ended questions in a schematic fashion, and responses elicited could not be quantified. The number of contributors to each section's or national union's response was seldom indicated.
- Marie-France Galand, Les Militantes du SNIPEGC dans les sections départementales de la région parisienne de 1945 à 1978, unpublished Master's degree thesis, the Sorbonne, no date, archives of the FEN.
- 8. Galand, troisième partie, p.14, my translation.
- 9. Interview, Paris, November, 1980.
- 10. See Margaret Beattie, "Le Comité Laure-Gaudreault de la CEQ: Promoteur de la femme en tant que personne," Resources for Feminist Research, Special Publication 8 (Fall 1980): pp. 108-99 and "A Note on the CEQ's Policy on Women," Resources for Feminist Research, Special issue "Women and Trade Unions, X, 2 (July 1981), pp. 40-43.
- Yasmine Ergas, "1968-79 Feminism and the Italian Party System: Women's Politics in a Decade of Turmoil," Comparative Politics, Vol. 14, No. 3, April 1982, p.254.
- Anne N. Costain, "Representing Women: The Transition from Social Movement to Interest Group," Western Political Quarterly, March 1981, pp. 112-113.