Immigrant Workers in Industrial France
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THE First World War was the great watershed of the modern era. It signaled the beginning of the end of liberal society. No clearer example of this could be offered than that of the transformation of labor migrations into France. Partly in compensation for France's drastic losses during the war, foreign labor flooded the country, doubling the proportion of the non-citizen population (from 2.9 percent in 1911 to 6.6 percent in 1931). Yet postwar immigration was much more than simply a short-term adjustment in French demographic conditions; rather it signified a radical departure from prewar patterns of immigration and of French attitudes and behavior toward foreign labor.

Before the war, immigration was primarily a free movement of populations adjacent to France into border labor markets. After the war, however, immigration became a government-regulated influx of foreign workers who were often recruited in large groups by a monopolistic private labor recruiter and sent to regions and occupations far from the well-worn paths of prewar migration.

What determined the character of the postwar foreign labor system was the introduction of corporatism into the French political economy. Corporatism is a word with many meanings. By using this term we do not mean to suggest that industrial groupings supplanted parliament nor that organized capital controlled French society. We certainly do not imply that French labor joined with management in a regulated
State, Society, and Supplemental Labor

capitalist economy. As is well-known, French parliamentary politics survived the dislocations of postwar society far better than elsewhere (Italy, for example); French capital was not nearly so cartelized as in Germany. Class divisions in France clearly precluded the kind of class collaboration which was possible in Sweden from the early 1930s. We do not argue that France experienced a basic change of regime in the 1920s, certainly not a dramatic shift from a liberal to a corporatist state. Our argument is much more modest. While proponents of the economic rationalization advocated a more directed market economy, the liberal character of the Republic remained. In the special area of immigration, however, clearly defined changes occurred in French behavior and policy which can be called corporatist. These include (1) the state (i.e., governmental ministries) began to regulate the foreign work force with the goal of reducing domestic conflict and enhancing economic growth; (2) fractions of capital cooperated in the organization of the foreign labor market; and (3) a portion of French labor joined employers in supporting a program of channeling aliens toward the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. In none of these trends was the pattern purely or completely corporatist. Business resistance to regulation and opposition to direct and equal bargaining with labor as well as divisions within the labor movement prevented a mature corporatist policy. Yet these corporatist trends were crucial and irreversible in the shaping of the foreign labor system in France.

After 1914, the French government expanded but also controlled and channelled the flow of foreign labor into France. The state intervened in the alien labor market in service to specific economic groups: it aided industries whose growth and survival depended upon overcoming a shortage of cheap tractable labor by encouraging massive immigration; the state also attempted to placate indigenous workers by limiting immigration and channelling alien labor into undesirable occupational sectors. As a result French governmental intervention stimulated economic growth, while, at the same time, it fostered social stability.

Not only did interest groups support these governmental efforts, but to an extent they participated in the formation of policy. Although different groups—labor, agriculture and industry—worked through separate governmental agencies, they came close to joining together in a corporatist policy making body—a national immigration office.
This might have contributed to a transformation of French social relations, considerably mollifying tensions in French society and institutionalizing social conflicts. Yet by the mid-1920's overtures toward direct interclass bargaining had failed, leaving the policy of immigration in the hands of separate regulatory agencies and their special interest clients. This created an indirect corporatist policy—immigration shaped in the interests of major social groups—without face-to-face cooperation. We can find the sources of this consensus and the reasons for its partial failure in an analysis of immigration in the generation before the war.

**Immigration before 1914**

On the eve of the First World War, foreign labor had already begun to play a vital economic role in France. A shortage of French workers, due largely to the decline in the birth rate, had stimulated immigration as early as the 1850s. Almost all of this influx came from spontaneous or loosely organized migrations from border countries. The immigrants located in districts near the frontier or in Paris. Rail transportation and job information seemed to have been sufficient to draw aliens across open frontiers. This unregulated pattern of immigration generally provided French employers with a diverse and flexible addition to their domestic supply of workers with French labor manifesting only a limited opposition to the aliens. Business favored free migration and successfully resisted sporadic demands from labor and xenophobes for controls.

Two problems emerged, however, which modified this rosy picture. First, free individual immigration could not guarantee a sufficient supply of labor to accommodate the diverse demands of employers; second, because there were no political constraints on aliens entering into direct competition with French workers for jobs, the potential for public opposition to foreign workers intensified each year that immigration increased. Thus, by the outbreak of war, both employers and labor had an incentive to organize immigration, both through collective action and state intervention.
Spontaneous Immigration and the French *Patronat*

A largely spontaneous response to the unmet demand for labor resulted in a steadily increasing influx of foreign workers into France from the 1850s until 1914. Census figures (see Table 1) show 379,289 aliens in France as early as 1851, this number rising to 1,159,835 in 1911 (2.9 percent of the population). As one might expect from a spontaneous immigration, the vast majority came from bordering countries (between 82 percent and 90 percent during the period 1851 to 1911). As Table 2 shows, until the 1880s Belgians (mostly of Flemish origin) and Germans predominated, but thereafter Italians and Spaniards gradually took their place.

These migrations provided employers with small but usually significant additions to the workforce in important occupational sectors and regions. Foreign workers concentrated along the frontiers and in Paris. Although in 1911 foreigners represented 3.2 percent of the economically active population in France, in the southeastern departments of Alpes-Maritimes and Bouches-du-Rhône they constituted 30 percent and 18 percent respectively. In the department of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of foreigners</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>379,289</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>655,036</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>801,754</td>
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<td>1881</td>
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<td>1896</td>
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<td>1901</td>
<td>1,037,778</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>1,049,051</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1,159,835</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nord, which borders on Belgium, aliens constituted 11 percent of the economically active population while in Paris they represented 7 percent. This pattern of concentration in the frontier districts and in the capital followed from the individual and spontaneous nature of the migrations.

The economic opportunities of aliens were dictated largely by jobs left open by the French. Foreigners concentrated in a variety of traditional and modern industries which offered a large number of unskilled and arduous jobs. Even before the war, immigrants were indispensable in key industries such as metallurgy, chemicals, and construction (see Table 3). Foreign workers also served vital functions as seasonal migrants and commuters, especially in the frontier regions. By 1913, 40,000 Flemish Belgians seasonally migrated to weed, harvest, and refine sugar beets in the north. Twenty thousand Spaniards worked during peak periods in the southern vineyards while about the same number of Italians served as flower cutters and woodsmen in the French southeast. By 1906 about 30,000 Flemish and German commuters, called frontaliers, crossed the frontier daily or weekly to work in French textile mills, brickyards, glass works, and mines.

Immigrants who flooded into Paris became vital to numerous industries, especially those requiring skills which the French lacked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1871</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>419</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgian</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>323</td>
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<tr>
<td>German, Austro-Hungarian</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>117</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>72</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxemburger, Dutch</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>741</td>
<td>1,001</td>
<td>1,130</td>
<td>1,034</td>
<td>1,160</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
% of total foreign population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1861</th>
<th>1871</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>31.9</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>31.2</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>10.1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


A report of April 1907 from the Prefect of Police (Paris) claimed that 40 percent of the demolition workers of the Seine were Italians, that 40–50 percent of the employees of sugar refineries and glassworks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Occupational Distribution of Immigrants, 1906</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>% of workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metallurgy</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusements</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone work</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemicals</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarrying</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goods handling</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics, glass</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic service</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were foreign, and that 20 percent of the construction workers were Italian and Belgian. Furthermore, a number of craft industries in Paris hired large contingents of immigrants.9

This brief survey of the pattern of spontaneous immigration into France before the war indicates that aliens provided employers with a growing, diverse, and often critical supplement to their supplies of native labor. Foreigners mostly took the unskilled, seasonal, low paying and unpleasant jobs that the French avoided. They also served as skilled workers, especially in trades in which insufficient French were trained. Despite the advantages that spontaneous migrations had for French employers, they proved to be inadequate for many enterprises.

Organizing the Foreign Labor Market

Labor shortages appeared for large agriculture as well as mining and metallurgical industries. Large-scale grain producers in the Seine basin and eastern France found it increasingly difficult to retain French laborers or tenants and could no longer draw sufficient numbers of French migrants, particularly from Brittany. Yet these agricultural districts lay beyond the established streams of Flemish, Spanish, and Italian migrations. Substituting French with foreign labor was not easy. Furthermore, as early as 1908, the Syndicat central des agriculteurs en France complained that Flemish seasonal workers had begun “to stop coming and to pass too quickly into industry.”9 Even traditional sources of foreign labor were becoming scarce.

Coal and iron mines, especially in the expanding northern and eastern basins, also experienced shortages of labor which spontaneous migrations failed to overcome. Coal mine operators in the northeast found Belgians unsatisfactory; they tended to leave the mine during the warm months for seasonal farm or construction work.10 As Philippe Ariès and others have noted, a stable, disciplined coal mining population was formed in France only after several generations of weaning peasants from the land.11 The mining population could not be renewed with undifferentiated migrant workers, especially those with alternatives to the deadend of
underground mining. It is thus not surprising that the Belgians, used to the comparative freedom of construction or even seasonal farm work, would resist the daily drudgery of the mines. Ultimately, mine operators had to recruit seasoned foreign miners who had known no other work culture.

For the iron mines of Briey in French Lorraine, the difficulties were even greater. When this district was seriously exploited after 1895, the Briey basin had no pool of labor upon which to draw. The peasants of the region were generally small land owners, unwilling to quit their independent if modest way of life for the hell of the iron mines. In addition, attempts to lure seasoned miners from other parts of France failed. Operators needed large numbers of workers and were unable to wait for a migratory stream to form spontaneously.\(^{12}\)

Mining and agricultural enterprises, because of the types of jobs they offered and because of isolation from traditional migratory paths, were obliged to organize in order to recruit fresh pools of foreign labor. Already, in March of 1908, the Syndicat central des agriculteurs en France negotiated a contract with a commercial labor placement company in Warsaw to recruit 400 Polish farm workers for the Meurthe-et-Moselle in eastern France.\(^{13}\) One year later the Syndicat made a similar arrangement with the Polish Emigration Society of Austrian Poland.\(^{14}\) Although the Galician Diet subsidized this society and the emigration of Poles was tolerated by the Austrian government, its success was limited.\(^{15}\) From 1908 to 1914 the Polish Emigration Society placed 20,000 Polish farm workers in northeastern France.\(^{16}\) Yet, according to a study by the French Ministry of Labor, only 5,000 of these Poles remained on the farms in 1914. A combination of factors, including inadequate organization, alternatives to farm work in France, as well as poor pay and working conditions, contributed to the failure of this effort.\(^{17}\)

Attempts to recruit and retain Polish miners were no more successful. This was somewhat surprising given the history of the emigration of Polish miners. From the 1890s both the Germans and Americans had drawn extensively upon Polish mining districts in Silesia to meet their growing needs for coal miners. From 1908, French mine operators attempted to follow suit. They used Polish agents to pirate Polish miners working in the Ruhr, appealing to Polish nationalism against the German mine operators. Despite these
efforts, by 1912 only about 500 Poles had responded. During the same period the iron mines and steel mills of Briey hired the Polish Emigration Society in Galicia to obtain about 1,000 unskilled laborers. The French found that they could not compete with the nearby German mines and mills in pay or working conditions. In any case, corporate recruitment of Poles was a low-budget pilot project, hardly likely to succeed without better organization and the absence of the German and American alternatives for Polish emigrants.

Only after the war, when Polish labor became a necessity and the cooperation of a new Polish state made recruitment more effective, did large-scale immigration from Poland begin. In the twenties, Polish antipathy to Germany and American restrictions on immigration gave the French an unprecedented bargaining position in procuring Polish labor. Already before the war, however, mining and agricultural associations were able to draw on their international connections to organize, at least, a trickle of migration. These early examples of collective immigration had no French governmental involvement. Indeed, entrepreneurs opposed all governmental interference. This attitude had to change, however, when the intervention of the governments of the labor supplying nations forced French business to seek the assistance of their government.

Italian immigration into the French Lorraine reflects this trend. Although the iron and steel industries had relied on individual migration in the 1890s to fill the ranks of workers, by 1908 rapid expansion of production required an organized immigration. In that year agents from three mines recruited Italians in the frontier towns of Chiasso and BALE. However, they soon realized that they were competing for this labor against each other as well as against German and Luxembourg mines. They also found that the Italians were frequently lured away after a short stint on the job by competitors who promised slightly higher pay. As a result, neighboring mines could reap the benefits of the Italian miners without enduring any of the costs of recruitment. Labor discipline also suffered because Italians could easily find work at a nearby mine or mill if they were fired. Therefore, in order to control the Italian labor market, the mine operators authorized their trade association, the Comité des forges et mines de Meurthe-et-Moselle, to organize a recruitment service for all its
members. Despite an often voiced commitment to a competitive market, the Comité des forges attempted to eliminate competition between member employers for Italian labor. In 1912, the recruitment service obtained a license from the agency of the Italian government which controlled emigration, the Commissariato generale dell’emigrazione (CGE), to recruit miners in Italy. In exchange for the privilege of corporate hiring, the CGE demanded that the French do the following: (1) take steps to reduce venereal disease and accidents in the Italian colonies in France, (2) use a model contract which would assure a parity in wages with the French, and (3) provide a mutual aid fund for Italian workers, which would be subsidized by the employers.21

At first this arrangement was satisfactory to both parties. Negotiations, however, broke down in 1913 over the CGE’s demands that the Italian consul at Nancy be allowed to inspect French mining pits and mills in order to assure safety and health standards. Robert Pinot, president of the Comité des forges, rejected this as an intrusion into French “sovereignty.” This disagreement blocked further recruitment of Italian miners and metal workers and led Pinot in 1914 to request the French government to intervene on the behalf of the French employers.

Following the outbreak of war and Italy’s entry in May of 1915, the CGE added more restrictions to control the outflow of strategic labor. It prohibited all recruitment in Italy without a license. Not only was detailed information on plant working conditions required of recruiters, but the French employers had to accept the Italian consuls as mediators in disputes between Italian workers and French employers. In response, Pinot stepped up his effort to have the French government exert pressure on the Italian authorities to improve the employers’ bargaining position.

Bertrand Nogaro, director of the Service de la main-d’œuvre étrangère (Foreign Labor Service), at first refused to negotiate under conditions so unfavorable to the French. He feared that because of the acute French shortage of labor, the Italians might be able to set an advantageous precedent in postwar immigration agreements. In spite of these fears, however, the shortages in the war industries were sufficient by March of 1916 to force Nogaro to bargain with the tough-minded Georges de Michelis, chief of the CGE. In May the
Parties reached an agreement which allowed French employers to obtain Italian workers through the Foreign Labor Service of the French government and the CGE. Italian demands for control over labor relations within France were considerably compromised; an Italian officer could inspect factories if accompanied by a French officer, but the Italian official could not mediate disputes. In exchange for the labor, the French agreed to share a proportion of French munitions and coal (six tons per Italian immigrant). Although only 5,486 Italians entered French factories and mines through this arrangement, this agreement became a model for postwar immigration treaties.22

This Franco-Italian agreement signaled the end of liberal immigration. Employers in highly concentrated and well-organized industries, such as iron and steel, represented by the Comité des forges, found the free market in labor to be inadequate to overcome their shortages of manpower. Having chosen to organize a collective demand for Italian labor, the Comité found itself faced with an unsurmountable opponent in the CGE, one who would attempt to control the supply of that labor. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the Italian government would not allow the systematic loss of Italian labor without exacting a cost. By 1914, then, the French employers were obliged to call on their government to obtain any Italian workers. Immigration had become a matter of foreign affairs, linked to commercial and national rights issues. In spite of employer opposition to "bureaucratic" restrictions, especially government involvement in the recruitment process,22 only the French state could adequately serve the collective interests of the employers vis-à-vis the Italian state.

French Workers React to Protect Labor Standards

Like the French capitalists, the trade unions and socialists of France gradually came to look upon state intervention as a solution to immigration, but for entirely different reasons. Because foreigners often worked at lower pay and under conditions deemed unacceptable to the French, indigenous labor favored controls on immigrant employment. To be sure, aliens were concentrated in frontier regions
and in the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. As a result, they were usually isolated from most French workers. In addition, they were concentrated in industries such as metallurgy, as well as road building and other seasonal industries, where French workers were too poorly organized and too unstable to voice any appreciable opposition. Despite the weakness of labor's opposition, however, it was often vocal and even violent in the generation before the war.

In those industries where labor was relatively well-organized and had strong artisan traditions of self-defense, French workers often actively confronted foreign labor. This was especially true in craft trades like tailoring, glass-blowing, woodworking, shoemaking, cabinetmaking and painting, where foreigners could easily be employed in cut-rate or sweat shops. Conflicts emerged also in the dock and construction industries, music halls, and restaurant services. In these seasonal or temporary jobs, local French workers often had to compete with a floating population of foreigners, who often offered superior skills at lower pay. Temporarily French workers involved with road and rail construction had to face teams of Spanish or Italian workers led by marchands d'hommes, as the unions called foreign labor contractors.

If certain trades seemed especially prone to competition between alien and French workers, a variety of circumstances could cause conflicts in other industries. For example, Flemish frontaliers, employed primarily in textiles and construction, were willing to work for as little as half the pay which the French demanded. Naturally, wage differentials encouraged employers to replace French with foreign workers. Immigrants were also used to increase productivity. A parliamentary report of 1903 noted that, in the textiles industries of Lille, employers recruited Flemish workers in order to introduce "modifications in working conditions . . . to discourage the collective action of the other workers and to break their resistance" to mechanization. In 1919, the Congress of Agricultural workers claimed that since 1908, Spanish and Algerian laborers had been responsible for the "general extension of the piece rate" in the viticulture of the Midi and had contributed to unemployment. On numerous occasions employers recruited immigrant labor to break strikes. A strike in 1908, for example, at a quarry in the Yonne, was broken by the use of Dutch replacements, as was a strike of wood-
Dockers at Marseilles in 1903 and at Nantes in 1912 also complained of foreign strike breakers.31

How did French workers respond to these varied threats of foreign labor? Just as employers organized to recruit foreign labor, so French labor’s concern with an overabundant supply of immigrants led them to collective action. At the level of the trade union, action might include a demand that French be hired first (for example, the dockers of Marseilles in 1903) or that foreigners be excluded from unions (for example, the painters of the Seine in 1894) or even that all foreign workers be expelled (for example, the leather-goods workers in 1895).32 Occasionally French workers struck to protest foreign labor. This happened in June of 1905 when about 1,000 farm workers from Arles struck briefly to oppose the hiring of Italians.33

Competition also led to violence. The army was required to quell a riot at the salt mines of Aigues-Mortes (Gard) in August of 1893, when Italians replaced 100 French workers.34 Smaller riots between Belgian and French miners broke out in the northern towns of Lievin (1892 and 1897), Lens (1893, 1897, and 1901), St-Pol (1897 and 1899), Billy Montigy (1911), and Ostricourt (1903).35

Work-site violence in 1893 was sufficient to lead the minister of the interior to request that the prefects monitor all enterprises which hired foreigners and to take measures to prevent violence.36 Protests against the employment of foreigners was local, spasmodic, and occasionally violent. It seemed to fit the pattern of traditional social conflict outlined by Charles Tilly.37 It consisted of spontaneous rixes, local outbreaks of violence in which foreigners were pitted against French workers with whom they directly competed. There were reactive demands for the restoration of the local French position in the job market by excluding the immigrant outsider.

Only slowly did French labor adopt a national strategy to respond to immigration. Workers had a basic alternative: either to act through the unions to limit the competition of aliens or to press for political controls. Like the employers, organized labor preferred to rely on corporate action. They did so because of traditions of internationalism and opposition to the bourgeois state. Left labor pinned most of their hopes on unionizing immigrant workers. In 1907, at their national congress in Nancy, French socialists opposed all governmental restrictions on immigration such as those which trade unionists had
adopted in the United States, and proposed to organize foreigners around the slogan, “equal pay for equal work.” In 1910, at its congress in Lille, the Confédération générale du travail—CGT (General Confederation of Labor) embraced the same tactics in a special meeting on the immigrant question.\(^3\)

But the French labor movement, which had been able to organize no more than one million French workers by 1914, was hardly capable of unionizing the highly unstable and often illiterate foreign workforce.\(^9\) The law of 1884, which legalized unions, also prohibited foreigners from voting for or being elected to leadership positions in unions. Foreign labor organizers, who probably were more effective than French ones, were subject to expulsion. A team of Belgian trade unionists in 1912, for example, was expelled for trying to organize Flemish farm workers in northern France.\(^{40}\) The difficult job of integrating immigrants into the trade unions was made all the more problematic.

In addition, French workers were certainly not immune to cultural chauvinism. In the working class newspaper Cri du peuple in 1884 we find a fear expressed of “the foreign vassals of Catholicism.” Michelle Perrot has noted a persistent anxiety beginning in the 1880s about the “Yellow Peril,” the fear that French employers might follow the United States and import Chinese labor.\(^{41}\)

Behind much of this xenophobia was the fear that outsiders—especially those who had a lower labor standard—would deprive natives of the right to a job near home. Whenever French workers acquired any political rights, they immediately attempted to protect their jobs from outsiders. As early as the Revolution of 1848, a workers’ delegation from the Paris suburb of Montmartre petitioned the provisional republican government to prohibit Parisian workers from seeking employment in their district.\(^{42}\) With the coming of the Third Republic, workers demanded priority for local labor, especially in the 1880s and 1890s. Of course, as many contemporary witnesses recognized, this attitude of labor was merely an extension of the point of view of businessmen who demanded protection for local products with tariffs.\(^{43}\) European and American-born workers in California had already set a precedent by demanding “America for Americans” in the 1880s to prevent the influx of Chinese and Japanese labor.\(^{44}\) Some of the French would succumb to such nationalist appeals,
especially during economic crises. At the same time labor’s demand for protecting local jobs was an attempt to defend wage and working standards, often painfully won in France, from outsiders who had lower standards. It was also an assertion of French labor’s right of settlement—the right to establish a permanent home or sedentary pattern of work. Priority for national labor could help French workers avoid the status of a floating laborer in constant search for work in an uncertain job market.

Given the organizational weakness of French workers, their tendency to xenophobia, and their desire to protect local job markets, a strictly trade-union strategy for dealing with the problems of immigration was insufficient. Thus French labor would adopt an alternative approach and call on the state for protection. From 1885 to 1895 leftist coalitions in the municipal councils of Paris, Marseilles, Toulouse, and other cities passed laws which limited the percentage of immigrants (usually 5 percent) who could be hired for municipal public works. Jobs, paid for by public funds, it was felt, should be mostly reserved for citizens. Despite success at the municipal level, the central government annulled these restrictions in a series of decrees between 1889 and 1895. Those seeking controls on foreign employment had to shift from the local to the national government.

Both socialists and conservatives proposed legislation to restrict foreign access to the French labor market. Socialists called for limiting foreigners to a fixed proportion of the jobs in each trade. A socialist proposal of 1902 also included the provision of equal pay for equal work; this would have removed the incentive of employers to hire foreigners who could be forced to work for lower pay than the French. All of the bills, however, were repeatedly killed in committee because legislators believed that they restricted the free market. Employers also feared that they would lead to reprisals from foreign countries against French business. Despite numerous parliamentary initiatives before 1914, laissez-faire prevailed.

The only significant law controlling immigration was passed in 1893. It required all foreign laborers to register with the police when they established a residence and whenever they moved thereafter. But this was really only a police measure designed to maintain some supervision over a floating population of foreigners. Besides this law, a decree in 1899 was the only effort to placate those demanding
regulation. Promulgated by the reformist socialist leader, Alexandre Millerand, who was then Minister of Commerce, it allowed towns to determine, with the prefect’s approval, what percentage of foreigners could be employed in public works. Yet even this mild measure was very seldom put into effect.59

Clearly no serious regulation of immigrant labor was tolerated by the dominant political classes in France before 1914. With significant exceptions, spontaneous immigration proved to be sufficient for the needs of employers, while the restrictionism of labor leaders was but a feeble voice. For this pattern of liberal immigration to change, employers would have to suffer from much greater shortages of labor. Labor groups would also have to abandon their protectionist policies and adopt a strategy more consistent with economic expansion. Both of these changes took place during the First World War.

Enter the State: Immigration During the War

Never before had France mobilized more of her human resources than during the First World War. Over seven million Frenchmen were taken out of the economy for the fighting. The war emergency required and also justified government control over and encouragement of immigration to take up the slack. The spirit of patriotism and willingness of all classes and parties to cooperate for the national defense in the Union Sacrée also produced an unprecedented situation: the possibility of agreement and collaboration in developing an immigration policy.

This transformation can be analyzed in two stages: (1) Initially, government involvement was restricted to an ad hoc response of different ministries acting largely independently to serve the needs of well-organized employer groups. However, the mechanisms which these ministries established to recruit, distribute, and control foreign labor became the foundation for the foreign labor system which continues to the present. (2) Beginning in 1916 the state enlisted the cooperation of business and labor groups in several advisory manpower commissions. This participation anticipated postwar cooperation between business and government in formulating French
immigration policy. It also provided a model for French labor’s goal of a regulated immigration well after the war.

The Government Recruits Foreign Labor

Six months after the outbreak of the war, it was obvious that French manpower was no match for that of Germany. Despite efforts to employ displaced Belgians, French women, and males either too old or too young to fight, the French government still needed more labor to work in the war economy. It was obliged to organize an immigration. In response to the specific needs of employers, the government recruited three separate groups of alien workers: (1) colonial and Chinese laborers, mostly for the docks and military construction, (2) Iberian and Italian farm workers, and (3) southern European industrial workers.

Colonial and Chinese Immigration. Under the direction of the moderate socialist Albert Thomas, the Subministry of Armaments took the lead in procuring colonial workers. Early in 1915, it recruited from the ranks of the 12,000 North Africans (mostly Algerians) already in France for the munition plants. The character of this recruitment changed radically, however, when the War and Colonial Ministries assumed control over colonial labor. These ministries early in 1916 established an agency under military leadership, the Service d’organisation des travailleurs coloniaux or SOTC (Colonial Labor Service). Under its chief, Colonel Lucien Wiel, the SOTC abandoned the practice of hiring civilian North Africans in France. Wiel believed that these workers were too contaminated by French life to be productive. Rather he recruited groups of “volunteers” from the colonial army reserve within North Africa who were not only innocent of the knowledge of French society, but were subject to military pay and discipline. In a similar way the SOTC also impressed Indochinese and Madagascarians for labor service in France. The SOTC obtained a number of Chinese laborers from several commercial labor contractors. Ostensibly the Chinese were free labor, but received similar treatment to that of the colonial workers.
Although these nonwhite workers were not part of the army, their situation was virtually identical to militarized labor. The SOTC transported, distributed, and “protected” all nonwhite immigrants, controlling all aspects of their lives at work and leisure. Imported without regard to the availability of jobs, these workers were often billeted for some time in barracks near Marseilles and placed in compounds segregated by nationality. The SOTC distributed each nationality in separate convoys, which, according to Wiel, prevented racial conflicts. The SOTC assigned supervisors, who had often been colonial plantation overseers, to police the colonial workers. These SOTC agents also acted as interpreters and generally helped to maintain the morale of these workers. The SOTC even built a mosque for the North Africans and printed a special newspaper for the Chinese. Whenever possible, the SOTC designated cafés for each nationality, “to assure that the leisure hours of these workers would be spent in harmless pastimes.” The SOTC also regulated diets, living conditions, and minimal wage rates.

What was the purpose of this highly regulated movement of nonwhite workers? Obviously, the SOTC system solved many linguistic and cultural problems. It also assured that colonial labor would work under a system which was similar to that experienced back home and to which they would eventually return. French authorities obviously had no interest in introducing colonial labor to French individualism or European labor relations (which often included unions). The SOTC’s paternalism was also a product of fears that racial conflicts might emerge between the French and the colonials as well as between the different foreign nationalities. Furthermore, the French authorities also felt that “unprotected” colonial workers might be tempted to adopt the French custom of drinking, to the detriment of their productivity. Perhaps, however, most important in explaining the SOTC’s policies was the French desire to keep the colonial workers in compact workteams and restricted to the most onerous jobs. It is probable that only their virtual militarization kept colonial workers from entering the general labor market and drifting into the cities—especially Paris—in search of excitement and better jobs.

Altogether during the war the SOTC imported 78,566 Algerians, 18,244 Tunisians, 35,506 Moroccans, 48,955 Indochinese, 36,941
Chinese, and 4,546 Madagascarians. Most of the nonwhite workers were used in noncombatant military work, primarily in the marine arsenals in dock work. Others were distributed to large farms.

Despite the SOTC’s attempts to provide a cheap, docile, and productive workforce, employers and officials were frequently dissatisfied. In fact the SOTC provided only a small number of workers to the French war effort. North Africans failed to volunteer for work during the harvest months of June and July, which coincided with their religious holiday, Ramadan.\(^{61}\) Ostensibly because of their small size and frailty the Indochinese were viewed by employers as unproductive.\(^{62}\) Employers also complained about the regulations and charges which the SOTC imposed on those using nonwhite workers.\(^{63}\) Beyond these problems were the racial tensions engendered between French and nonwhite workers. This was particularly the case with the Chinese. The SOTC, of course, anticipated difficulties and provided employers with special instructions on how to handle these unfamiliar workers.\(^{64}\) This was insufficient to stop race riots between French and Chinese workers in 1916 at the war plants of Creusot and the gasworks of St. Denis in late 1917.\(^{65}\) French officials feared that the presence of single male Chinese and colonial workers near the civilian populations might give rise to fears of sexual attacks on the wives and daughters of soldiers at the front. The Chinese, who were not French colonial subjects, apparently proved to be less tractable than the other nonwhite workers on the job. Employers in Bordeaux, Rennes, Nantes, and Brest complained of the insolence of the Chinese and of their pay, which was six times as high (at three francs a day) as the cost of prisoners of war.\(^{66}\)

The use of nonwhite labor in France during the war was largely a failure. While they may have been crucial when the forced labor of the POW's was not available, employers resisted hiring them. From the standpoint of the French employer, nonwhite labor was unproductive, cumbersome to utilize, and much more expensive than forced labor. In addition, French society was hardly ready to tolerate non-European workers in their midst. As a result of this experiment, the French discontinued most nonwhite immigration after the war and did not resume it until an even more grave shortage of labor after World War II obliged them to import non-European workers.
Iberian-Italian Farm Workers  In stark contrast with colonial immigration, the government played a facilitating rather than a controlling role in recruiting European farm workers. The state merely provided subsidies and technical aid to farm groups that jealously guarded their entrepreneurial rights. While widening well-established migratory streams from southern Europe, agriculture laid the groundwork for a separate farm labor program after the war.

The French Ministry of Agriculture did not create a public agency to recruit farm workers abroad. It simply subsidized and gave official status to a private organization created in 1912 by the Société des agriculteurs en France. From April of 1915, this organization, the Office national de la main-d’oeuvre agricole—ONMA (National Farm Labor Office) not only researched sources of labor in Italy and Spain, but it organized recruitment and placement on the farms. By the spring of 1915, the need for southern European labor had become obvious. Efforts to mobilize women, youth, prisoners of war, and garrisoned soldiers were insufficient. In a conference in Toulouse in April of 1915, 300 representatives of French agricultural societies approved the ONMA’s plan to recruit Spanish farm workers. Departmental farm societies established contracts which set wage and working conditions for all immigrants sent into that department. ONMA agents then filled requests for labor in sixteen immigration offices strung along the Spanish and later the Italian frontiers.

Altogether 146,446 Spanish and Portuguese as well as 2,225 Italians crossed the frontier to work on French farms. Furthermore, the ONMA obtained colonial workers for large wheat growers and even Chinese laborers were occasionally sent to farms. Large-scale sugar beet growers also received 7,580 North Africans and one thousand Indochinese by war’s end.

Despite the efforts of the ONMA, its success was modest. While 5.2 million French workers were employed in agriculture in 1911 and some 3.28 million of them had been mobilized by the end of the war, barely 160,000 foreigners had been imported to replace them. Why was so little foreign agricultural labor used? First, farmers had access to other forms of cheap labor, and secondly, they had difficulties in recruiting and retaining immigrants. Farmers often used soldiers and POW’s for critical seasonal work because they cost far less than
immigrants. As a result, hardly one-fourth of the French farm associations utilized the services of the ONMA and these were located largely in the south, where farmers already had experience with southern European workers. Small farmers were generally reluctant to hire unseen workers even on approval of the agents of their own associations.

Even if farmers did hire immigrants, unacceptably low wages and poor working conditions deterred immigrants from returning or staying. In a study of the Spanish farm workers placed in Loir-et-Cher, the ONMA found that wide differences in pay (from three to six francs daily) led to rapid turnover. Many farmers offered wages as low as seventy-five francs a month, which inevitably resulted in broken labor contracts and flight to the war factories. For many reasons, farmers could not easily compete with the higher paying urban industries. Realizing this fact, the ONMA tried to maintain its labor service for the exclusive use of farmers and thus channel labor into the rural job market. Yet the Ministry of Labor, seeking to control the entire placement of labor, repeatedly blocked the Ministry of Agriculture and its attempts to protect the ONMA's separate channel of labor. By 1917, the government forced the frontier offices of the ONMA to open their doors to industrial as well as farm immigrants. In effect, agriculture had to share its mine of labor. These patterns of failure to retain foreign labor as well as the struggle to maintain a separate stream of immigrants would be repeated throughout the interwar period.

European Industrial Labor Although the war industries were able to supplement their workforces with French women and noncombatant male workers, they too experienced shortages of labor. To help fill the gap, the Ministry of Armaments (after 1917, the Ministry of Labor) sought immigrants. It looked first to Italy and sent Bertrand Nogaro to Rome to negotiate. As we have seen, Italian restrictions on recruiting workers led the French government to search elsewhere. Providing France with an alternative in June of 1916, the French consul at Rhodes suggested recruiting Greek refugees. Nogaro arranged at once to transport them to Marseilles. The Ministry of Armaments established an agency, the Service central de la main-d'oeuvre étrangère (Central Foreign Labor Service) to administer
these immigrants. In August of 1916, Nogaro added Portuguese construction workers and in February of 1917, Spanish industrial workers to the labor pool after negotiations with their respective governments. By the war's end, nearly 81,000 European immigrants entered French industry, including 22,849 Portuguese, 15,212 Spaniards, 24,274 Greeks, 5,486 Italians and 12,770 other nationalities.

Initially, European industrial workers were distributed like the colonials out of temporary labor depots near Marseilles or various frontier placement offices where they were billeted. However, unlike the nonwhite workers, the European received six-month contracts with their employers and were not placed in convoys. European workers had to be treated like "free" labor and yet they were to be strongly encouraged to serve the immediate needs of the war economy.

This fact becomes obvious when we examine how the government attempted to control the mobility of the European immigrants. Government officials feared that European immigrants had a propensity for high rates of turnover and instability, both of which would lead to higher labor costs and social problems. Nogaro, for example, noted that immigrants lacked personal ties to any single locality, and thus were more likely than indigenous labor to migrate at the slightest opportunity for an increase in wages. This tended "to provoke a general rise in wages, while the cost of living in the regions where this rise takes place has not yet required such an increase."

More specifically, Nogaro believed, unstable foreign workers tended to equalize wages between Paris, where immigrants often went in search of higher pay, and the labor-starved provinces. This pattern of movement to the cities, he feared, also led to concentrations of uprooted and often unemployed foreigners in Paris and other large cities.

To counteract this development, Nogaro's Foreign Labor Service attempted to minimize competition for labor between provincial and Parisian employers. The key to this policy was to encourage the immigrant to remain in the provinces and thus provide employers with needed labor and also maintain traditional low wages. At the same time this policy would avoid the social costs of masses of presumably dangerous foreigners in the cities. How did the govern-
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ment encourage immigrants to remain in the provincial industries, often when this must have been contrary to their own interests? First, unemployed immigrants were sent to regional labor depots located in towns like Lyons and Nantes, where they were pooled and sent into jobs in low-wage regions. In Paris, however, there was no depot but simply a placement office which immediately employed the immigrant or directed him to a provincial depot for a work assignment. Another device was to give workers who completed their contract a bonus. The Foreign Labor Service also concentrated each nationality in specific industries and regions. These practices were designed to give the immigrant a stable cultural environment and thus prevent anomic and excessive migration. Immigrant work groups were also aided by interpreters. Like the agents used by the SOTC, interpreters came from older members of the military auxiliary who had experience in foreign countries. These interpreters were not only to mediate and anticipate any disputes but also to help weed out and expel “troublemakers,” especially those complaining about wages and working conditions.  

Besides these economic and cultural means of controlling the mobility of the immigrants, the government also forced immigrants to carry an identification card in order to survey their movements. Beginning in June of 1916, all European immigrant workers were issued cards which designated the geographical limits within which they could travel and whether they were farm or industrial workers. Whenever the worker moved, a copy of his card was forwarded to the police nearest to his next workplace (where he would pick up his card); if he were unemployed, the card was sent to the nearest placement depot. By these means the government discouraged job hopping and controlled necessary employment changes. Resourceful immigrants did break their work contracts and skip off to Gay Paris, but a host of government measures attempted to reduce this to a minimum.

According to a circular from the Ministry of the Interior of June 1916, the identification card was designed to “restrain the unjustified migration [of immigrants] which could easily become a general trend.” The circular instructed police to threaten to expel workers who broke their contracts, which was defined as failure to produce up to their capacity or refusal to accept a job offered by the government.  

The Association national d’expansion économique, representing
major industrial groups, proposed in March of 1917 that the identification cards become permanent and be centrally administered by the Ministry of the Interior.\textsuperscript{36} One month later this was done by government decree. In a report which accompanied that decree, the government claimed that the cards would enable the state to “maintain an absolutely indispensable surveillance over the movements” of the immigrants so that they would “not become unproductive at the expense of France which shelters them, or fall into idleness which is often dangerous to the public order,” and so that they could “be sent as soon as possible to enterprises which serve the national defense or the economy.”\textsuperscript{391}

The identification cards were designed to help police supervise a foreign population which lacked roots in France, was unknown to local authorities, and was presumed to be irresponsible or even dangerous. In this sense the cards were simply an extension of the requirement, in force since 1893, that immigrants register with the local police. More important, however, the cards helped to create an unfree labor force since immigrants were compelled to sell their services to buyers favored by the state. Often these were employers who could not find willing French workers.

European immigrants were slightly more free than were nonwhite foreign workers. Colonial laborers were treated as hardly more than paid slaves, hauled in gangs by military personnel wherever they were needed. European workers, however, were constrained by bureaucratic regulations designed to impede their mobility as much as possible. These procedures were, of course, established in time of war, which partly explains their illiberality. But they also show that French employers had come to rely on the state as a recruiter of supplemental labor and as a tool to constrain that labor in the immediate interests of French capital.

These governmental services, however, did not solve all of the problems of employers. The three immigration services, created in an ad hoc manner to serve the immediate needs of special economic interests, failed to provide several vital functions: they did not rationally allocate scarce foreign labor among the various economic sectors, nor did they channel the immigrant to avoid conflicts with the French worker. These tasks would be addressed by two additional institutions, both organized along corporatist lines.
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Corporatism: Business and Government as partners

In March of 1916, the government created the first of these corporatist bodies, the Conference interministérielle de la main-d’oeuvre —CIMO (Interministerial Labor Commission). Including representatives from the key employer groups and the trade unions, it was an exemplary product of the Union Sacré.\(^9^2\) Although formally both labor and management were represented, it primarily served as a clearinghouse for the employers’ needs for labor in the war economy.\(^9^3\) At first business funneled their needs for labor through the appropriate ministerial official on the commission (for example, F. H. Brancher of the ONMA for agricultural employers) who attempted to fill the order with supplies secured by the recruiting ministries (for example, Ministries of War and Colonial Affairs). In an attempt to rationalize this procedure, in October of 1917, the Commission gave the Ministry of Labor the task of collecting the data on the supply and demand of labor and of apportioning the limited supply.\(^9^4\)

The commission distributed immigrants in ways which reflected racial discrimination. Whenever lodging was “unsuitable for Frenchmen,” it used nonwhite workers (or POW’s).\(^9^5\) For construction work near the front which was unsuitable for POW’s for security reasons, and for which it was impossible to find civilian French labor, the Ministry of War asked for unemployed Algerians from Paris.\(^9^6\) Agriculture was willing to take anybody, even to accept Indochinese in exchange for POW’s who were needed for skilled metal work.\(^9^7\) Finally, Nogaro tried to reserve his European immigrants for industrial work rather than to allow their skills to be wasted in agriculture or construction.\(^9^8\) The state distributed foreign workers into the job hierarchy in accordance to the racial or social hierarchy.

The Interministerial Labor Commission not only distributed foreign manpower but gave employers and government officials invaluable experience in cooperating with each other and in sharing ideas about immigrant labor policy. It surely helped employers discard laissez-faire notions that government should stay out of the labor market. From now on business and government would be partners in manipulating the flow of foreign labor into France.
The Other Corporatism: Labor Joins Management and Government

Although French trade unions had only a nominal role in the operations of the Interministerial Labor Commission, they were not used merely as a window dressing in the Union Sacréé. Because of their general support for the war effort and recognition of the critical need for additional hands, few trade unionists sought to exclude foreign labor as they sometimes advocated before the war. Rather, they wished to insure the priority of French workers in the distribution of jobs. Having little influence at the ministerial level of government, they attempted to control the job market at the local departmental level. A second corporatist institution, the Offices départementaux du placement (ODP) was created to fill this need.

Like the Interministerial Labor Commission, the departmental placement offices were administered by corporatist bodies, called parity commissions, which included representatives of business, labor, and administration at the departmental level. Although the public employment office had existed in France since 1904, and the idea of a parity commission had been advocated by the government since 1910, only the war and the Union Sacréé induced employers and labor to cooperate. In December of 1915, the Labor Ministry urged the prefects to organize departmental placement offices with parity commissions, hoping to minimize irrational migrations of unemployed labor and to give priority for jobs to local French workers. By December 1916, there were eighty-six such offices, thirty-seven with parity commissions. In some of the urban departments, the ODP’s gave labor some voice in the distribution of jobs on the local level. For example, in Paris private placement services of both management and labor coalesced into subsections of the ODP of the Seine. In some cases, especially in departments where dock workers were important, these offices were created to placate workers’ fears of foreign competition. In 1916, for example, the ODP of Bouches-du-Rhône (Marseilles) created a special section for dock workers because of complaints that immigrants were hired in preference to the French. Similar anger, when the docks hired Chinese, Moroccan, and other nonwhite stevedores, led to the
formation of special placement offices in Le Havre, Dunkerque, and Rouen.103 When employers chose to use these offices, the ODP's could stop employers from hiring outsiders—especially immigrants—when unemployed French were available.

These goals of the ODP's conflicted with the activities of the Interministerial Labor Commission. A two-track system appears to have regulated the labor market during the war. One was dominated by the employer associations and was oriented towards the expansion on the national level of cheap, docile, and constrained pool of labor. The other was dominated by local interests and was restricted to the major towns: it included real participation by labor, and attempted to rationalize the labor market with the least displacement of native workers. Efforts by the Office central de placement, which coordinated the ODP's, to gain control over the employment of all foreign workers was rejected by the Labor Ministry's Arthur Fontaine.104 He claimed that labor was already represented in the Commission at the national level and that local ODP's lacked the requisite information on the needs of national defense to decide on the employment of foreign or colonial workers.105 As a result, a poorly coordinated system resulted; one that would continue after the war and remain a source of conflict.

Despite the inherent conflicts between these two institutions and their approaches to the problem of manpower, they both represented a significant departure from pre-war patterns. For employers it was a sharp turn away from the liberalism of prewar immigration; for unions, an equally significant shift from the simple advocacy of ceilings on the employment of foreign workers. Both groups discovered a new role for the state through the corporatist advisory committee. This experience was a powerful impetus for the development of a national policy on immigration after the war. However, as this analysis of the history of French attitudes toward foreign manpower suggests, serious divisions between agricultural and industrial employers limited a solid front of business in the formation of immigration policy. Strongly divergent interests between employers and labor likewise impeded consensus.