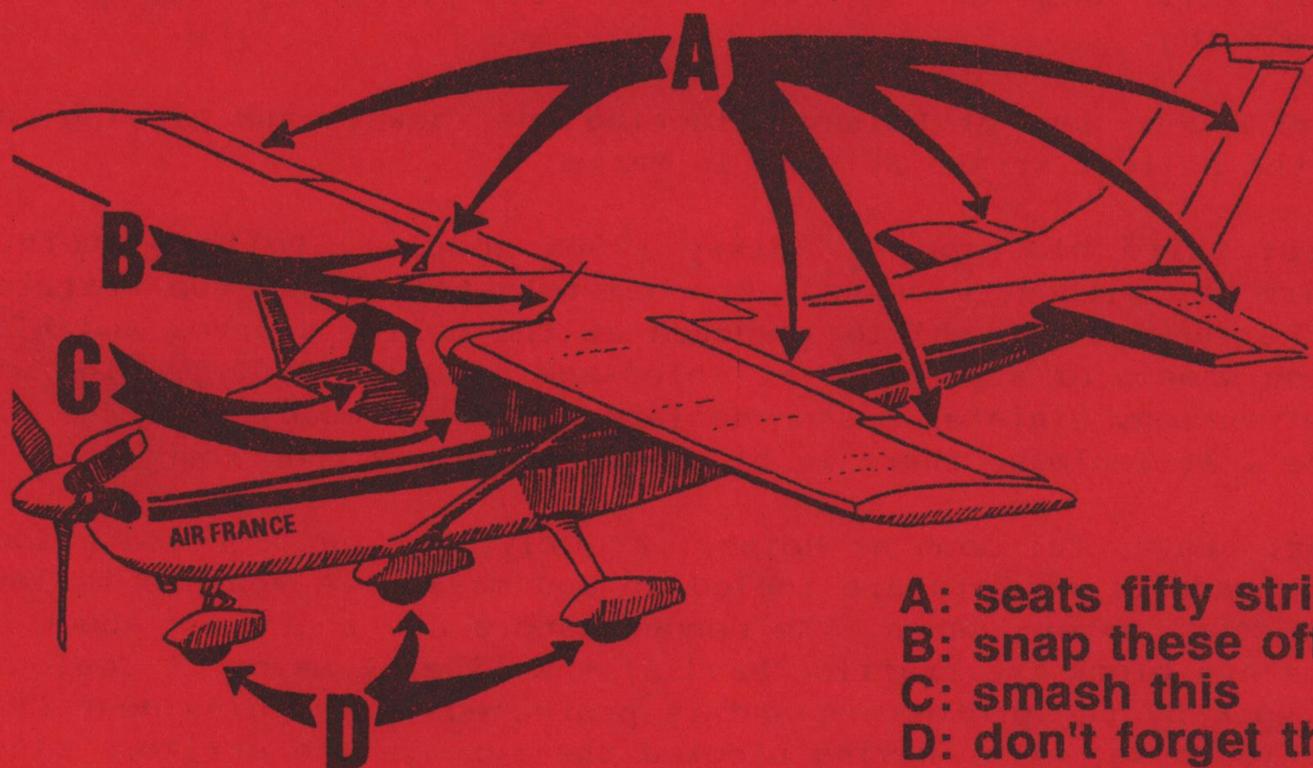


# AIR FRANCE STRIKE

## October / November 1993

comprising of

- \* A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS,
- \* SOME ANALYSIS OF THE STRIKE
- \* A BRIEF TRIP TO ORLY and INTERVIEW WITH SOME STRIKERS



- A: seats fifty strikers
- B: snap these off
- C: smash this
- D: don't forget the tyres

Translated from  
MORDICUS magazine  
Winter 1993

The following text is in 3 parts - "Les Rampants..." is the main article which starts with a chronology, the second part "A Brief Trip to Orly" describes a visit to Orly by some Mordicus types. The third part "On the Track..." is an interview with some strikers.

## LES RAMPANTS SE CABRENT

[this is a pun - literally it means "those who crawl rear up", "rampants" also means "ground staff"]

### CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS -

**12 October:** National strike over transport workers wages called by the unions.

**13 October:** The strike continues at Air France at Roissy freight, then amongst the passenger bus drivers against the Plan to return to the agreement which provided for 4,000 redundancies, freezing of wages, stopping bonuses and the contracting of certain activities to subsidiary companies of Air France.

**14 October:** The strike extends itself from freight to other sectors (landing, Direction du matériel - DM, commercial).

**15 October:** The strikers at Roissy freight block a 747 leaving for China, with vans and various other vehicles.

**16 and 17 October:** Weekend of reflection, the movement carries on.

**18 October:** First demo on the runways of Roissy, 2000 people block them during the morning.

**19 October:** Second demo at Roissy, blocking the runways and playing cat and mouse with the police. Strike at Résa in Paris.

**20 October:** Third blockage at Roissy (2000 people). Police intervention which is firm but without excesses. The demonstrators block the traffic then return to the runways. A vehicle launched at the police swerves and hits the front landing wheels of a plane. First blockage of Orly (3000 people) without police intervention. Minister Bosson declares, on the radio, that the plan is "irrevocable". At Toulouse there is blockage of runways then roads.

**21 October:** Uneventful demo at Roissy. At Orly, violent confrontation with the police: loads of workers are toolled up and masked. A vehicle is launched against the cops' water cannon. The demonstrators are scattered about on the access routs and block the traffic. Baudis, the liberal mayor of Toulouse, is covered in spit by the protesters and is protected by the dissident CP mayor of Orly. At Toulouse, after having blocked the runways the strikers block the rail traffic at the central station.

**22 October:** Second day of violent confrontation at Orly: some vehicles are launched against the police and demolish some plate glass windows in the Southern terminal; blockage of runways and cat and mouse. Negotiations in the evening at La Défense, at the Ministry of Transport, between under-secretary Beysson, who proposed dropping the wage cutting measures, and the unions. 200 furious strikers from Roissy demand to participate in the negotiations. The

CGT pilots' union declares solidarity with the strikers. The unions of Air Inter and Aéroport de Paris (ADP) call for a day of action on the 26 October.

**23 October:** Government proposals rejected by the strikers.

**24 October:** The government announces the retraction of the plan. That evening Attali retires. Live on TF1 [a TV channel], Génoves, central leader of the FO, announces that the strike is over.

**25 October:** The strike continues despite a tract by the FO calling for a return to work. A delegation (3000 people!) to the Orly police to demand the dropping of charges against the strikers arrested then released following the confrontations of 22 October. C. Blanc (old managing director of RATP) is named as boss of Air France.

**26 October:** Demos at Orly and Roissy, uniting Air France, Air Inter and ADP. 7000 people march onto the runways at Orly, 5000 at Roissy. It is the victory demo but it is also a bit, for the majority, the burial of the movement.

**27 October:** The strike continues awaiting the unions/bosses meeting set for 2 November. All the same, the return to work was beginning. At the Orly DM, the central delegate of the FO was expelled from the general meeting before being able to speak.

**31 October:** End of the strike at Orly DM.

**1 November:** End of the strike at Roissy freight. Sit-down demo in Paris. Fifty people occupy local union offices with banners.

**2 November:** Aborted bosses/union meeting. In the afternoon, 700 people sat down outside the union HQ in Paris for the continuation of the movement.

**10 November:** Strike at Air Inter. Attempt to block the runways at Orly repulsed by the police...

## GENERAL AMBIENCE

What is striking about this strike is its massive character - even though it was a minority who triggered the movement (the Freight at Roissy, then Orly on 13 October, the day after the day of action organised by the unions). It was the coming together of ground staff, for the first time since May 1968, comprising the commercial services, the luggage registration staff, who made the strike, consisting of close to 80% of waged workers (leaving out the pilots and the managers).

The massive character up until Tuesday 26 October had been a strength which enabled the government plan to be defeated, but also a weakness, because it showed the divisions between a strong anti-union minority, using violence and beginning to make fun of the business, and the majority worried about preserving the image of the business and, basically, demanding negotiation about the "reforms".

At the same time it broke down corporatist divisions inside Air France, which enabled some to see their problems not as those of their little sector but as those of all wage-workers. The discussions frequently came back to the idea

that this movement was for everyone, that it was not the property of a particular category, but dynamic, and did not belong to such and such a union.

This movement was a little like a baby trying to walk for the first time, understanding its strength, but when the first objective is attained it is so surprised that it does not see the need to go any further.

Nevertheless, the strikers did not have the initiative of the movement: it was the management that brought them together in the rejection of their plan, not them imposing a centralised response. There was in fact a juxtaposition of movements coming out of different services (Freight, DM, Landing etc.) because of mistrust of the unions extending to mistrust of all who they could not directly control right from the start of the movement. After years of partial action manipulated by the unions, there remained a prudence against all who appear as a centre, therefore as uncontrollable. This healthy reflex which could become a hindrance (like with SNCF in 1986), and which, happily, at Air France was graced with a massive character, began to fall.

By workshop, by service, the strikers controlled the strike when they knew how, but they did not control it on whole sites nor between sites. This left a free field for the unions to divide and hold them back by talking to those at Orly about the return to work at Roissy and vice versa. It is not easy to weave links outside the media or union channels. But this will be a vital question for the movements to come. The means of struggle have allowed barriers to fall and it is also this which the government feared: an effective and centralised organisation of strikers on all the sites.

## POPULARITY

This movement benefited from an enormous popularity on the part of aviation workers but also among many others who comprise the "users": the TV did not show a single interview with blockaded travellers complaining about the strike. During the second week of the strike at Roissy the farmers of "rural coordination" came to give them their support and food. On the contrary, many people declared that they understood and supported the strikers. It is true that for many the aeroplane remains a means of transport for "the rich" and that it is always a pleasure for a strike to cause a nuisance to them. This would not be the case for strikes on the Metro or the SNCF.

This popularity was still increasing as the government, which had announced that the plan was "irrevocable", drew back and Attali was resigned: for the first time the irreversible fatalism had been stopped. We still can't say what impact this is going to have on the consciousness of millions of workers in the months to come. The government has been discredited but it has shown in annulling the plan that it sensed the menace of extension and that it was better to play on worsening it than hardening it.

The government felt this fear in discovering the strength of determination in the confrontation with the police, during the blockades of the runways at Roissy, then at Orly and Toulouse. But, if the strike was sustained, it was clearly identified by the bosses of the industry as a danger: 21 big bosses paid for a full page advert in Le Figaro calling for the limitation of the right to strike and Pierre Suard, the managing director of Alcatel-Alsthom, accused the strikers, on TV on 23 October, of being responsible for the deaths of three of his managers in an aircraft accident.

## UNIONS

If they kept the strike going at the beginning because it was a good way of showing to the management that they needed them to keep the herd under control, the unions began to change their tune in front of the breadth of the movement and adjusted their aim: Force ouvrière played at stopping it and the CGT pushed for its continuation. After the dropping of the plan was announced, FO and the CGT called, in places, for a return to work so that the professional elections could take place! On Sunday evening on 24 October, after the announcement of the retreat, you could see Genovos on telly celebrating the victory in announcing that the strike was over! The next day, at the general meeting the strikers called him shit by continuing the strike. On Wednesday 27 October, at the Orly DM, the strikers expelled the FO representative from the general meeting before he was able to speak! In the workers' sectors (DM etc.) a number of FO members tore up their cards at the time of the return to work.

The CGT played a more subtle role and adapted its language: in the general meeting its representatives insisted on the role of the rank and file and of non-unionised people and presented themselves as faithful representatives of the strikers. It is true that at Roissy the CGT delegate from the DM, Bousquet, was a militant in the LCR who are partisans of general assemblies of the unionised and non-unionised, beginning each of their interventions with a lecture on direct democracy. On the whole the CGT seem to have understood (following the rail strike of 1986 which saw the appearance of "non-union" ["a-syndicales"] coordinations) that they had to adapt their language on pain of disappearing, being the most able to apply the break to movements in the last resort. In the assemblies the speeches of the CGT delegates start off now with "I am a CGT delegate, I have my opinions on how the movement should go and I am here to listen and retransmit your proposals, it is a rank and file democracy movement..."

As a whole a good number of strikers (a majority in the DM at Orly who have a long tradition of struggle) recognised the unions as enemies. You often heard expressions "the unions make us sick", "the unions are rotten", "we have nothing to do with these bastards", even if they allow them to run the assemblies and propose the slogans and legal actions. But then illegal actions are best sorted out alone.

At the same time the unions had not disappeared in the rank and file: in the workshops the rank and file delegates of the CGT, or even the FO, indeed even the CFDT, were playing the sort of role of "shop stewards" controlled by their workmates. It is not yet the soviets, but it is no longer complete follow-my-leader.

In certain sectors (commercial, for example) the strike involved a rush to join the unions, including the FO.

If the unions didn't apply the break to the movement that quickly, it's partly because of the unanimity of the strikers but it's also because of the numerous delegates and rank and file militants refusing (consciously or under rank and file pressure) to hold back the movement and, on the contrary, wanting to fight.

## ORGANISATION

If the strike was massive we should not think that the workers were officially on strike all day: for example, at the Orly DM, the strikers did not strike for more than 3 hours 50 minutes a day. But as there are two shifts this is sufficient to paralyse all activity while losing less than half their wages.

Even if the whole of the strikers didn't have a conscious attitude of hostility to the unions, practically they managed to outflank them. During the hot week at the Orly DM the morning general assemblies called by the unions were quickly terminated by cries of "To the runways!", which enabled all the strikers to find themselves again in the service of a precise objective (blockage of the runways and access routes), and in discussion outside the union channels.

By contrast the victory demo on 26 October (the largest number ever gathered at Orly, 7000 demonstrators!) was very easily controlled by the unions, the strikers preferring to go and discuss things in their departments, between people who know each other, rather than organise a big general meeting.

Equally, the strikers left to the unions the monopoly of convening the general assemblies and certain initiatives.

It is not a question of proposing miracle recipes and criticising the movement because it has not gone beyond the pre-established lines set for it but of understanding where the consciousness of the strikers starts from and how it evolves in relation to their own objectives at the time.

## LIMITS

Before addressing the limits of the movement it is necessary to draw attention to a very positive point: the openness to outsiders. On Tuesday 26 October, during the demo celebrating victory which assembled 7000 people at Orly for a tour of the runways, not only was our leaflet\* appreciated but the strikers were happy to know that we had come from outside to support them.

There was still an attachment to Air France amongst the great majority of the strikers and thus a wish to participate in the management of reform and modernisation and, amongst the sales agents, a concern for public service. All this helps the objectives of the unions very well: making themselves known to the management as indispensable elements in the efficient running of the enterprise and the management of the crisis.

Certain people, and it is the majority, still think that their lot is tied up with that of the company, that they should have interests in common with it and that the workers should have their say on management, on reforms and on modernisation. They would like to be understood, recognised, as having more human relations in their way of working.

It is this identification between the workers and the enterprise, this "sector nationalism", which constitutes (preliminary to any struggles) the principle break on future developments, because it includes respect for the instruments of work.

Nobody had any illusions about the plans to come, very well knowing and saying from the start that they had to be taken back, understanding this in a still

more violent fashion. But at the same time, other people, and often the same ones, seemed afraid of their own strength, the more so because their "victory" had been obtained easily. In one discussion a young lad working on the runways repeatedly said that it was unfortunate that they had had to block the runways to be listened to, while calling for the same violent action elsewhere. The extremely hierarchical, even military, organisation of Air France with its numerous managers imbued with their privileges, perhaps explains the need for social recognition by the strikers. Such a massive movement expresses first of all a consciousness of the role of pion which you play every day but doesn't always lead straight away to a critique of that "playing". It is rather a demand for promotion (often the strikers expressed their rancour with the management in terms of the fact that they had not even been asked their views concerning the plan).

The second limit is that the strikers did not put in place forms of organisation capable of outflanking or confronting the unions. This left the unions with monopoly of organisation, initiative and speech.

Nevertheless, the strike had the immense appeal of a breath of fresh air in the current situation, as much for those at Air France as for the rest of society.

## THE FUTURE

At the time of the return to work a striker from Roissy freight declared that they should carry on until they got paid for the days on strike. The journalist asked him: "And afterwards, if you win that?", the striker replied: "We will carry on".

Even if work started again (which allowed the shunning of "suicidal" tendencies wishing to continue to the end) it started again in an ambience never seen before: even among the commercial staff, the managers kept their mouths shut, the workers had learned to know themselves, to value themselves and to respect themselves. As for the Orly DM, on the GV ("grande visite") posts work was not really effective: on the slightest pretext groups formed to discuss the latest rumour...

Solidarity remained lively and exemplary: on Monday 25 October, 3000 Orly strikers went in a delegation to the police demanding that charges against the previously arrested strikers be dropped: something which was obtained immediately.

What does the future hold for the movement (independent of the reform plans of Blanc)? What is already happening is the formation of a collective consciousness (not uniform between sectors) of immense overt possibilities, but also of formidable obstacles to be got round, notably by completely surpassing the unions (or other "rank and file" organs which can fulfil the same role), refusing to delegate, taking their own affairs in hand, leaving behind the sector managers and the company.

The first "gain" of the strike is confidence in themselves, in their collective strength, which the strikers forged. But this confidence must not blind them: if a future conflict endures and gets tougher not everyone will want to carry on to the bitter end. Differentiations and divisions will make themselves felt amongst the strikers, which will be exploited by the management.

The strikers have struck a blow against the vile logic of the economy, but a provisory blow. They have shown an example to other workers, shown that that which is "irrevocable" the day before can be abandoned the next day. They have shown to others and to us the formidable power that we hold. They have not yet realised all the consequences.

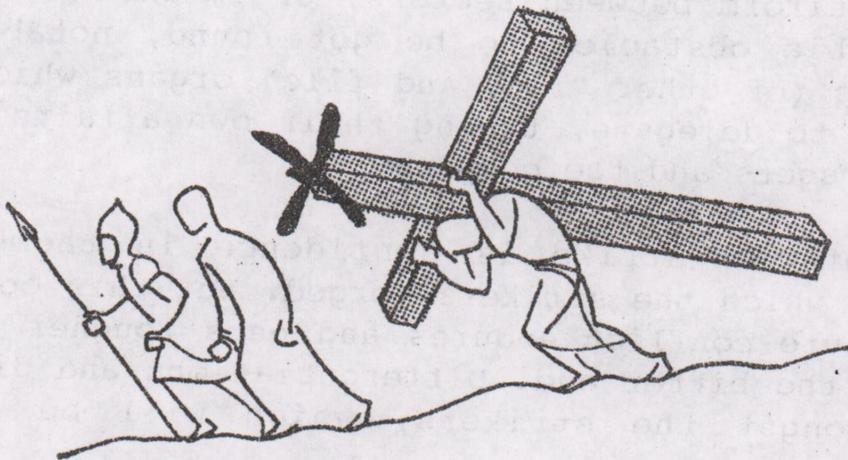
### **A mutineer on the Bounty**

\* Five leaflets were distributed during the strike by a few people, outside or not connected to Air France, who signed themselves "Les Révolté du Bounty".

## **A BRIEF TRIP TO ORLY**

Tuesday 26 October: a few Mordicants went to see some Air France comrades. We joined an imposing crowd which soon invaded the tarmac. Suddenly, an aeroplane took off. A quick start for the protesters at the front. A group of about thirty strikers, with padded parkas and faces masked with balaclavas or scarves, detached themselves and went onto the runways with small steps, a grenade cartridge serving as a football to make things more interesting. A striker had "Workers' Vengeance!" written on his back. Everyone was laughing. In reply to a question I explained that I did not work at Air France and that I had taken a day's holiday to come and support the movement. Thanks. The discussion is interrupted by the arrival of a Pakistani 747 which is pointing its nose towards the runway, ready to take off. A hellish sprint begins to trap it before it gains too much speed. A smoke bomb is let off in front of the plane. The pilot gives up, stops, and then switches off the engines to victorious cheers. The cops are nowhere to be seen. The journalists turned up with loads of cameras. Everyone, with faces masked, climbed up on the wheels of the machinery making the victory sign. The journalists were told rudely: "Say clearly that the unions want to crush the strike. They have sold out. We don't need the unions." Appropriately enough, a group of trade unionists arrived. The tension rose. A CGTist bureaucrat: "Take away your crowd, we will speak to them with an uncovered face!" "Go fuck yourselves, sellouts!" ["Espece d'enculés, vendus!"] Each of the strikers in the group is soon surrounded by several goons who explain that "there are thirty of you and there are 3000 CRS who are just waiting for this, it's better for you rejoin your comrades to take decisions democratically on the course of the movement". After about half an hour we left. The group rejoined the crowd around the terminals and led itself in dwindling numbers towards the warehouses, a good few kilometres away. We began to freeze. It was lunch time. In the distance the Pakistani 747 started its engines again.

**Alfred**



**"I don't think Jesus is gonna break the strike with that"**

# ON THE TRACK

["piste" - runway]

## OF THE AIR FRANCE STRIKERS

**Mordicus:** The first thing which surprised me about this strike was its popularity, that it was not only a strike but also, as Bosson said, a "rebellion" which went beyond the defence of particular interests. It was a symbol for people. How have you actually experienced this strike?

**P. (Orly DM):** It was not a rebellion. A rebellion, that's something else. A rebellion, for me, means a civil war.

**M. (Administrative Services, Paris):** No, we did not take up arms. But I think that the media and the politicians felt that the strike was something other than just a strike. Without this they wouldn't have cracked so quickly.

**W. (Telecommunications Service, Orly):** The idea of rebellion, this was the first time in the history of Air France that people had dared to venture on to that Holy of Holies, the runways. In May '68 this was not done. During the big strike of '75, that I know about from the oldtimers, at no time were people on the runways. It is this that we would call a rebellion. Having said that, no one has taken up arms yet, but....

**M. :** The unions have been completely outflanked, at least in the airports. I think that for Bosson the strike meant being able to go and discuss with the people in power, to talk figures. Otherwise these people wouldn't have any wish to negotiate.

**P. :** We surpassed a limit. We crossed to the other side. Freight was blocked, everything was blocked. I had never seen that before. They didn't really expect that.

**W. :** The foreign aircraft were no longer able to land, so you cause chaos to airline traffic on a world scale. It's also because of that that they backed down so quickly.

**Mordicus:** How do you explain the massive character of the strike?

**W. :** My sector had 70% strikers whereas normally 5% would be good. We occupied the offices. It has to be said that they were directly touched by the PR2.

**P. :** At the DM it was the same. All part of sub-contracting. Jobs a cut price to be taken to market. But the work is disgusting.

**M. :** The bosses of the sub-contracted jobs are usually the mates of the Air France managers.

**P. :** It is a mafia. They want to sell the services which will fetch the most and leave the shit.

**W. :** They privatise the most profitable sectors so that some boss can get fat on the back of a public service.

**P. :** The buying in of UTA is a scandal. UTA has been cranked up to two or three times its price.

**W. :** The owner was Seydoux, a close friend of Mitterand.

**Mordicus:** How did you come up with the idea of blocking the runways.

**P. :** By general discontent. In the euphoria that was what everybody wanted. The idea affirmed itself in blocking something. The unions were outflanked. When you have a general meeting of 4 or 500 people, when they are not too much on edge, not too motivated, you can still contain them. But when you have 2 to 3000 people who say: we don't care, we're going to block the

runways... the unionists will support blocking the runways, in each case just when they are about to be outflanked...

Mordicus: What was that moment?

P. : It was the confrontations with the CRS (*laughs*).

Mordicus : Can you speak about the development of the occupation of the runways?

P. : The first two days that happened without any problem. They weren't there. The third day we had the CRS. We knew they were going to come, but it was so intense that, in the end, we didn't care about the CRS. The CRS lobbed a few grenades and that got out of hand. On Thursday, there were some blokes who were injured, you saw it on TV. By contrast, on Friday the CRS really took some stick. I saw them stiff with fright, I would not like to have been in their shoes. And on TV, they didn't talk about any injuries. That's nice, Eh! The lads drove into the cops with runway vehicles and the cops ran away.

W. : It was the unions who organised things for us. It was the DM that led us on to the runways (*laughter*). To begin with, the journalists showed what the management wanted and they were given some stick.

P. : With us as well, we saw the journalists telling whopping lies on TV. I can tell you that when we saw them turn up the next day... It has to be said that afterwards they adjusted their aim. Because they were on the verge of being lynched. I saw them get kicked out of the DM. Afterwards, when they saw that public opinion was against them, they followed on behind.

W. : On Thursday we saw some lads arrive from the DM. It was a very compact group which going in front of the CRS. The lads had their masks and the first five rows had base-ball bats and all the rest. The next day they had their parkas, their gas masks, their catapults and their carbon dioxide extinguishers for recovering grenades. The lads launched a runway vehicle and lobbed a few molotov cocktails.

Mordicus : Has this strike transformed relations between people?

P. : Yes, definitely. Some people who didn't know each other have met each other, you discuss things with everybody... If you do nothing, you are a grub. But listen, you don't go there for fun...

W. : I participated in the strike in '74 at the PTT [Post and Telecommunications]. There I found a fundamental difference. Some administration people met up with the workers of the DM. There was a look, a different complicity...

Mordicus : And on Tuesday?

P. : Tuesday 26, that was a stroll. It was a big thing but it was a flock of sheep. The route was completely marked out by the unions. Us, we didn't come to make up the crowd. We went to block the runways, with all that mass that there was, and carry off a really strong coup. We did not come to stroll about like that.

M. : When there wasn't organisation, those who were organised, such as the unions, in moments like that, when people arrived everywhere and didn't meet, they could lead people wherever they wanted.

P. : They penned us up. Terrible!

M. : Suppose you know that there are people who wanted to scheme against you. Suppose you didn't think and those who wanted to scheme against you did what they wanted to do. The unions

had the intelligence not to confront the strikers. They followed and submitted. But when there was a need for organisation people let themselves be had.

P. : The cops wanted to avoid confrontation. There was an agreement between the unions and the cops. The unions were insulted and treated to all sorts of names and I can tell you that with us the boys had had enough. People were expecting something else.

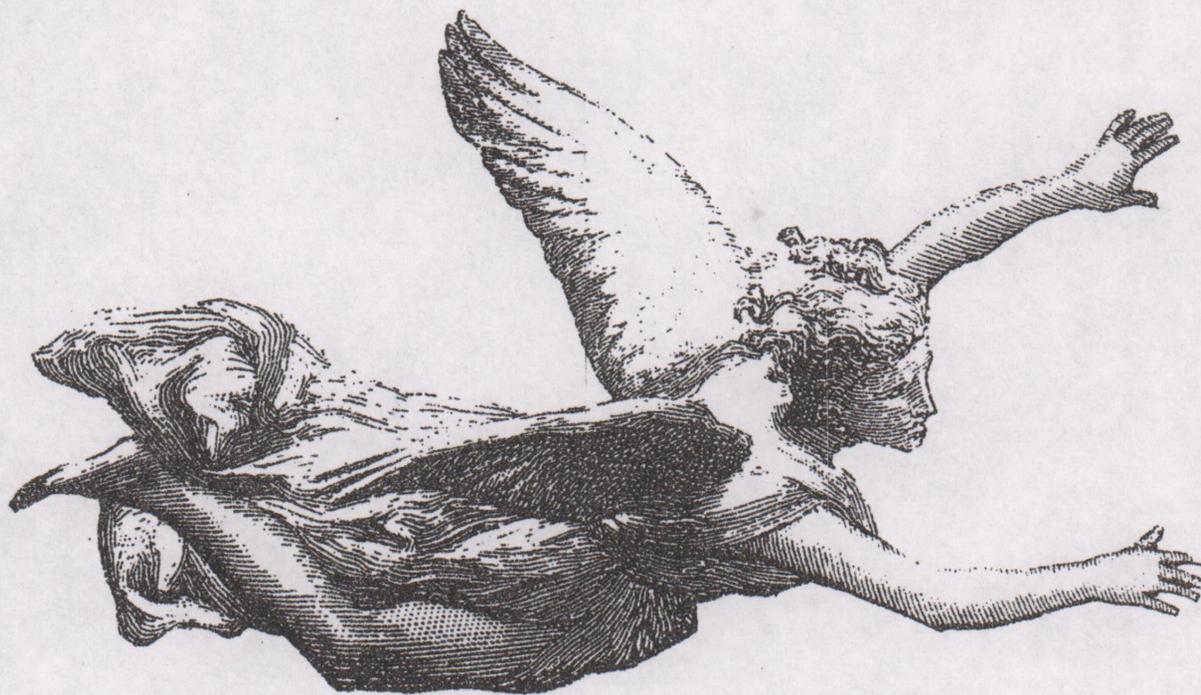
M. : It's bloody sickening that we haven't yet reached the stage of organising without the unions.

Mordicus : What final conclusions do you reach about the strike?

P. : We don't know what's going to happen. The end result is that if Blanc drags things out and if he takes back the plan, it will start again and it will be worse. If it was up to me, and a lot of people agree with me at the DM, we should never have returned to work. Not least because there weren't any signed documents (concerning the withdrawal of the NDR plan). You can negotiate when you have a base in action but you can't do it when you have returned to normal working. Then we are going to get screwed, it's obvious. It will start up again in any case. When, I don't know!

W. : It was a small victory in that they officially announced that the plan was withdrawn. But it was a purely defensive strike. At no point was the question posed of going on the offensive against the boss.

Interview done on 7 November 1993



**AIR FRANCE SCAB OR FLYING PICKET ?**

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\* nearest Tubes are *Elephant* or *Kennington*

