

# How Socialists Invented the Summer Holiday

By

David Broder

In 1930s France, the labour movement made summer holidays a priority — and forced bosses to pay workers for time at the beach.

The sun didn't shine for bourgeois France in summer 1936. Posh society ladies whined that the invading hordes of proles were taking up too much space on their favored beaches; restaurateurs on the Côte d'Azur even worried whether the factory workers arriving in their resorts would know how to use a knife and fork. In June, the Socialist-led government had guaranteed every worker two weeks' paid vacation, making the summer holiday a reality for millions. Now, workers could stop making bicycles and baguettes for a fortnight and start building sandcastles — and their bosses had to pay them for it.

The law that gave workers holiday time was passed by Jewish socialist prime minister Léon Blum, who had been elected that May. Yet the change was most of all owed to the powerful strike movement that followed his election. Across the world, labour unions had long resisted the domination of life by work: the general strike that began in Chicago on May Day 1886 demanded “eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.” After the achievement of legal limits on working hours, and then the invention of weekends, in the twentieth century, labour's crusade for free time took up the fight for paid holidays.

Having first sunk roots in France, paid vacation time was soon achieved elsewhere, in many cases complemented by rights like sick pay and maternity leave. But the fight for holidays wasn't just about giving workers one fortnight of freedom a year, only then to trudge back to the shop floor. Driven by a new mass culture, the fight to expand the realm of leisure was also about democratising the societies in which we live. French workers not only won the right to vacations but built the hostels, campsites, and social clubs through which they could spend their time better — and spend it together.

## Building a Broad Tent

Free time had always been a political battleground. The early labour movement was a hive of friendly societies and cooperatives through which workers pooled their resources to make best use of their free time. From 1919, the Socialist and Communist mayors of Ivry-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, ran a solidarity fund to provide workers' children with trips to the sea. Much as bodies like the YMCA promoted forms of recreation compatible with

Christian values, the workers' parties created leisure, sporting, and social activities of their own — within what free time they could find.

In summer 1936, it took government action to universalise the holiday pay previously achieved by a small minority of workers. But the success didn't owe just to Léon Blum, or indeed to the Popular Front uniting his Socialists with the liberal Radicals and Communists. Indeed, the program the Popular Front announced before the May 1936 election was cautious — it promised to nationalise war industries and give greater freedom to labour unions, but its call for “a reduction in the working week without a reduction in weekly salaries” didn't say what reduction could be made, or when.

The Popular Front's election triumph on May 3, 1936 — taking 57 percent of the vote — inspired a wider mood of change. On May 11, workers occupied an aircraft factory to demand the reinstatement of two colleagues fired for striking on May Day; this prompted solidarity action by dockers, lighting the touch paper of a wider movement. The strike spread to thousands of workplaces across France, embracing some 2 million workers. The festive atmosphere in the occupied factories showed not only that workers felt emboldened, but that they had high expectations for what would come next.

Emboldened by the strike wave — but also wary of protracted social conflict — Blum sought a settlement with employers that would also satisfy the activists in the main workers' parties. On June 7–8, the Socialist premier, the trade unions, and employers sealed the Matignon Agreements, which enacted a more detailed — and, indeed, more radical — version of the Popular Front's manifesto promises. Bosses had to swallow a forty-hour limit on the working week (with no loss of pay), enhanced trade union freedoms, and at least two weeks' paid vacation for each worker.

## Republic of Youth

Workers had won the right to paid vacation through solidarity action, and this same spirit informed how they were now to use this time. This was also shaped by earlier debates on what vacation actually meant. In Karl Marx's time, a trip to the beach was often seen in terms of restored health, away from the dirt and smoke of the city — historian Yvonne Kapp notes how he obsessed about the benefits of trips to the seaside, “in medical as in lay opinion, a panacea second only to alcohol.” But what workers actually did in their time off remained a hotly contested question into the early twentieth century.

As historian Gary Cross notes, many socialists denounced the damaging effect that factory routine had on workers' minds, depriving them of the energy and intellectual alertness to do more than passively consume entertainment. Criticisms of spectator sports and gambling were widespread in the labour movement; “temperance” campaigners expressed not just Christian moralism but the recognition that workers shouldn't waste the family income on booze. Left-wing parties' focus on political education, but also activities like brass bands and rambling, sought to draw workers toward more enlightened pursuits.

Yet the Left wanted to do more than integrate the most politicised workers — especially as the far right promoted its own vision of mass leisure. From 1925, Italian fascism's “After-Work” and “Balilla” organisations provided state-subsidised leisure activities, and from 1935, Nazi Germany's “Strength Through Joy” program used state resources to lay on sporting activities and collective holidays that promoted militaristic and “national” values, cutting across class divides. The Popular Front thus sought to promote its own democratic vision of what leisure could be.

This was especially evident in the work of Blum's undersecretary of state for sports and leisure, a post filled by Léo Lagrange. Reflecting the different aims of leisure policy, this role created by the Popular Front government was initially attached to the Ministry for Health but then moved to the Ministry for Education. But Lagrange's choices also reflected the difference between socialist and fascist imperatives. As he put it, the Popular Front's concern was not just relaxation but to promote the dignity of working people. For instance, in contrast to the elite

sport on display in the Berlin Olympics, Lagrange aimed “less to create champions and to lead 22 players into the stadium in front of 40,000 or 100,000 spectators, than to invite the youths of our country to go regularly onto the pitch, the playing field, the swimming pool.”

Key here was the focus on leisure’s ability to bridge class divides — Lagrange not only sponsored the “People’s Olympiad” in Barcelona, alternative to Hitler’s Olympics, but himself provided tours of Paris to agricultural labourers from other regions. Government support for member-run associations was aimed at fostering a collective management of leisure time, free of the patronage associated with church or charitable initiatives: for Lagrange, this would allow the “miner, the artisan, the peasant, the mason, the clerk and the teacher [to] gradually understand the unity of human labour.”

This was echoed in initiatives from below. From 1935 to 1938, the CGT union’s “Labour Sport and Gymnastics Union” rose from 42,000 to 100,000, as it adopted the call for a “club for every factory.” Of course, just as workers couldn’t have afforded to go on vacation without paid leave, they also needed to be able to spend their time economically. Subsidised rail travel (discounted 40 percent) provided one arm of this policy, but also key were local Popular Front committees, organisations like “Holidays for All” (that promised “more than a cut-price version of bourgeois tourism”) and the CLAJ youth hostel association.

As its name suggested, CLAJ — the “Secular Center of Youth Hostels” — was an alternative to religious leisure associations, instead coming largely under Communist sway. It vastly increased its presence during the Popular Front era, from forty-five hostels in 1933 to ninety in 1935 and 450 by 1938. Providing cheap accommodation for tens of thousands of people also fed a liberalisation of social mores. If formal politics were discouraged, CLAJ’s magazine *le Cri des Auberges* proclaimed “every hostel a republic of youth,” breaking with the “family holiday” model promoted in some Popular Front propaganda.

As historian Siân Reynolds notes, CLAJ’s role was particularly important because of the freer social mores it promoted, and in particular the fact that it was not gender-segregated (although dorms were). Collective male-female socialising, the spread of the colloquial *tu* over the formal *vous*, and lack of dress codes for women drew on existing Communist Youth practice, but also undermined gendered hierarchies: for Lucette Heller-Goldenberg, they “put a stop to the false relations between a young girl endeavoring to get a husband and a young man who looked for a victim.”

## A Ray of Light

The Popular Front wasn’t all smiles and sunshine — it was, after all, created as a defensive rampart against rising fascism, and some of Lagrange’s colleagues looked more kindly on the “patriotic” benefits of cultural mixing than its capacity to undermine family mores. Nonetheless, Blum’s policy had major effects, including in the rise of a similar practice in Britain. Though legislative efforts in Westminster had failed in 1929 and 1936, trade unions’ rising demand for paid holiday, inspired by the French example, saw the number of workers granted such leave rise from 1.5 million in 1935 to 7.75 million in March 1938.

Financial pressure and the Civil War in Spain brought the Popular Front to an end that fall. The liberal Radicals turned toward the conservatives, undermining Blum’s key measures, which were destroyed completely under the German occupation. Lagrange himself was killed on the front in June 1940. Blum, meanwhile, faced trial for treason in 1942. Defiantly defending his record, he used the courtroom to defend his leisure policy, subverting the Vichy regime’s own family-values rhetoric. For the Jewish socialist, paid vacation had offered a “ray of light in dark and difficult lives,” not just “giving them facilities for family life but giving them a promise for the future — a hope.”

This ray of light would long be remembered. The strains of Charles Trenet’s 1936 song “Y’a d’la joie” echoed down the years, while photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and CLAJ member Pierre Jamet immortalised the *joie de vivre* of

hitchhiking and rudimentary camping. The light of summer 1936 was, however, doubtless brought into relief by the darkness of what followed under Vichy rule. Some historians have thus portrayed it as a comforting myth — for Julian Jackson, images of “crowds waving from departing trains have become as much a symbol of 1936 as the barricades have of 1968.”

In summer 1940, Parisian families packed their suitcases for a different kind of journey — the evacuation of the capital in the face of German invasion. Yet even in the dark days of occupation, the summer of four years before left more than happy memories. Neither the Communist nor Socialist parties were still standing, having been banned by the conservatives and by Vichy respectively. But the structures that workers set up to make best use of their hard-won free time also created webs of solidarity that survived into the occupation period. After the German invasion, CLAJ became a bedrock of the armed resistance.

Today, our free time faces enemies other than Nazi storm troopers. Bosses are using both our precarious conditions and our cell phones to keep us constantly on call, shackled to our jobs and desperate for shifts. But vacation pay is precisely about freeing us from the choice between free time and the employment we need — it’s an obligation on all employers to pay us for part of our time off, regardless of their particular circumstances. In 1930s France, the fight for holidays created a general leveling up of all workers’ conditions, at their bosses’ expense. That’s just what we need today.

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