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Contested Sovereignties: Oil, Labour and the Saharan Frontier, 1956-66

Abstract

Emerging in the midst of a painful war of independence and deeply intertwined with the contested claims to territorial and economic sovereignty, the Algerian oil industry, and its labour force, occupied a unique place at the forefront of the Algerian decolonisation process. This paper explores the history of this critical yet under-researched workforce, focusing on daily lives, professional cultures and activism on the Saharan oil towns. In the context of this bitterly disputed territory, this study illustrates how sovereignty claims and contestation were experienced and translated into lived experiences through the oil sector, arguing that oil workers had a critical role in shaping and mediating these claims.

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INTRODUCTION: THE CHRONOLOGIES OF DECOLONISATION

1 In May 1963, Algerian oil workers' unions unleashed a wave of strike action against foreign oil companies in the country, decrying the companies' 'colonial' and 'apartheid' segregation of north and south. The strikes came a year after Algerian independence from France had been recognised, finally ending eight bloody years of war. The economically critical oil industry, however, remained overwhelmingly dominated by French companies, who stood accused of refusing to acknowledge Algeria's status as an 'independent and socialist' nation. Even further, oil companies were denounced for allegedly continuing an infamous colonial policy that had sought to divide Algeria between its coastal north and desert south, in order to retain the oil-rich latter under French control.¹ These strikes then, are exemplary of two central themes to be explored in this article: first, demonstrating an important but often overlooked activism at the heart of a workforce that has been widely perceived as politically apathetic and passive, the result of either high wages or state and company coercion.² This perceived passivity goes some way to explaining the striking lack of historiography exploring oil workers' histories and was forcefully made by Mitchell's seminal intervention into the social histories of oil in *Carbon Democracy*. Mitchell argued that in the late/post colonial world, the international nature of oil networks, long-distance and physically flexible, shattered workers' ability to directly control and leverage the resources they extracted, using earlier, domestically concentrated coal miners as a striking counterexample. This article, however, argues that in this case, the opposite is true. Instead, I find that for French and Algerian oil

workers, the specific shape of both transnational and domestic resource networks were not only empowering but very effectively deployed by a politically astute and influential workforce.

2 Secondly, these strikes ask important questions about the chronologies and experiences of independence and decolonisation across Algeria and France. Protestors took aim at the colonial legacies which still defined the staggeringly asymmetrical economic relationship between two sovereign *nations* and *personal* hardships of wage and employment inequalities. Their voices give a unique insight into the disconnect between political 'independence' and economic reality, and how this disjuncture was actually lived and understood. Exploring these stories across the colonial and independence periods, builds important new perspectives into the wider histories of decolonisation and Algerian nation-building. Historical approaches here have tended to approach Algerian history as decisively divided and bracketed by 1962, with work bridging the pre and post independence periods comparatively rare. Moreover, this work has explored decolonisation predominantly through state policy, such policy thus appearing as finite, linear, and fully indicative of wider realities. In contrast, the experiences of oil workers demonstrate that the process of decolonisation was defined and mediated by an assemblage of nonstate and individual agents, whose dynamic responses to a dynamic *process* of political autonomy defined an uneven and seemingly entropic independence.³

3 This article, then, spans the late years of colonial rule through the independence accords of 1962 and into the mid-1960s, drawing on a variety of

¹ François Weiss, *Doctrine et action syndicales en Algérie* (Paris: Cujas, 1970), 143.

² On oil workers as politically ineffective or apathetic see Timothy Mitchell's seminal work *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013). On the limited study of Algerian unionism in light of state control particularly see Mohamed Brani *et al*, "Employee relations in Algeria: a historical appraisal", *Employee Relations*, vol. 30, n° 4, 2008.

³ For a discussion of historiographical approaches to decolonization see Michael Collins, "Nation, state and agency: evolving historiographies of African decolonization", in Andrew W. M. Smith and Chris Jeppesen (eds.), *Britain, France and the Decolonization of Africa: Future Imperfect?* (London: UCL press, 2017). For a close study of the impacts of private interests and capital in reframing the colonial/independence transition see Vanessa Ogle, "'Funk Money': The End of Empires, The Expansion of Tax Havens, and Decolonization as an Economic and Financial Event", *Past & Present*, vol. 249, n° 1, 2020.

sources, notably company and consulate records, to understand the interaction between state, corporation and individual to more fully contextualise these processes and influences. The analysis opens with a discussion of employment and wages: focusing on oil workers as a direct economic force, through the construction and destruction of the colonial Saharan frontier. The article then turns to oil workers as a military force, highlighting their important but often obscured role in the war of independence. Finally, the discussion frames oil workers as a heterogeneous and powerful political force through activism and unionism, with particularly important implications for post-independence nation-building. Overall, tracing the oil industry's labour force through the war, independence and the so-called 'post-colonial decolonisation' of the early 1960s, this article highlights the specific ways oil workers contributed to the uneven political and economic progression of France and Algeria into two independent nation-states.⁴

SAHARAN FRONTIERS: EURAFRICA ON THE OIL TOWNS

4 From its discovery in 1956 through to the mid-1960s, oil resources and revenues were inextricably tied to the territorial demarcation of the Algerian nation. In 1956, Algeria had been under French colonial rule for 126 years, an imperial regime which would last another 6 years, despite the escalating war for independence. The importance of the oil discovery at this juncture was immense. The precious resource was widely perceived, across the government as well as public opinion, as a miraculous panacea to the myriad of problems facing the crumbling imperial behemoth. Political and public imagining transformed the Algerian desert into a new El Dorado running with black gold, a resource which could fix everything from France's substantial economic woes through to its waning global political standing.⁵

⁴ Phillip Naylor, "A Post-Colonial Decolonization: French-Algerian Hydrocarbon Relations, 1962-71", *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*, vol. 8, 1985.

⁵ Henry Peyret, *Le Sahara espoirs et réalités, L'économie supplément*, vol. 596, 1957. F60 4004, French National Archives,

Retaining French ownership of the oil reserves, then, was of critical importance. As a result, the oil reserves both motivated and facilitated an infamous attempt to divide Algeria between its northern and desert regions -and retain French hegemony in the latter. This new frontier was imposed politically and economically. First, a new Saharan geopolitical unit was created, which was administered through a novel form of devolved and oil-funded regional governance.⁶ Secondly, economic policy sought to further legitimate the north-south division by emphasising defined historical, ethnic and cultural differences. The colonial regime therefore invested its oil revenues heavily in 'Saharan' cultural hubs or economic specialties, ranging from architecture to agriculture to interior decoration.⁷ After independence in 1962, the new Algerian administration attempted to reverse the colonial segregation by using oil profits to more closely integrate the Sahara into the Algerian nation-state. Oil revenue was instead funnelled into supporting and connecting industrial development on a national scale as well as homogenising state support and subsidies (including lower oil prices) across the nation.⁸ In these ways then, oil was significant in funding broader policies of segregation and assimilation respectively.⁹

⁶ Muriam Haleh Davis, "Algeria's Colonial Geography Shifting Visions of Mediterranean Space", *New Geographies*, vol. 5, 2013, 315-324; Kelsey Suggitt, "Impossible endings?: reimagining the end of the French empire in the Sahara, 1951-1962" (PhD diss., University of Portsmouth, 2018).

⁷ Daniel Strasser, *Réalités et promesses sahariennes* (Encyclopédie d'Outre Mer: Paris, 1956) ; Meriama Chaouche-Bencherif, "La Micro-urbanisation et la ville-oasis ; une alternative à l'équilibre des zones arides pour une ville saharienne durable" (PhD diss., University Constantine, 2007), 238.

⁸ On Algerian industrialisation and oil pricing strategies see Hocine Malti, *Histoire secrète du pétrole algérien* (Paris : La Découverte, 2012), Hocine Malti, *On l'a appelé le pétrole rouge* (Alger : Marinoor, 1997) and Belaïd Abdesselam, *Le Pétrole et le gaz naturel en Algérie* (Alger : Éd. ANEP, 2012).

⁹ On the relationship between oil and secessionist tensions see Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War", Oxford University, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Working Paper 2002-01 and Michael Ross, "What Do We Know about Natural Resources and Civil War?", *Journal of Peace Research* vol. 41, n° 3, 2004. On oil wealth and co-optation in Algeria, see John Entelis, "Algeria: democracy denied, and revived?", *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 16, n° 4, 2011 and Clement Henry,

- 5 But oil revenue was not funnelled out solely by the state through subsidies and investment projects. Critically, money was channelled into the local economy directly through oil companies and their employees. Indeed, in 1959, oil workers' wages from just *one* company were estimated to constitute some 50% of the entire Saharan economy, according to the management.¹⁰
- 6 Under colonial rule, oil exploration and extraction were highly protected industries, almost exclusively held by French companies. The two dominant interests were the majority privately funded and controlled Compagnie Française des Pétroles d'Algérie (CFP A) and a state-owned interest, the Société Nationale des Recherches et Exploration des Pétroles en Algérie (SN REPAL).¹¹ The extraction of oil and gas was concentrated in the northeast of the desert, the largest sites at Hassi Messaoud, Hassi R'Mel and Edjeleh. Here, thriving and entirely new towns sprang up- some estimates put the population of the largest, Hassi Messaoud, at 8,500 at its peak in the development period.¹² The ways in which oil workers choose to spend their earnings then, was critical to the evolution and integration of the regional economy. However, as this article will demonstrate, such spending did not simply mirror or reinforce the respective state policies of division and integration. Instead, oil companies and their workers were autonomous economic agents, directly defining the political-economic space of the Algerian nation.
- 7 Late colonial-era oil companies certainly conceived of themselves and their staff as powerful political and economic forces in the formation of the Saharan 'nation'. Business planning at the major oil interests considered salaries not only in terms of company profit and loss, but also

how such employment would shape the '*national*' Saharan economy- and how such benefits could be maximised.¹³ Taking this logic even further, CFP A explored the possibility of directly 'taxing' its local employees- deducting a proportion of their wages- and investing this money into their home towns and villages.¹⁴ This would then be used to finance continued agricultural production in the absence of local oil sector workers who were employed away on oil sites, but also for the general improvement of the facilities in the villages themselves.¹⁵ Such improvements, however, did not represent an entirely altruistic community endowment but rather a self-serving means to 'support' their employees. In fact, these improvements aimed primarily to 'cushion' the 'culture shock' between the lavish luxury of life on the oil sites and the 'rustic poverty' of their rest periods.¹⁶

Such an approach, therefore, clearly demonstrates the central role of oil companies and oil sector employees in defining the socio-spatial politics of the late colonial Sahara. First, these investments demonstrate that oil companies defined a deliberate and overtly political role for both themselves and their employees. The language and scope of the 'taxation' project and its implications for public infrastructures elevated the company itself to a quasi-state actor. More significantly, by directly taxing local workers and then shaping the scope and reach of public investment around these workers specifically, these professionals emerge not as passive recipients of oil wealth, but instead, as important figures in public revenue creation and infrastructure development. Similar trends are also clear in the placement of other community investment projects, such as agricultural centres and cutting-edge hospitals. These were built in close proximity to the oil towns, to facilitate both their direct management by, and

"Algeria's agonies: oil rent effects in a bunker state", *The Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 9, n°2, 2004.

¹⁰ F de Laboulaye, *Problèmes humains au Sahara*, 30 December 1958. 18V01807/192, Total Archives, Paris, France.

¹¹ Other key interests included the Compagnie de recherche et d'exploitation de pétrole au Sahara (CREPS), and Compagnie des pétroles d'Algérie (CPA).

¹² Konrad Schliephake, *Oil and Regional Development Examples from Algeria and Tunisia* (New York: Praeger, 1977), 97.

¹³ Laboulaye, *Problèmes humains* (cf. note 10); Internal CFP A memo, 1959. 18V01807-192, Total archives.

¹⁴ M. Metz, letter to M. Benseid, 1960. 18V01807/192, Total archives.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Laboulaye, *Problèmes* (cf. note 10).

subsequent cessation to, oil sector employees.¹⁷ Oil workers then, shaped company investment into a specifically Saharan economic and infrastructural development programme. This simultaneously reinforced the narratives of colonial segregation (through developmentalism) but also undermined the state's role here, creating uneven regional geographies where public services were tied primarily to oil-producing regions and non-state actors.

9 Oil workers had even more agency over how they actually *spent* these wages. This was particularly important given the huge proportion of the local economy that these wages represented. In the late colonial era, the personal wealth management and spending choices of French oil workers particularly did little to further the state policy of permanent entrenchment in the Sahara. Instead, viewing their residence here as temporary, these workers focused on saving- usually to put towards a house purchase back in France- maximising the benefits of the disproportionately high earnings and paid-for onsite luxury facilities.¹⁸ These perceptions of temporary settlement were fuelled in part by the ongoing resistance of oil companies to establishing permanent family settlements on their sites- much to the disappointment of the colonial administration.¹⁹ As such, very little of their income was invested into the local economy.

10 Indeed, oil companies repeatedly clashed with the colonial administration over their employment practices, and how these reflected- or not- state policy. Perhaps most critically, proponents of the French Sahara were keen to illustrate the extraordinary potential of French economic hegemony by achieving *full* employment in the Sahara, with a workforce drawn exclusively from local residents. Oil companies were staunchly opposed. Indeed, companies went so far as to write to training providers asking them to tone

down the career ambitions of local students. CFP A actually threatened to withdraw funding for industrial training for providers who refused to comply and also argued that the agricultural- rather than industrial- programmes on offer should be expanded.²⁰

11 One notable exception to the limited flow of capital from oil workers into the local economy was a small expenditure on local food products. The potential of this local market was severely limited by the insistence of oil companies on food supply lines running from France, or the north, deliberate policy choices designed maintain a sense of inherent 'European' privilege and cultural continuity for their French workers.²¹ Nonetheless, the small-scale markets dealing with oil workers directly still fuelled nomadic settlements on the outskirts of oil towns, where livestock and crops were raised.²² In contrast, by the mid-1960s, as the proportion of local staff in higher paid positions slowly climbed, wage investment in other local businesses increased. In particular, local oil sector employees fuelled a mini construction boom in the oil regions as they invested their wages in the construction of houses and the establishment of businesses.²³ These exchanges, then, highlight how oil workers as an independent economic force helped shape the demography and urban landscape of the Sahara.²⁴

12 Oil workers drawn from the Saharan region were also critical in colonial efforts to present a symbiotic relationship between the oil economy and 'traditional' Saharan economic and cultural structures. As one report put it, the aim was instead to 'tightly associate petrol site, palm grove and herd.'²⁵ In practice, this meant representing the

¹⁷ F. de Laboulaye, letter to M Crosnier, 10 January 1962. 18V01807/192, Total Archives.

¹⁸ CFP A, Projet de cité à Hassi-Messaoud : Etude Préparatoire, 17 July 1958, 11. 18V01807/170, Total Archives.

¹⁹ Le Mangou, note for M. le Therisien, 19 February 1962. 18V01807/168, Total Archives.

²⁰ Laboulaye, Problèmes (cf. note 10).

²¹ Commission générale, Budget d'équipement du Sahara, May 1960. F60 4004, French National Archives, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, France. D. Plessis, "Quel visage le Sahara d'hier et d'aujourd'hui aura-t-il demain ?" in L. Armand et al (eds.), *Le Sahara en Questions* (Paris: La NEF, 1960).

²² Serge Lerat, "Hassi Messaoud", *Cahiers d'outre-mer*, no. 93, 1971, 30-1.

²³ Schliephake, *Oil*, 115, 119-121 (cf note 12).

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ M. Metz, letter to M Benseid, 1960 (cf. note 14).

oil industry as a supplement and support to- not a replacement of- traditional industries.²⁶ This focus on the 'traditional' had the added benefit, of course, of further entrenching the colonial definition of Saharan culture and identity. The investment projects into local workers' hometowns, is one clear example of this prerogative. Local oil workers were further critical, however, as the tangible enactment of these linkages in practice, highly mediated representatives of the successful marriage and integration of oil and the oasis, the modern and the past, the French and the Saharan. This work was an important crutch to French diplomacy: it was on the success of such projects that the colonial administration attempted to defend its Saharan claims, claiming to make huge strides in the 'global' problem of developing modern industry in 'backward' areas.²⁷

13 Oil companies and local government then, took a keen interest in the movements and lifestyle choices of their Saharan staff. These employees were extensively studied and promoted as living exemplars of the fluid integration of the oil and traditional economies. This included, for example, reporting on the 'adaptation' of local staff to industrial labour and supporting their 'specific' needs with specialized recruitment, induction and training.²⁸ These ideological frameworks were extended into the architecture and even interior decoration of lodgings within the oil sites and training schools.²⁹

14 Reporting in popular, political and company media widely promoted this notion of the French Sahara as personified by the oil workers. Working relationships across the labour force

were described as productive 'fraternities of labour,' 'free from racial hierarchies'- despite the rigid hierarchies imposed in professional status and segregated town planning.³⁰ Local workers were particularly key to this image. One exemplary tableau published in 1959 for example, describes the blue jean-clad oil workers triumphantly riding scooters away from the work sites for a rest period, triumphantly 'returning'- with their all-important wages- to the oasis villages and date plantations.³¹ Here then, modernity/ the oil economy- represented by clothing and mastery of modern machinery and *Saharan* tradition-farming and oasis settlements- are literally linked by the physical movements of the oil worker (and their wages). Changes to the oil worker's person are present but superficial (clothing for example) and facilitate the seamless movement between agriculture and industry. The preoccupation with keeping oil workers firmly rooted in their traditional settlements, moreover, extended far beyond the rhetorical. Instead, these prerogatives were definitive in shaping the housing and facilities provided within the oil towns. In 1958, for example, a project to launch family settlements for Saharan employees within the oil towns was opposed and ultimately rejected for fear it would inspire too significant a change for local social structures and lifestyles.³² Thus, the 'successful' integration of local staff into oil sector employment represented a fusion of France and the Sahara, and was thus an important means of promoting and defending the colonial frontier.

Overall, oil workers were an important, but contentious, economic force in the attempts to create a separate Saharan nation, or latterly, to integrate the Sahara fully within the Algerian state. Indirectly, oil workers shaped the vast financial investments of their employers into the local economy. These investments were conceived of broadly in support of the Saharan frontier and colonial 'progressivism' here, but also created layered economic and

²⁶ For an alternative approach to the mining industry and modernity see James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

²⁷ See, for example, D. F. Borrey and D. G. Lambert, "Quels problèmes humains se posent dans le Sahara moderne ?" in L. Armand et al (eds.), *Le Sahara en Questions* (cf. note 21)

²⁸ Ibid; Prohuza, Preliminary report 'Operation Mekhadma', 1958. 18V01807/615, Total Archives.

²⁹ Laboulaye, *Problèmes* (cf. note 10).

³⁰ Davis "*Algeria's*", 324 (cf. note 5).

³¹ Plessis, "Quel" (cf. note 21).

³² CFP A, *Projet*, 11 (cf. note 18).

political geographies which in turn undermined the colonial claims to the region. More directly, oil workers, positioned as exemplars of a symbiotic relationship between the Sahara and France, personally directed important revenue streams and economic linkages which reinforced the uneven integration of the region.

RESOURCE CONFLICT: OIL, LABOUR AND THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

16 Oil workers, and the sites on which they lived and worked, also stood for the French Saharan frontier in a far more literal sense: militarily. In fact, oil sector employees shaped the war of independence and its aftermath in the Sahara as direct combatants. Their stories are critical to understanding how insidiously the war shaped lives and livelihoods in a region often understood as passive or minimally affected by the conflict, and moreover, the role of local inhabitants in the conflict.³³ Furthermore, focusing on oil workers as having an agency in the war reframes our understanding of oil and warfare more broadly, going beyond models of grievance and greed.³⁴

Oil workers, whether local or from the metropole, were primarily engaged in the war because their labour was an integral part of fuelling the imperial war machine. On the French side, the precious resource had not only been a decisive motivating factor in the launch of the Saharan campaign but in the latter years of the war was perceived as literally powering the French war effort.³⁵ Furthermore, both sides were aware that

³³ Jacques Frémeaux, "The Sahara and the Algerian War", in Martin S. Alexander et al (eds.), *The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954-62* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 76.

³⁴ On oil and secessionist tension see Collier and Hoeffler "Greed" (cf. note 9). On oil companies as diplomatic agents see also Roberto Cantoni, *Oil Exploration, Diplomacy, and Security in the Early Cold War: The Enemy Underground* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

³⁵ FLN propaganda frequently urged workers on oil and other critical sectors, like docking, to leverage their critical roles to 'sabotage to the imperial war machine.' Soummam Report, 25 August 1956. 350, RG 84, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, United States.

control of the flow, access and knowledge of the oil reserves were central to the outcome of the war. In 1958, for example, the FLN reported that it had 'exchanged oil for freedom.' These widely circulated stories suggested that the FLN had used oil to 'buy' American support-exchanging oil rights for political and military support, including troops and arms.³⁶ Perhaps even more striking, a French dependence on Italian experts allowed the Italian company ENI to collate and provide the FLN with a detailed understanding of the oil deposits and value. This proved decisive to the long-awaited peace agreements signed at Evian in March 1962. The Accords had been under tense negotiation for twelve months before they were finally signed, with disagreements over the sovereignty of the Sahara and the future of French settlers in Algeria coming dangerously close to completely destroying the negotiations. The unexpectedly detailed knowledge of their resource wealth gave the Algerian delegation a much-needed advantage over their French counterparts.³⁷

Because of this inherent political and economic value, pipelines, exploratory missions and extraction sites were threatened and actively targeted by the pro-independence Front Libération Nationale (FLN) and bitterly French-Algeria Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS) alike.³⁸ FLN agents infiltrated the extraction

³⁶ Cootes letter to Matt Loram, 28 February 1958. 350, RG 84, NARA.

³⁷ Frémeaux, "The Sahara", 76 (cf. note 36). Here, and in the longer term, however, the acute lack of Algerian technicians and resultant dependence on French staff, as well as the French market, prevented the Algerian delegation from pressing this advantage further. This issues were so significant that Ben Bella allegedly gave the order to sign oil sector agreements without even reading them-Abdelatif Rebah, *Sonatrach: une entreprise pas comme les autres* (Paris: Casbah, 2006), 34. On the importance of trained labour to the development of an independent Algerian economy see Musso, Marta, "Taking Control: Sonatrach and the Algerian Decolonization Process" in Moses Ochonu, *Entrepreneurship in African History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018).

³⁸ Note sur les incidents survenus sur les chanterais du lot nord, 20 March 1959; Meeting minutes: sur la protections des établissement de stockage des produits pétroliers, 6 September 1958. 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

sites several times, on intelligence-gathering missions. Other missions directly targeted the well-paid oil labour force to extort significant sums of money. Colonial reporting on these incidents carefully highlighted that although both northern Algerian and French staff would pay without complaint, local staff were resolute in resisting this pressure.³⁹ This carefully curated presentation, starkly highlighting the perceived regional differences, further justified the territorial division and continued to naturalise the 'innate' political and social differences of the Saharan people, even as victims of the violence and terrors of war.

19 In some cases, staff who refused to make the payments were physically attacked.⁴⁰ Further illustrative of the strategic importance and risk of attack, oil sites were demarcated as 'sites of national interest' by the colonial government. Oil companies leveraged this importance to secure a huge investment in defence spending at their sites, including increased surveillance, flyovers and weapon holdings on these sites, despite vehement military objections.⁴¹ Thus, although insulated to some extent from the horrors of the war, oil workers and the sites on which they lived and worked, were defended and targeted as an integral part of the imperial war machine.

20 To defend their interests in the Sahara, both the colonial government and oil companies themselves employed a range of strategies drawing on the presence of the oil workforce here. First, and perhaps most overtly, French oil workers were conscripted into armed territorial units. These units, operating with a specifically Saharan territorial scope, went far beyond securing their company sites, but in fact aimed

to 'contribute with our weapons to the French territorial defence.'⁴² Oil sector staff, then, were active combatants in the war, a de facto infantry, operating in defence of the Saharan frontier. Moreover, many units were so deeply invested in this mission that directors initially refused to surrender their weapons to the Algerian authorities at the end of the war.⁴³ In addition, local oil sector employees were engaged in intelligence gathering, monitoring radio transmissions or as a frontline informers, reporting directly to the companies.⁴⁴ French as well as Algerian oil sector employees, then, were direct and indirect combatants for the imperial defence: as workers, spies and even infantry. The specifically Saharan scope of their military activities, and their echoes into the post-independence years, was a further defence- both literally and figuratively- of the Saharan border.

Secondly, stringent labour and border controls were introduced to 'protect' oil sites from rebellious '*northern*' forces. These extensive efforts imposed sweeping controls of movement across the 'border,' and highlight how integral national oil workers were to both the conflict itself and the imposition of the Saharan frontier. These controls sought to entirely 'cut off' the Sahara from the north, specifically to prevent 'dangerous' northern Algerians, posing as oil workers, accessing the valuable oil sites. Furthermore, labour controls on the oil sites themselves were recognized by the civilian and military authorities as a critical line in the French defence. As a result, oil companies introduced increasingly rigorous controls on their staff, including issuing ID cards and opening on-site employment centres to carry out more rigorous background checks for new

³⁹ Meeting between BRP and General Mirambeau, 22 May 1959 and Max Lejeune, letter to F Crosnier, 28 November 1957. 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

⁴⁰ Note 20 March 1959 and Meeting minutes, 6 September 1958 (cf note 38) ; M Clayaux, compte rendue de la mission effectuée à Hassi Messaoud et à Ouargla, 26-29 May 1958. 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

⁴¹ D Chevrière letter to Général de division commandant interarmées au Sahara, 27 March 1962. 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

⁴² N° 10/I of the 102 Région Militaire relative à la mise sur pied d'Unités Territoriales d'un type spécial au Sahara et de son modificatif n° 82.0II EM. 10/1/MOB, 13 September 1956.18V01807/297, Total Archives.

⁴³ Meeting notes, représentatives of principales compagnies pétrolières and the état major mixte de le Z.E.S, 19 June 1962; Réunion de l'état major (cf. note 42). 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

⁴⁴ P Crosnier, letter to the Minister of the Sahara (undated). 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

staff.⁴⁵ Oil companies were directly responsible for monitoring and expelling ‘suspect’ staff.⁴⁶ They also worked closely with the nearby prefecture both before and after independence to quickly curtail any signs of pro-FLN union activity, until the prefecture was deliberately moved away from the oil sites.⁴⁷ As both individuals and a labour force, then, Algerian oil sector employees clearly represented a dangerous threat to the colonial mission in the Sahara. The threat of these staff, moreover, shaped a policy that further rooted the frontier into lived realities- here as a controlled ‘national’ border. However, by tying the border controls and state offices to oil sites to control these workers, the effect was to further limit the scope of administrative reach and legitimacy, further tethering itself to the oil nodes.

- 22 Overall, oil workers were an important force in the war of independence-through their labour, as victims and as combatants. Their varied roles in the conflict had the combined effects of shaping the active field of conflict in the desert region, reinforcing the Saharan frontier as a de facto state border and compounding the uneven representation and reach of the colonial administration. Instead, because of the role of and response to oil workers here, claims to Saharan sovereignty became increasingly dependent on and operated through oil- as a physical and political as well economic centre.

A COFFIN OR A SUITCASE: UNIONS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NATION

- 23 Finally, I turn here to explore the political influence wielded by organised oil workers and their unions. Like civil movements in Algeria more broadly, their histories have been obscured in a broader historiography focused primarily on the years of violence and conflict. However, these stories are critical to understanding the political and economic entanglement of postcolonial France and Algeria for two reasons. First,

because the activism of oil workers in Algeria remained fundamentally defined by the interwoven oil network- creating very real political leverage in a way that wider conceptualisations of oil and its networks have failed to account for.⁴⁸ The connections between Algerian extraction and French refining and consumption of oil products remained symbiotic and interdependent, a result of the pricing structures baked into the independence accords. A combination of protected reference prices and refining laws meant that the most profitable operations in Algerian extraction depended on a French refining outlet, and vice versa. As we will see, French oil workers particularly effectively leveraged the importance of these linkages for companies, and their own unique place within this system, for political/economic gain. Secondly, I draw attention to the competing visions of economic independence within Algeria and how these conflicts shaped the changing relationship between the two nations as well as FLN nation-building projects domestically.

Early union activity was concentrated in the Sahara and dominated by the war. In early 1962, one of the first major campaigns within the sector was for the relocation of the families of French staff, hitherto housed in the cooler coastal north, to the relative safety of the Saharan oil towns, where the outright violence, fighting and attacks were more limited.⁴⁹ In an astute and politically self-aware move, the campaign targeted the government as well as their employers and deftly leveraged the political import attached to the industry and its workforce. The movement argued, for example, that given their own ‘critical’ role to the French nation, imperial claims to the Sahara would ‘collapse,’ should they be forced to abandon their posts in order to assure more adequate protection for their families.⁵⁰ In so doing, organised workers exploited both their frontline

⁴⁵ F Delavesne, letter to the Minister of the Sahara, 5 December 1957. 18V01807/297, Total Archives.

⁴⁶ Id.

⁴⁷ Id.

⁴⁸ Notably Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy* (cf. note 2)

⁴⁹ Motion to the direction of CFP A from the committee of the personnel of the south, 19 February 1962. 18V01807/297, Total archives.

⁵⁰ Id.

and ideational importance to the economy as well as exemplars of French civility.

25 Indicative of the strength of the mobilisation, the campaign was a success. The arrival of women and children revolutionised the encampments, hitherto bastions of masculinity- literally as much as figuratively. The extent of the changes, moreover, throws the influence and power of the workers' movement into even sharper light, considering the vehement objections to family settlements that had dominated oil policy until this point.⁵¹ In fact, oil companies carefully accommodated the feminine 'sensibilities' of their newest residents, particularly concerned that the inherent 'mental fragility' of women would be vulnerable to the brutal *depaysement* of desert living. Indeed, these concerns carried so much weight that even in wartime adding new swathes of greenery- a huge financial and environmental cost given the local water shortages- was given equal priority to reinforcing security measures.⁵²

26 Given this rigid adherence to gendered biological difference, it is perhaps surprising that a very high proportion of these new arrivals took up paid employment, and moreover, that they were actively encouraged by the companies to do so. In fact, the interest here was both entirely self-serving and indicative of just how important employee morale was. Companies had long been concerned and opposed to the presence of women on the camps. One key concern was that these unoccupied and isolated women would unleash their frustrations on their husbands, ultimately sabotaging their performance at work. In contrast, even from the very earliest consideration of family settlements on the oil towns, female employment was posited as the solution, an alternative, tangible outlet for any such frustrations.⁵³ It is clear then, that the oil labour force was astute and well organised from its earliest inception in

Algeria, particularly effective at trading on their own status at the heart of the colonial Saharan dream. Their campaigns, which also played on the notions of innate biological and 'Saharan' ethnic difference, had huge implications for the demography of the region and fundamentally changed the shape of the oil towns, despite the objections of their employers.

Oil unions, like the workforce overall, were a 27 heterogeneous and varied group. Broadly categorised into three groups- French, *pied noir* and local, these distinctions were malleable and complex- simultaneously reinforced and undermined by hiring policies of oil companies.⁵⁴ Oil workers' organisations included pro-independence groups, notably chapters of the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA), who were latterly honoured as having 'assured Algeria's economic future' through the course of the conflict by defending oil installations from OAS attack.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the OAS was well-represented among oil sector workers, who were widely perceived as a very real threat to a peaceful French withdrawal.⁵⁶

Other French oil workers, however, were rep- 28 presented by unions with less polemic stances on French Algeria, such as the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and the Confédération Française des travailleurs chrétiens (CTFC). Key concerns among these workers were the assurance of their own financial future through the tumultuous political change. As the Evian accords passed through the lengthy processes of agreement, ratification and finally implementation in the summer 1962, tension on the camps was high. One key fear, stoked by pro-independence and pro-French Algeria groups alike, was that French workers would be wholesale replaced by Algerians- and this, in turn, would

⁵¹ Mangou, note (cf. note 13).

⁵² André Conquet, La C.F.P. (A.) De Paris A Alger et Hassi-Messaoud en 1962, 20 July 1962. 18V01807/236 Total Archives. J. D. Herbes, Implantation d'une cite d'urgence pour familles, 30 April 1962. 18V01807/165, Total Archives.

⁵³ Id. ; H. Duquenois, Projet de Cite à Hassi Messaoud: Etude Préparatoire, 16 July 1958. 18V01807/170, Total Archives.

⁵⁴ For example, as noted above, oil companies stressed their attainment of labour 'equality' in the camps whilst continuing to practice residential racial segregation.

⁵⁵ "La Vie de Nos syndicats- L'UGTA et l'Or noir", *L'Ouvrier Algérien*, 1 November 1962.

⁵⁶ T. E. Evans, letter to R.M Hadow, 9 May 1962. 165671, FCO, Kew Archives, London, United Kingdom.

result in an ‘effusion of blood.’⁵⁷ Concerns about their professional future, however, were by no means new. In fact, despite the high proportion of OAS representation and their own status as the very emblems of the French Sahara, oil workers and their unions had been diligently preparing for a comprehensive French withdrawal from as early as 1958. Unions had most notably been backing notions that would facilitate workers’ redeployment within the metropole at the fall of the Algerian Front.⁵⁸

DESPITE THESE FEARS, THE REALITY OF INDEPENDENCE AND ITS AFTERMATH WAS MINIMAL CHANGE TO

29 the privileged living and working rights of French oil workers. Under the Evian agreements, French companies retained exhaustive advantages over the exploitation and sale of Algerian oil. As a result, French companies and French employees overwhelmingly dominated the industry and enjoyed other mandated benefits in travel, customs and social security.⁵⁹ This all came at a high ideological and financial cost to the Algerian government. In response, the Algerian state launched increasingly vitriolic attacks on oil workers- *not* just their employers- as agents and exemplars of ongoing neocolonial transgressions of Algerian state sovereignty.⁶⁰

30 In an attempt to redress the balance, the Algerian state introduced a number of polemic policies. One of its central platforms was the

⁵⁷ L Carcassés, Préfet des oasis synthèse mensuelle des renseignements, 13 March 1962; Marcel Turon, synthèse mensuelle des renseignements, 1 December 1961. AG/5(1)/1824, Diplomatic Archives, Nantes.

⁵⁸ Préfecture of the Oasis, Synthèse Mensuelle des Renseignements, 13 March 1962. AG/5(1)/1824, French Diplomatic Archives, Nantes, France.

⁵⁹ M Tuech, letter to the Préfet, 11 March 1964 ; D Dommel, letter to les Consuls Generaux et Consuls de France en Algérie, 7 July 1964. MDAE Ouargla Consulat série A 11, French Diplomatic Archives, Nantes.

⁶⁰ Through 1964 and 1965 Ben Bella gave a series of speeches promoting Algerianisation of the oil sector and attacking the ‘shocking inequalities’ of neocolonial oil system, see for example, speech to Congress of the Oil Workers Union, 4 October 1964, cited in *Perspective Mondiale, Un service de presse ouvrier*, vol. 2, no. 35 (October 16, 1964).

Algerianisation of oil sector staff. ‘Algerianisation’ itself was a sweeping national movement bound up with the process of establishing a post-colonial national identity, often through use of language (for example, moving to an Arabic based education system) and shared history. The extent to which these linguistic or pedagogical Algerianisations were imposed, altered and assimilated remain highly contentious.⁶¹ For oil companies, however, ‘Algerianisation’ translated to localised commercial control at all levels, particularly the replacement of French staff with Algerian nationals. This was all the more vital given that the lack of trained workers remained a critical weakness in the state’s attempts to wield more direct control of its central industry and was a key reason the French government had held onto so much control of the oil sector- and ultimately the nation’s economy- after Evian.⁶² The issue of Algerianisation as well as other controls over the payment oil sector staff became increasingly contentious by 1965 as the initial terms of the Evian accord were due to be renegotiated. These changes were a source of alarm to the workers’ unions who attempted to mitigate the potential impacts by securing greater rights to redeployment in France in the event of job loss, particularly for those of pied-noir descent.⁶³

Perhaps surprisingly, this seemingly defensive 31 campaign, also pushed for salary *increases* for French staff working in Algeria. This seems

⁶¹ Tristian Leperlier, “The Post-colonial Internationality of Algerian Academics”, in Johan Heilbron et al (eds), *The Social and Human Sciences in Global Power Relations. Socio-Historical Studies of the Social and Human Sciences*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Ibtissem Chachou, “L’algerianisation du français. Vous avez dit « sabir » ?”, *Lengas* vol. 70, 2011; Beïda Chikhi, “L’Algérie: La postindépendance, l’effervescence cosmopolite et la littérature”, *International Journal of Francophone Studies* vol. 19, n°1, 2016.

⁶² On the differing approaches to and results of oil companies Algerianisation policies see Radouan Mounecif, “Prudence and decision making: The Compagnie Française des Pétroles (Algérie) and the algerianization of its personnel (1962-1971)”, *Entreprises et histoire*, vol. 92, 2018; Frémeaux, “The Sahara”, 76 (cf. note 36); Rebah, *Sonatrach*, 34 (cf. note 37); Musso, “Taking” (cf. note 37).

⁶³ Louis Dauge, letter to the Secrétaire d’Etat, 29 February 1965; report on the situation of French executives, technicians and employees in Algeria and in the Sahara. SEAA 208, French Diplomatic Archives, La Courneuve

strikingly out of step with the political direction, but the unions went so far as to justify their claims as being necessitated *because* of Algerian attempts to impose economic sovereignty. They argued, for example, that the new import controls and autogestion had vastly increased the cost of living.⁶⁴ They aimed much of their campaign at the French administration, maintaining, as they had in earlier years, that they, as workers, were irreplaceably ‘critical’ to French foreign policy in Algeria- no longer aimed at defending French sovereignty but a new era of ‘cooperation.’ For Pompidou’s government, mutually beneficial industrial development in Algeria remained a central plank of foreign policy, a shining exemplar of the French ‘third way’ and securing appeal and influence in developing nations. Moreover, the partnership with Algeria underwrote the French oil sector which was predicated on Algerian oil as a reliable ‘domestic’ supply line.

32 This well entrenched sense of their own political centrality continued to shape French oil workers activism even after the Algiers accords of 1965. In 1966, for example, a French employee of the joint Franco-Algerian gas processing enterprise CAMEL wrote 13 threatening letters to other French employees of the company. The author, Domer, posed as a UGTA representative, claiming that CAMEL must be ceded to the Algerians- threatening the recipients with ‘a coffin or a suitcase.’ When the plot was eventually uncovered, Domer confessed the letters had been intended to provoke a mass panic and departure of French staff. This, he strongly believed, would crash the Algerian economy and force the Algerian government to abandon attempts to Algerianise its industry.⁶⁵ It is clear then, that from being politically apathetic, oil workers perceived of themselves, and acted, as key diplomatic agents- indeed, they understood and leveraged the nature of their work as fundamentally political. Moreover, they drew their political clout from their place at the forefront of the vast vested French interests in Algeria, which rested on the intertwined oil network.

Activity among oil chapters of the UGTA and other local unions was primarily focused on issues of nationhood, sovereignty and economic independence. Between 1964 and 1966, campaigns focused on the ‘economic neo colonialism’ of the industry, which included anything from immediate working conditions, like pay, to the wider economic structures of the industry, such as the domination of French companies in production. The UGTA in particular was well represented- in places, some 84% of local employees were unionised and highly active. 33

One key campaign was for the extension of the role of workers councils within all foreign oil companies. The UGTA argued that this policy was critical to the Algerian revolution and recognition of its socialist centre. The UGTA was particularly keen to recognise a comparatively broad scope of responsibility for these elected committees, which would include the training, hiring and firing of staff. Their employers read the campaign very darkly. For them, the campaign was latest battleground of the Algerian state’s efforts to extend its own control over the industry. The committees, they argued, would have so much control over hiring and firing that they would enact Algerianisation from the inside. Indeed, companies were increasingly convinced that the campaign was in fact aimed at making their own operations so untenable that they would ultimately abandon their concessions, handing the state a *de facto* nationalisation.⁶⁶ 34

The oil companies’ response then, was framed by their view of the oil workers as a powerful political force and effectively a state tool. They worked closely with their embassies to navigate the unrest and studiously avoided any potentially inflammatory action. This included delaying the closure of defunct drilling and transport sites and avoiding any staff lay-offs: companies broadly played for time as the French-Algerian negotiations dragged 35

⁶⁴ Id.

⁶⁵ Jean-Félix Chavret, letters to the French Ambassador, 11 February 1965 and 2 February 1965. SEAA 208, French Diplomatic Archives, La Courneuve.

⁶⁶ Esso, Concerns about activities of Algerian workers committees, 23 January 1965. PET 6, NARA; US Oil Company Interests in Algeria, 23 November 1965. Pet 6, NARA. The future of petroleum product marketing companies in Algeria, 3 August 1964. Pet 15, NARA.

on, expecting that these agreements would ultimately put an end to the unrest.⁶⁷

36 In reality, however, the relationship between the Algerian state and the union movement was complex and often conflicting. In public, the administration maintained a policy of studied ambiguity to much of the union activity in both its rhetoric and policy. One central tactic was simply to delay or obfuscate policy decisions. As one example, the state employed deliberately confusing language and constant delays in requests to clarify the legal standing and scope of the workers' committees.⁶⁸ This delicate policy kept the international companies as well as labour unions enough onside that the state had sufficient support behind the main thrust of its oil policy: economic independence by wresting direct control of the industry from French interests. This effort hinged entirely on diversification of markets and producers, in which the international and the ability of Algeria to staff and manage its own industry, were crucial.⁶⁹

37 However, whilst Algerian and UGTA-affiliated oil workers certainly conceived of much of their union activities in nationalistic terms, these terms were not entirely aligned with the state outlook. For example, after the extensive fight to implement workers' committees – with the committees themselves justified as an expression of *Algerian socialism* in practice – some of these committees ultimately believed that the national interest was best served by establishing close working relationships with the oil companies themselves. Thus, at BP for example, the workers' committee actually published written warnings to the staff stressing that their interests lay with the profitable running of the *company*, and *not* the promotion of the broader economic agenda of the UGTA or FLN. Because of the committee's status as an exemplar of the FLN's socialism in practice, such a clash was deeply politically uncomfortable.⁷⁰

Such clashes, moreover, were not confined to 38 isolated workers' committees. By the mid-1960s, the prevalence and power of labour activity was a huge headache for the oil companies. Key potential allies like Esso and Mobil both cited the extent of the labour unrest as a defining cause of their limiting of their interest in Algeria.⁷¹ Moreover the unrest imposed huge delays on critical deals as oil company management struggled to contain wave after wave of staff unrest. This included the building of the first Algerian-controlled oil pipeline and the increasing of the Algerian share of the largest national refinery – two crucial infrastructures for an autonomous state oil policy.⁷² In these ways, then, the disparities in the models of economic independence held by state and the grassroots unionists ultimately served to perpetuate the very structures that held French influence in place.

Tensions with the state, moreover, were not 39 limited to international diplomacy but also to domestic state-building projects. Here again, union activity seemingly lent support to the state, particularly in its efforts to realise the political and cultural connection of the north and south of the country, such as the strike action against 'apartheid' staffing policies.⁷³ In reality, however, the relationship between the unions and state was critical in fuelling regional division and secessionist tensions in the Sahara. For local membership, national structures repeatedly failed to address to realities of oil production on their lives and livelihoods. Directives from the union centrale's were repeatedly rejected as being 'unrepresentative' of local needs and regional union leaders were elected on tickets promising to address local issues around oil extraction, most notably employment and pushed for more devolved, regional union structures.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Sinclair labor dispute, 31 December 1966. PET 6, NARA.

⁶⁸ Esso, Concerns (cf. note 67).

⁶⁹ Musso, "Taking Control" (cf. note 37).

⁷⁰ Gelvaris, Algeria-Organisation, 12 February 1965. ARC 53458, BP Archives, Warwick, United Kingdom.

⁷¹ US Oil Company Interests (cf. note 67)

⁷² Algerian Petroleum, 2 December 1964. PET 6, NARA. Labor Troubles, 6 November 1964. PET 15, NARA.

⁷³ Weiss, *Doctrine* (cf. note 1).

⁷⁴ Troubles of Oil Workers, 21 October 1965. PET 6, NARA. J. R. Mandereau, Problèmes syndicaux aux Sahara-Réélection du Secrétaire Général de l'U.G.T.A., 13 April 1964. 21 PO ALG

40 The response of the state further intensified the pressure. Local strikes and rebellious committees and leadership were denounced as counter-revolutionary and removed from power. Their replacements were, in turn, rejected by their local chapters.⁷⁵ Here the localisation of oil reserves and production set against increasingly centralised power in the north threw regional and local disconnect into sharp light- spilling out at ground level as those who refused to take part in strikes were increasingly subject to threats and even violence.⁷⁶ As a result, tensions between and across grassroots union members and centrales quickly escalated along pro and anti-state lines. Thus, despite the superficial support for the nation-building and national unity projects of the FLN, union activity often conversely had the effect of reinforcing regional fractures.

41 Overall, oil workers' activism through this period was a powerful, active and varied force, consistently conceived of acting within the framework of nationhood and sovereignty. Whilst broadly supportive of state prerogatives, differing understandings of what economic independence would look like in practice hampered the effectiveness of both the state and the unions. Moreover, whilst French workers particularly continued to draw significant political influence from the interlinked oil economy, grassroots unions were increasingly fractured along regional lines.

CLOSING REMARKS: (RE) WORKING THE FRONTIER

42 It is clear, then, that the oil labour force played an active role in the evolving political and economic relationship between France and Algeria both before and after independence, inexorably

intertwined with the definition of the Algerian nation and the establishment of its southern border. As an economic force, oil workers had a nominally supportive but pragmatically contentious relationship with the respective state attempts to establish sovereignty in the Sahara. In particular, oil workers' wages and expenditure patterns created layered economic and political geographies with diverse relationships to the governing centre. For the colonial administration, this was further compounded by the workers' military role. This simultaneously buttressed the Saharan 'border', but also challenged and disrupted sovereignty claims in the resource rich regions, which became increasingly dependent on and operated through oil, with long term repercussions for state legitimacy in the south.

Finally, the varied, dynamic and politically 43 engaged unionism across the sector had an antithetical relationship to notions of statehood and independence. Particularly after Evian, organised (Algerian) labour lent superficial support to the establishment of a unified, economically independent and socialist Algerian state. In practice, workers' movements actively disputed and even blocked some key state policies here, whilst the workforce as a whole continued to draw significant political influence from interlinked/ neocolonial oil connections. Overall, this study suggests that the transition away from colonial rule was uneven and messy, simultaneously reinforcing and fragmenting colonial ties. These incongruities were the result of neither a teleological ascent of independent statehood nor a switch from overt political influence to economic control but instead the result of dynamic and unpredictable interactions at different levels of agency, drawing together citizens and governments, workers and companies.

V 730, diplomatic archives, Nantes. André Pautard, "Un Syndicalisme mal adapté", *Le Monde*, 13 January 1965.

⁷⁵ Gelvaris, Algeria-Settlement of Strike, 17 May 1966. ARC 41865, BP Archives; Gelvaris, BP Algeria-Organisation, 2 September 1965. ARC 53458, BP Archives. Note d'information- offensive syndical dans les compagnies pétrolières, October 1964. SEAA 208, diplomatic archives, La Courneuve.

⁷⁶ Id.

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