

AHS London Lecture Thursday 16 January 2025

Nikos Gorgoraptis, A French revolution in watchmaking: LIP and the experience of workers' self-management

LIP was founded by Emmanuel Lipmann in 1867 in Besançon, the epicentre of French horology at that time. It rapidly became a thriving manufacture and by the 1930s it was the largest watchmaker in France. Under the management of Fred Lip (grandson of the company's founder), 1500 workers at LIP were producing over 500,000 watches a year in the 1960s, sold through a well-established distribution network in France and abroad.

In 1973, having acquired a majority stake, Swiss giant Ebauches SA - ASUAG decided to liquidate LIP and planned massive layoffs. The workers refused to accept that fate. Inspired by the events of May 1968, they occupied the factory, seized a 'war treasure' of 65,000 watches, and under the slogan 'we produce, we sell, we pay ourselves, it's possible', they resumed production without managers. Their struggle was organised by trade unionists but led by an 'Action Committee', where decisions were made collectively by all workers. Women, who formed over 50% of the workforce at LIP, led a 'revolution within a revolution', questioning traditional gender relationships at the workplace.

They were able to sustain themselves through a prolonged period of negotiations, from which they emerged victorious: LIP reopened under the management of 'left wing boss' Claude Neuschwander and all workers were rehired by December 1974. This marked a period of remarkable creativity, with designers such as Roger Tallon and Isabelle Hebey putting forward innovative watch designs which became both popular and influential.

Nikos Gorgoraptis is a London-based member of the AHS Wristwatch Group. He is interested in the intersection between horology and the labour movement.

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However, a new government under Giscard d'Estaing decided that LIP 'must be punished' to serve as an example. Key public sector contracts and loan agreements were therefore cancelled, LIP found itself in difficulty again and it filed for bankruptcy in February 1976. The workers occupied the factory again, resumed production, and formed the co-operative *Les Industries de Palente*, which continued manufacturing watches until the mid-1980s.

Using an unusual timepiece as a starting point, parallels will be drawn between the struggle of the workers at LIP and historic events in Greece at the same time. The legacy of 'the LIP affair', as it lives on today in self-managed organisations around the world, will also be examined.