

## Origins, Organization, and Structure

In 1894 a French army officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, was tried and convicted of espionage and sentenced to life imprisonment. The trial caused a brief public sensation and was soon forgotten except by a handful of relatives, intellectuals, and army officers who had growing reservations both about Dreyfus's guilt and about the conduct of his trial. Faced with the government's refusal to reopen the case, in January 1898 the famous novelist Emile Zola published *J'Accuse*, an open letter to the President of the Republic, appearing in the Radical newspaper *L'Aurore*, which bluntly and eloquently accused the army of having knowingly convicted an innocent man. The government promptly laid criminal charges against Zola.

On February 20, 1898, in the midst of the Zola trial, a group of upper-class Parisian intellectuals met at the home of Senator Ludovic Trarieux. The senator, who had just testified in Zola's defense, desperately wanted to found "a group, an association, a League [or] something" whose mission was to "safeguard individual rights, the liberty of citizens and their equality before the law."<sup>1</sup> There was in fact precedent for such a League. Ten years earlier, when the democratic republic had seemed menaced by the renegade General Boulanger, a group of militant republicans had founded a League of the Rights of Man to defend public liberties and the regime. As that League had dissolved itself on the defeat of Boulanger, Trarieux and his associates decided to readopt the name.<sup>2</sup>

Within a month of the initial meeting, the new League had attracted 269 members. By the time it held its first general assembly on June 4, there were 800 members; by the end of that year there were 4,580 members, 200 of whom attended the second general assembly in December. When Dreyfus was finally pardoned by the French government at the end of 1899, the League had 12,000 dues-paying adherents in seventy sections. The new League also displayed an indefatigable energy. The Central Committee elected in June 1898 met no fewer than twenty-three times in the next six months. When Trarieux wrote

an open letter to the minister of war, General Cavaignac, demonstrating the blatant illegality of the 1894 trial, the League published 400,000 copies and distributed one to every local and municipal politician as well as to every schoolteacher, priest, pastor, or rabbi in the nation. When Dreyfus was granted a new trial in the summer of 1899, the League established a stenographic service dispatching a verbatim transcript of the court session to any newspaper that wanted it, ensuring that the story was on the streets of Paris within three hours. It also published a million copies of the complete transcript of the new trial. Throughout the affair, and until Dreyfus's final rehabilitation in 1906, the League churned out an endless stream of documentary evidence (comparisons, for example, of the handwriting on the *bordereaux* and that of Esterhazy) and scores of polemical pamphlets. It also held a large number of public rallies.<sup>3</sup> Its militant activity certainly disquieted the government of the day; in the spring of 1899 the police searched League headquarters, and its leaders were fined a symbolic sixteen francs for belonging to an illegal association.

From the beginning, leaders of the new League agreed that, unlike its predecessor, it would not be a single-issue organization and that the Dreyfus affair was the beginning but not the end of its campaign for justice. Its membership continued to expand dramatically. By the time Dreyfus had been completely rehabilitated in 1906, there were nearly 60,000 members in over 500 sections; by 1910 there were 80,000 members in over 800 sections. Owing to internal political conflict,<sup>4</sup> membership declined to just over 50,000 on the eve of World War I. By 1919, however, League membership had surpassed that of 1910; in 1926 it stood at 140,000 and reached its peak in 1932 with 180,000 members in some 2,400 sections. This made it, by French standards, a huge organization. Neither the Socialist party nor the Communist party had a comparable membership before 1936. In the early 1930s, the League may well have been larger than all of France's left-wing parties combined.<sup>5</sup> And it was certainly the largest organization of its kind in the world. A decade after its creation the League had 80,000 members; by contrast, thirty years after its formation, the comparable ACLU had a mere 9,000.

What kind of people joined the League? Men, mostly. Women were admitted to the League from its beginnings, although it took until 1925 for the League to change the wording of its statutes to make female membership sound like a right rather than a concession. Of the 204 people who served on the Central Committee from 1898 until 1940, only thirteen were women—rarely more than one or two out of forty in any given year.<sup>6</sup> Their role in the deliberations of the Central Committee was, with a few exceptions, minimal. The League took

some pride in the fact that three of the members of its first Central Committee in 1898 were women, although one was the wife of the treasurer and the other two quickly ceased attending meetings. It is not possible to state with any certainty what percentage of the rank-and-file members of the League were women as this was one statistic the League did not (and probably could not) record. In the 1930s, the League introduced a half-price tariff for women members who were married to leaguers. In 1937, of 118,867 members who had paid their dues, 996 (or less than 1 percent) fell into that category.<sup>7</sup> These statistics would not show widows or unmarried women, of whom there were a higher than usual number in interwar France. Nor would they include married women who belonged to an association their husbands did not, although this group is unlikely to have been large. Of the 262 members of the section of Parthenay in the Deux-Sèvres, nine, or 3.8 percent, were women.<sup>8</sup> It seems unlikely, therefore, that women accounted for more than 5 percent of League members. Women were even more seriously underrepresented at the local leadership level. A woman, usually a schoolteacher, might be the secretary of a local section, rather less often the vice president, and only rarely the president. In 1923, of 995 known presidents of sections, five were women. By the end of the decade, nine of the 1,871 section presidents were women.<sup>9</sup>

Members of the Central Committee, the League's governing body, were drawn overwhelmingly from the Parisian academic world, the legal profession, and increasingly from the parliamentary elite. A third of those who served on the Central Committee in the 1920s were employed in higher education (the universities and the Lycées); a quarter were current or former senators or deputies, and about one-tenth were high-profile lawyers. Of the fifty-seven members on the 1931 Central Committee nineteen were teachers, three-quarters at the university level, and a further fifteen parliamentarians (twelve deputies, one senator, and two former deputies.) The rest were, in roughly equal proportions, journalists, *hommes de lettres*, lawyers, and trade-union executives. Members of the working class (as opposed to their trade-union representatives) were rare. Nor was there much turnover; resignations and deaths rather than electoral defeats determined most departures from the Central Committee.<sup>10</sup> The presence of so many deputies, as well as the almost total absence of peasants or workers (but not women), was a source of annual grumbling by representatives of the League's left-wing minority, for whom the Central Committee's composition provided a clue to its insufficient militancy. In fact, however, there was little, professionally or sociologically, that distinguished members of that minority from the rest of the Central Committee.

A sociological profile of the League's rank and file is a good deal more problematic and necessarily more impressionistic. Only in the case of a few sections have complete lists of the membership, including occupations, survived. Such lists are probably not representative of the League as a whole; the vagueness of many occupational descriptions and the inherent ambiguity of self-description render specious any attempt at sociological rigor. Of the nearly 600 members of the essentially rural section of the Mâcon, 17 percent described themselves as workers or artisans, 17 percent as small businessmen, and a further 17 percent as farmers (*cultivateurs* or *proprieteurs*). Nineteen percent described themselves as teachers and a further 22 percent as civil servants.<sup>11</sup> Another example, drawn from a very different environment and nearly thirty years later, was the section of Nancy. Of its 528 members, 305 identified themselves professionally. Thirty-eight percent defined themselves as workers, about two-thirds of whom worked in the local state-owned railway yards. A further 15 percent were "cadres"—foremen or supervisors, again more often than not in the rail yards. Fourteen percent were civil servants, and 15 percent were teachers at some level or other. The rest were either liberal professionals or independent business owners.<sup>12</sup> In the section of Parthenay, schoolteachers made up only 6 percent of the members but represented 60 percent of the teachers in the town.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1920s, roughly one-third of the presidents of all local sections described themselves as teachers or civil servants, a further third as small-business owners, and another third merely as local politicians (typically mayors, members of the municipal council, or members of the councils of the *arrondissement* or of the department). About 10 percent were members of the liberal professions.<sup>14</sup> At the level of departmental federations, by 1925 more than half of the presidents of departmental federations were either teachers or civil servants (36.2% and 14.9%, respectively). By 1929, the relevant figure was 57 percent (45 percent teachers and 12 percent civil servants). Liberal professions were better represented among the presidents of federations, at around one-fifth (as opposed to one-tenth at the section level.) Small business owners by contrast declined in importance, with 12 to 15 percent of the presidents compared to typically around 30 percent at the sectional level. Similarly, local politicians declined in importance compared to the sectional level; their numbers dropped from 12.8 percent in 1925 to 2.5 percent in 1929; by contrast deputies and senators, understandably, were more important at this level, representing 9 percent and 7.5 percent of the federation presidents in 1927 and 1928, respectively. A recent study of the League's leadership cadres, national and local, for the interwar years, has demonstrated that the liberal professions (law, medicine, and journalism, in that order) were

dramatically overrepresented. So too, although less pronounced, were teachers and civil servants. Peasants and workers were significantly underrepresented.<sup>15</sup> Although sociologically heterogeneous, the League was the terrain, par excellence, of the lawyer, doctor, journalist, schoolteacher, or civil servant.

The relative underrepresentation of the more humble elements of French society in the leadership—both national and local—of the League, not very surprising in itself, was always a sore point. As if to compensate for the League's essentially middle-class composition, many leaguers made something of a fetish of the lower classes. The economic constraints on the working classes served as a standard argument for refusal to increase League dues. League president, Victor Basch, who could have a tin ear for the sensitivities of his audience, enraged everyone at the League's 1931 congress by sarcastically noting that the proposed (and rejected) increase in dues would cost the typical worker all of two aperitifs a year. Of course, he was also alert to the substantial degree of posturing that went on at such events. At the next congress a delegate, speaking on behalf of the peasantry, attacked him for his penchant for Latinate phrases, more or less incomprehensible to the poorer elements of French society. Because his antagonist was in fact a graduate of the Sorbonne, Basch could not resist reminding him that he was perhaps not ideally placed to speak for the more humble elements in the League.<sup>16</sup>

The League's many critics often charged that it was dominated by Protestants, Jews, and Freemasons. The claim was excessive, but all three groups uncontestedly played an active role in the League from its foundations. This should not be surprising, as these elements had played a critical role in cementing the foundations of the democratic republic in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, Protestant ministers had been active in the early years of the League, and both Francis de Pressensé (president from 1904 until 1914) and his successor, Ferdinand Buisson (until 1926) were Protestants. So too were Mathias Morhardt, secretary general from 1901 until 1911, and Alfred Westfall, treasurer for most of the League's first thirty years. In 1926 Victor Basch, a Jew, became president and, in 1932, another Jew, Emile Kahn, became secretary general. Both Jews and Protestants were well represented on the Central Committee. Because the degree of religious devotion varied enormously among the League's leaders, it is next to impossible to establish exactly how many of its leaders were Jewish or Protestant. By the most elastic definition some 17 percent of the members of the Central Committee were Protestant; a further 12 percent were Jewish. Five percent were notionally Roman Catholic but married to Protestants or, in the case of an additional 3 percent, to Jews.<sup>18</sup>

The Freemasons were another story. As the League repeatedly pointed out, no president or secretary general of the League ever belonged to the Masons.<sup>19</sup> In fact, however, the milieu from which the League drew its members was deeply impregnated by Masonry. Masons played an active role in founding League sections,<sup>20</sup> and, as the right-wing press was fond of noting, officially blessed the League as its secular branch.<sup>21</sup> At the League's 1925 congress in La Rochelle, the president of the host federation announced that the local Masonic lodge had prepared an "intimate" reception for the Masons present and unhesitatingly declared that he expected that three-quarters of the delegates would be attending.<sup>22</sup> Many of the Radical (although fewer of the Socialist) deputies and senators who belonged to the League were Masons. Eleven of the twenty-six parliamentarians who served on the Central Committee in the 1920s belonged to the Masons. Over the span of forty years, fully one-third of Central Committee members belonged to Masonic lodges.<sup>23</sup> Although most Masons were relatively marginal figures in the League, some played an important role. Camille Planche (deputy from the Allier) and René Château (deputy from the Charente-Maritime) were both presidents of the large League federations of their respective departments. Ernest Lafont (deputy from Paris); Eugène Frot (deputy from the Loiret), Marc Rucard (deputy from the Vosges), Maurice Viollette (senator from the Eure-et-Loire), all Masons, were high-profile members on the Central Committee.<sup>24</sup> The overlapping memberships between the two associations prove little beyond the fact that both appealed to defenders of the lay republic and, less nobly, membership in both was of incontestable utility to aspiring politicians.

Why would someone join the League? Given that so many Frenchmen did—there were probably as many League members in 1933 as there were members in all French political parties combined—the question is an important one. The League took some pride in its large and usually growing membership. Yet League leaders suffered few illusions as to the reasons for its healthy membership rolls. In 1927, shortly after becoming the League's president, Victor Basch, wryly observed that the 44,000 new members recruited in the previous eighteen months probably did not reflect a concomitant increase in concern for the defence of civil liberties.<sup>25</sup> A decade later he would remind his colleagues that it was misleading to suggest, as they so often did, that the League had 160,000 *militants*; what it had instead was 160,000 dues-paying members.<sup>26</sup> Basch knew only too well that many leaguers were in the organization for the material advantages membership might afford. Sceptics within the League sometimes suspected that the real reason for its large mem-

bership was because League dues were significantly lower than those of the political parties of the Left, making the League, for many, a "cheap" political party.<sup>27</sup> Certainly any attempt to raise dues, even to take account of inflation, involved a protracted struggle with the militants who invariably invoked the penury of the proletariat, a predictable response that overlooked the fact that the proletariat was seriously underrepresented in the League. Much of the activity of local sections involved, and at times was limited to, political activity that a leaguer could carry on in his or her section at a fraction of the cost of an often like-minded counterpart in a neighboring Socialist section.

What was supposed to set a leaguer apart from a Socialist militant was the former's dedication to fighting cases of injustice. But the distinction between left-wing politics and fighting injustice was not obvious to many of the League's rank and file. In 1930, for example, the ten sections (with 622 members) in the department of the Mayenne reported having dealt with no individual cases of injustice in that year and having limited itself exclusively to propaganda.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the League's grass roots had a notoriously elastic definition of "injustice" as the thousands of resolutions made annually by the local sections demonstrate. The section of Caen, for example, arguing that among the rights of man was the right not to be injured in automobile accidents, passed a motion calling for improvements in municipal traffic regulation.<sup>29</sup> The section in Mâcon once gave equal weight to two resolutions: one dealt with the question of separation of church and state; the other dealt with postage rates for local newspapers.<sup>30</sup> As one member of the League wryly noted, sections were not beyond voting motions calling for spelling reform.<sup>31</sup> The causes were usually worthy but better suited for civic improvement associations than for the League of the Rights of Man. The League invariably attracted single-issue advocates; one individual, troubled by the widespread practice of riding unlit bicycles at night, promised to join the section of Villerupt (Meurthe-et-Moselle) if only it would address this pressing social problem.<sup>32</sup> The leader of the League's section in Marseilles was obsessed with bullfights and filled his local bulletin with so much copy on this topic that exasperated members finally had to protest that this was the League of the Rights of Man and not the Society for the Protection of Animals.<sup>33</sup> In 1928, the section of Laôn badgered the Central Committee about rabbits from nearby hunting preserves that were devouring crops. For once, most members of the Central Committee agreed that the depredations of rabbits were outside the remit of the League. But Secretary General Henri Guernut, who just happened to represent that constituency in parliament, countered that one

of the rights of man was surely the right to “harvest the fruits of one’s labor.”<sup>34</sup> This kind of activity risked trivializing the work of the League. In 1935, Léon Emery, a member of the Central Committee, caustically observed that the typical resolution of a local section involved a demand for the regulation of heavy truck traffic, which, he hinted, might explain why officials in the government did not always take the League’s interventions very seriously.<sup>35</sup>

The basic unit of the League was the local section. The choice of the word *section* was not accidental. It conjured up images of the sections of the Parisian *sans-culottes* and was also a direct imitation of the Socialist party. By 1933 there were just under 2,500 sections, which varied in size from a couple of dozen members to several hundred. In large centers (Lille, for example), sections of over 1,000 members were not unknown. The sections passed on the admissibility of members—often a hotly debated issue—as well as their exclusion for activity unworthy of the League. In time, the League had become so large and the number of sections so numerous, that the League introduced an intermediate body between the sections and the central leadership: the departmental federation. Once again, this action was in direct imitation of the Socialists, and once again *Fédération* had a distinctly revolutionary resonance.<sup>36</sup>

Not every section was active. The League forever complained of sections that were “asleep,” but anyone reading the provincial press and the local bulletins of the League cannot help but be impressed by the energy displayed at the local level. Many sections met regularly, passing their various resolutions on to the Central Committee. Most held an annual general meeting as did all federations. In the latter case, they were almost always presided over by a member of the Central Committee. Some of the larger federations, for example, Aisne, regularly held two annual congresses.

The Central Committee was the directing organ of the League. Chosen by co-optation in the League’s early years, the Central Committee, by 1907, was elected directly by the sections. Anyone could be nominated, provided he or she had the support of a certain number of sections or the existing Central Committee. In practice, the nominees of the Central Committee, usually figures in the world of academics, law, or politics with a high profile, were almost invariably chosen. This situation gave rise to annual feuds about the dictatorial tendencies of the Central Committee, although this diminished in the 1930s when a number of more or less permanent critics of the League leadership were elected. For practical reasons, virtually all of the members of the Central Committee came from Paris or its immediate environs. In 1926, the League decided to add a number of *nonresident* members representing the provinces.<sup>37</sup> Al-

though these nonresidents rarely could be expected at the frequent meetings of the Central Committee, they could, and did, submit their votes and their opinions by mail. Never did all members of the Central Committee meet at once. Some members, chosen largely for their political or academic profile, rarely attended; Léon Blum, for example, only once attended a meeting.

The high point in the League's year was its annual congress. Attracting between 400 and 1,000 delegates, it was the occasion for the finest academic discourse, the display of rapierlike wit, and inevitably a personal "incident" or two. Members of the Central Committee and representatives of the big departmental federations spoke frequently and at considerable length, a fact that did not escape the rank and file.<sup>38</sup> Rare was the delegate who renounced his turn at the rostrum merely because he had nothing new to add. Time invariably ran out; late night or early morning sessions were the rule. To satisfy the many delegates who had not, by the end of one day, had a chance to speak, the 1937 congress scheduled a special one-hour session to begin at 9:00 sharp the next morning. Typically it began at 9:30 and was still going strong two hours later.<sup>39</sup> Many a humble provincial militant, having spent a year polishing his discourse, learned to his chagrin that he had five minutes in which to summarize it. Still, at most congresses, modest members of small sections managed to command the floor long enough to detail the problems of their neck of the woods or, not infrequently, the particular injustice to which they had been subjected, usually to the ill-disguised indifference of the audience. With five minutes remaining in an afternoon session at the League's 1925 congress, Salzes, a delegate from the federation of the Hérault rose to inform his colleagues that he would require at least an hour to explain the complexities of his own personal grievance. He believed himself unfit for military service, despite a medical examiner's report that concluded the opposite. Salzes had a long history of belaboring congresses with his case, and both the Central Committee and its legal experts had repeatedly examined it and found it to be without merit. To the intense exasperation of Secretary General Henri Guernut, the congress agreed to a special evening session. Of course most delegates had no intention of actually attending the session because it conflicted with a reception being held by the Masons. Others, one suspects, agreed to a night session as it would afford them a chance to ride their personal hobbyhorses. Before Salzes could take the floor, a delegate from Algeria took the opportunity to enlighten his fellow leaguers about "the native mentality." "Make the slightest concession to the Arabs," he assured everyone, "and they will immediately feel themselves entitled to strike you down."<sup>40</sup>

Women were present at all League congresses, although they rarely constituted much more than about 10 percent of the delegates and often rather less. Many appear to have been there primarily in their capacity as wives of delegates.<sup>41</sup> They spoke infrequently; of the sixty or seventy delegates who took the floor at an average congress, rarely were more than four or five of them women. When they did speak, women delegates were always greeted with enthusiastic applause. This might have reflected the fact that women were invariably more succinct than men and that their interventions were usually rather more to the point. The effusive reception of their remarks, especially when they involved women's political rights, might also have been designed to mask the general agreement on the part of most leaguers to ignore their political ramifications.

The most exciting part of a League congress was the presentation of the *Rapport Moral*, roughly the equivalent of a State of the Union address. Here, the president or secretary general, detailed the activities of the League in the previous year, the issues that faced it in the future, and the current political situation in France (and increasingly, Europe). It was at this moment that the great battles of principles took place between the League leadership and its rank and file or, more accurately, the left-wing elements who claimed to speak for the rank and file. By the interwar years, there was a more or less permanent minority of dissident voices within the League, dating from disputes over the origins of World War I. Although members of the minority did not always speak with one voice (nor did their opponents in the majority), more often than not the internal battles within the League pitted the two factions against one another.<sup>42</sup> Spokespersons for the minority could be found in many provincial federations, notably those of the Rhône, the Allier, and the Ardèche, but the core of the opposition almost always came from the federation of the Seine and from certain sections, Monnaie-Odéon in particular.<sup>43</sup>

In time these struggles became formalized. For the opposition, the Central Committee had never been energetic enough on any issue; its activity was invariably too parliamentary, too academic, and never worthy of the League that began with the Dreyfus affair. The Central Committee predictably replied that the opposition had paid no attention to the organization's activities in the previous year, was apparently ignorant of League statutes, and was not worthy of the League founded to defend Dreyfus. The pattern of these debates and because delegates on both sides seemed able to refer instantly to arcane texts and documents suggest that the debates were not entirely spontaneous and were the reflection of arguments carefully rehearsed in Paris. Provincial delegates sensed this and repeatedly lamented that they were subjected to what

amounted to Parisian quarrels. The larger provincial Federations, those of the Charente-Maritime and the Aisne in particular, frequently engaged in polemics with the federation of the Seine about its allegedly domineering tendencies.<sup>44</sup> In principle, the vote on accepting the Rapport Moral was a vote of confidence; a negative vote automatically brought the resignation of the Central Committee. In practice this never happened. On those rare occasions, as at the 1935 congress, when a close vote was anticipated, the two sides worked out a compromise formulation.

Nonetheless, League congresses—much like meetings at the federation and section levels—could be very lively. This was so, at least in part, because leaguers could be extraordinarily litigious. The Duplantier affair was a classic example. In 1907 in the garrison at Poitiers, an army doctor attempted to shove a pill down the throat of a reserve soldier he suspected of faking illness in order to avoid an arduous march. The soldier, on the advice of a fellow reservist, Caillon—secretary of the neighboring League section of St. Vivien and also secretary general of the federation of the Gironde—formally lodged a complaint. The colonel of the regiment concluded that the doctor's actions had been inappropriate and confined him to base for two weeks. The Central Committee, apprised of the matter, called on Duplantier, the president of both the section of Poitiers and of the federation of the Vienne, to make a formal investigation. Duplantier turned the matter over to a friend, the editor of a local left-wing newspaper. Based on his friend's findings, Duplantier submitted a formal report to the Central Committee in which he concluded that the reservist had in fact been faking illness, that the doctor in question was well respected by his troops, and that Caillon was an outspoken antimilitarist. This report outraged both the section of St. Vivien and the departmental federation of the Gironde, which sent out circulars denouncing Duplantier who was, at that very moment, a candidate for membership in the Central Committee. In truth, their version of events was not, in substance, all that different from Duplantier's, but they took strong exception to the depiction of Caillon as an "antimilitarist" and openly suggested that the tenor of Duplantier's report owed something to his personal connections with the doctor in question, a connection Duplantier flatly denied.

Fully two hours of the League's national congress of 1908 were taken up with this question, to the obvious exasperation of some delegates who believed, quite correctly, that they were being subjected to petty personal quarrels. In the end, an arbitration committee was struck, which after two more hours of deliberation concluded, without passing on the question of complicity, that Duplantier

was guilty of submitting a somewhat partial report.<sup>45</sup> This particular issue, trivial in itself, would have larger consequences for the League, however. Behind personal spats of this kind, there almost always lurked more consequential political tensions. Although Duplantier claimed that what was at stake was his personal honor, it was no secret that he was one of the more outspoken critics of then president, Francis de Pressensé and his efforts to take the League in a more overtly socialist direction.<sup>46</sup> Duplantier resigned from the League and promptly began suing everyone. In particular, he won a defamation suit against League secretary general, Mathius Morhardt who, in his capacity as editor of the League's *Bulletin Officiel*, had published the stenographic transcript of the Duplantier debate (and indeed of the entire congress). At issue here (or so claimed Morhardt's many enemies within the League) was that Morhardt had all along been in possession of documents that cleared Duplantier of any suspicion of complicity with the doctor, documents that he had either misplaced or ignored, and the resulting suit had cost the League some 20,000 francs. The League and Morhardt were silent on this last point. But shortly thereafter Morhardt resigned as secretary general, citing reasons of health. There is no evidence linking these two developments but Morhardt, who lived another quarter century, was ever after a very bitter man.<sup>47</sup>

For all of its disputatious tendencies, the energy of the League was undeniable. In 1930, a fairly typical year, the Central Committee sponsored no fewer than 644 meetings; the sections and federations organized a further 2,500. The government obviously took these meetings seriously, dispatching (at least until the 1930s when the archival record runs out) hundreds of agents to report on the League's deliberations. Rarely did a meeting of the League take place without some agent of the Ministry of the Interior dutifully reporting on what had been said, thus saving the government the trouble of reading the invariably extensive accounts in the press. Across the desk of various agents in the Ministry of the Interior came reports labeled "very confidential," informing the government of the latest deliberations of the Central Committee, otherwise inaccessible to all but the 20,000 subscribers to the *Cahiers*.<sup>48</sup>

The assiduousness of government agents was all the more inane because the League prided itself, with good reason, on being "*une maison de verre*," literally, a glass house. Its internal organization faithfully reflected its call for an open and transparent French democracy. Its house organs, the *Bulletin Officiel* and, after World War I, the *Cahiers* went to exceptional lengths to apprise League members of all aspects of its internal life, including issues about which almost any other organization might have preferred to remain silent. No letter of res-

ignation, no matter how abusive, was refused space in the League's press. The *Bulletin* regularly published a stenographic record of League congresses, replete with all of the quarrels, spats, and insults that invariably occurred. After 1916 they were published as separate volumes. Debates of the Central Committee were also regularly published, not quite in stenographic form but with sufficient detail as to reveal to any reader the intensely personal nature of the debates that took place. Only once did the editor note that a debate had become so savagely personal that reproducing it would be inappropriate, although a record would be kept in the League's archives. Given how frank the published debates are, this debate must have been one angry exchange.<sup>49</sup> Dissenting opinions, including those sharply critical of the League's leaders, were routinely published, as were a wide variety of articles calculated to offend not only the League's leaders but also most of its members. The various resolutions of local sections, no matter how anodyne, would find a place in the League's bulletins. Any reader of the *Cahiers* could learn just about all there was to know about the way the League was run and what it looked like. One could discover how many members there were, who the presidents of every section were, how many members there were in any given department, as well as the percentage of the population in any department who belonged to the League. Anyone who cared could also learn what percentage of the leaguers in any particular department subscribed to the *Cahiers* (ranging from 33 percent in the Aisne to 4 percent in the Vendée). It is hard to imagine that any organization as large as the League was ever as openly and as transparently democratic.<sup>50</sup>

None of this candidness prevented vociferous elements in the League from asserting that its apparent openness served only to mask the occult dictatorship of the majority within the Central Committee. Routine were the charges that a self-appointed group of Parisian upper-class intellectuals ignored the views of the rank and file with which it was out of touch, cynically manipulated the congresses, and restricted dissenting views from appearing in the *Cahiers*. These were predictable enough charges, emanating as they usually did from members of that same Parisian intellectual elite. But there was some basis for them. Until 1907 the Central Committee was chosen by co-option. In that year, the statutes were revised to the effect that candidates for the Central Committee could be nominated by the Central Committee itself, by local sections, or by departmental federations and would be elected at annual congresses. The Central Committee invariably nominated some dissidents for its slate but also reserved the right to indicate which candidates it had nominated, and such candidates almost invariably prevailed. Of the 204 members of the

pre-World War II Central Committee, only twelve were elected without the support of the Central Committee.<sup>51</sup> It was also true that at any given congress, members of the Central Committee did most of the talking. Still, the Central Committee was always subjected to a vote of confidence at congresses and invariably won them. For the minority, this proved only that their colleagues were adept at bullying provincial delegates. The majority countered that votes of confidence meant that they reflected the general sentiment of the average leaguer. A reading of the many local publications of the League suggests that this was by and large true. The ritualistic claim that dissenting views were excluded from the *Cahiers* cannot, with one notable exception in 1937,<sup>52</sup> be sustained by any careful reading of that house organ.

Although, in practice, internal democracy within the League never reached the lofty standards it set for itself, this can in large measure be explained by the relative indifference of the rank and file. The agenda of any given League congress was to be established by the votes of local sections. To some degree, this was a concession to sections in the West who were forever complaining that the one issue they really cared about, the clerical peril, was increasingly ignored by the League. But fewer than 5 percent of sections ever expressed an opinion on an agenda. To give local sections some direct input into League policy, the League organized a "question of the month" involving some issue of public policy and invited every section to submit its opinions. Typically, an elaborate questionnaire was sent out, laying out the issues at stake and requesting specific answers to specific questions. Some sections obviously subjected the questions to careful scrutiny and submitted detailed and thoughtful responses. But they were rare. Never did as many as 5 percent of the sections respond; 2 percent was more typical. Granted, some of the questions (for example, the Kellogg-Briand Pact or the merits of interfederal organization within the League) were unlikely to prompt much interest. But in 1930 the League posed a question—explicitly directed at its numerous North African sections—concerning the extension of political rights to the native populations. This sensitive issue ought to have stirred up interest but, again, only a small fraction of the sections bothered to reply.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, sections were always anxious to see their various resolutions published in the League's house organs and were indignant if they were not. But it did not escape the notice of headquarters that these resolutions were often formulaic and utterly identical to the simultaneous resolutions of a dozen other sections of the same department, all of which suggested that there was often not much original thinking at work in the deliberations of those sec-

tions.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, given the hard work in making the *Cahiers* an indispensable reference tool for any serious leaguer, it was a standing affront that only about one in ten bothered to subscribe. Granted, at twenty francs annually and thus twice as much as League dues (already a sensitive issue), cost might have been a factor. Many a junior civil servant might have earned less than 2,000 francs a year. But this fact alone probably does not explain the low subscription rate. Nor does the apparent indifference to the internal life of the League necessarily indicate general indifference. As a later chapter will show, the sections could be very active indeed on issues they cared about.