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No fowl play, French cops say

When it comes to ruffling the feathers of the national police force, the poultry producer of the French village of Loué is a repeat offender. Following the form of previous publicity campaigns, its latest advertisement also takes roguish pleasure in punning on the French word for “chicken”, which is also a slang term for a police officer. That’s why you’ll see on the current posters a policeman perched on a tractor, complete with siren, alongside a proud hen nesting on the village sign. The idea for the cocky campaign was hatched by the general manager of the Loué chicken co-op, Yves de la Fouchardiére.

This is not the farmer’s first offence. Back in 2010, he took a pop at the cops in a poster featuring a laidback lone policeman with the slogan “Loué chicken raised in freedom”, contrasted with a battery of bobbies crammed into a police van, labelled simply “Other chickens”. The point being to use humour to crow about the merits of free-range chickens compared to factory-farmed fowl.

However, the poultry producer’s cheeky colloquiality has repeatedly stuck in the craw of some members of the constabulary, who consider it an unacceptable affront to the dignity of their profession. Two years ago, the SGP Police Unity union fired off an indignant letter to him, in protest at what they called his “verbal assault on a law enforcement officer”.

Yet by squawking so loudly, the offended officers have ultimately shot themselves in the foot. Or, rather, they have given a shot in the arm to the poultry producer instead of enhancing the image of the boys in blue, who have instead come off as killjoys in this operation. And if their aim was to kill off the leg-pulling campaign, it has totally backfired, since the media and social networks have had a field day with it.

The union’s reaction is even more misplaced when you consider that Gallic culture has always has a playful penchant for using fowl language to refer to the police. Leafing through a few pages of the slang dictionary, you’ll find a number of mischievous monikers: “poulet” and “poulaga” (chicken) and “perdreau” (partridge) for “cop”, and “maison Poulardin” for “cop shop”. So the Loué brand is really only carrying on a popular tradition of teasing law enforcement officers.

What’s more, the slang term is in fact linked to the chickens produced by the Loué co-op. And the origin of the semantic association is revealed on the Ministry of the Interior’s own website: “By decree of the police chief of 7 September 1870, the town sergeants changed name to become ‘guardians of public order’. They received a new uniform, and the cocked hat was replaced with the kepi. In 1871, Jules Ferry handed the city barracks over to the police force to use as its headquarters. As the barracks had been built on the site of Paris’s former poultry market, the police then acquired the nickname ‘poulets’ “.

In the case of the Loué chickens, if anyone should feel the long arm of the law, it should be the trade union killjoys who have been a little too quick to take offence. Admittedly, there’s nothing particularly ingenious about the Loué advertising campaign, but it’s by no means an affront to the profession. There are also some officers who know the score.

In some police stations, the poster has become a real collector’s item, says an amused Yves de la Fouchardiére: “Back then, we printed off another 9,000 copies to keep up with all the requests we
got by post and phone. What’s even more surprising was that many requests came from police
stations themselves, no less. There was huge demand from the force – for leaving dos and the like”. So really there was hardly a need for them to get into such a flap about this case.