



FELLOW TRAVELLERS

*Communist Trade Unionism and
Industrial Relations on the French Railways,
1914–1939*

THOMAS BEAUMONT

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Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914–1939

Thomas Beaumont

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

First published 2019 by
Liverpool University Press
4 Cambridge Street
Liverpool
L69 7ZU

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data
A British Library CIP record is available

ISBN 978-1-78962-080-1
epdf ISBN 978-1-78962-491-5

Typeset by Carnegie Book Production, Lancaster

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Acknowledgements

This book began life as a PhD thesis completed at the University of Exeter in 2011. Research for the project was facilitated by several funding sources. Financial support from the University of Exeter was provided first, in the form of a bursary from the History department, and then through a studentship from the College of Humanities. Additional research funding was provided by grants from the Society for the Study of French History and the Royal Historical Society. In the final stages of the book project I was greatly aided by the award of a British Academy Small Grant, as well as generous support from the Liverpool John Moores University QR funds.

Some of the material contained in this book has previously been published elsewhere. I would like to thank Sage Publishing for permission to reproduce sections of my article, ‘Extending Democracy: Railway Workers and the Popular Front in France, 1936–38’, *European History Quarterly*, 44, 3 (2014), 458–479, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691414532058>.

I am very grateful to Martin Thomas, who supervised the original thesis. Martin not only put me on the trail of the cheminots, but also provided encouragement and the benefit of his experience and attention to detail throughout the project. I could not have asked for a better supervisor. Andrew Thorpe and Stacey Hynd also played an important role in the supervisory team. Their suggestions and advice were invaluable throughout the PhD. Jackie Clarke examined the original thesis and has continued to take an interest in the work as it has developed into a book. Also at Exeter, I am grateful to Tim Rees for his ongoing interest in my work and his friendship over a number of years. Tim was good enough to read the manuscript in full prior to completion. The work is all the better for his advice.

Since the completion of my PhD I have had the good fortune to work with fantastic colleagues at two institutions. First at the University of Bristol, and now at Liverpool John Moores University. At Bristol, Robert Bickers, Tim Cole, Josie McLellan, and Jonathan Saha were very encouraging and

always willing to discuss research. Roger Middleton gave valuable advice at a particularly tricky period and came up with the title *Fellow Travellers*. At LJMU I am grateful to the participants at the History Department lunchtime research seminar who read and offered valuable feedback on a chapter of the book manuscript. Beyond this, I would like in particular to thank Susan Grant, who read various sections of the manuscript in draft. In my first year at LJMU I was lucky enough to meet and make the acquaintance of Sam Davies, a superb scholar and a generous colleague. Sam was enthusiastic about this project and was a great source of knowledge and encouragement before his untimely death. He is sadly missed. My thanks to Alison Welsby and the staff at LUP, and to the anonymous readers for their feedback. My thanks, too, to the Labour History series editor Neville Kirk.

Friends both inside and outside of academia have been an amazing source of inspiration and support in the years it has taken to bring this project to a close. I have enjoyed discussing all things cheminot with Ludivine Broch over several years. Her insights and excellent work have done a great deal to help shape my own understanding of the railway workers and the professional world they inhabited. Alison Carrol and Laure Humbert have been longstanding friends, I am grateful to them for their advice and good company over a number of years. My thanks, too, to Jon and Rosie Edgar, James and Jo Hadley, Alex Howard, and Zena Wood. All have put up with my frequent discussions of railways, cheminots, and communists with patience and good humour. Michelle has been a huge source of support and has more than anyone motivated me to finally get this book finished. She read much of the work in manuscript with a sharp eye and the work is all the better for her input. I am deeply grateful to her for everything.

Finally, and most importantly, huge thanks to my family, and in particular to my parents, for their support and encouragement over the years. This book is dedicated to them.

Introduction

Railway workers (in French ‘cheminots’) were the earliest, and among the most enduring, bastions of communist support in twentieth-century France. From the earliest days of its existence, railway workers provided the French Communist Party (PCF) with some of its most high-profile national leaders, together with a legion of highly active party militants spread widely through urban and rural France. Dispersed cheminot cells maintained a communist presence in some of the deepest regions of rural France, while massive concentrations of railwaymen and women in urban centres such as Villeneuve-Saint-Georges and Saint-Pierre-des-Corps (Tours) nurtured a rich and powerful working-class communist culture. Most significantly, railway workers voted en masse for communist ‘shop stewards’ in the workplace and joined the communist-led trade union Federation in large numbers, consistently making it the largest of the trade union organisations on the railways between the two world wars. The relationship between railway workers and the Communist Party was at the heart of the growth of a distinctly ‘French’ communist political culture, yet it is a history which in large part has yet to be told. *Fellow Travellers* contributes to remedying this lacuna in the history of the communist movement in France.

The relationship forged between communist militants and railway workers in the period between the two world wars would have long-lasting consequences for industrial relations and left-wing politics in France. The choices made by communist militants among the cheminots in these years were profoundly influenced by two key factors. First, a working environment that was shaped by the professional ethos of railway labour and, second, by the long-lasting legacies of the devastating 1920 strike defeat, which effectively curtailed the railway workers’ willingness to openly confront management and the state for much of the rest of the period covered by this book. In such circumstances, communist activists looked to the everyday politics of the workplace as the key focus of their activities. In so doing, communist activists on the railways

set down deep and lasting roots of support. They maintained this support even through the sectarian period of the Comintern's shift to 'class-against-class', deepening their participation within railway industrial relations and engaging with managers and state officials. They would build upon this crucial experience during the years of the Popular Front (1934–1938). Here, in a transformed political and social landscape, France's railway employees joined alongside their fellow workers in shaping a new social contract for workers, extending the principle of democratic representation into the workplace. While the Popular Front experiment proved short-lived, its influence was long lasting. In the post-Liberation period, the key tenets of the Popular Front experience re-emerged within the nationalised SNCF, shaping the particular character of railway industrial relations – the peculiar mix of collaboration and hostile confrontation between management and workforce that continues to make the French railways one of the most contested sectors of the modern French economy.

Fellow Travellers takes the reader inside the social and political worlds of railway workers between the two world wars and in so doing sheds important new light on the nature and meaning of the Communist political commitment in France in its key formative years. Taken as a whole, this study provides an important contribution to the scholarship on communism and working-class history in France. It fills an important gap in the historical record and adds further weight to interpretations which increasingly stress the pluralism and complex webs of networks, encounters, and experiences which lay at the heart of communist political activism.¹

¹ For works stressing the pluralism and complexity of Communist political identities which go beyond the Cold War perspective of Moscow 'control', see for instance: on France, Julian Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: sociabilités militantes au PCF* (Rennes, 2010); John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front* (London, 2008); Laird Boswell, *Rural Communism in France, 1920–1939* (Ithaca, 1998); Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley, 1990). On Britain, see Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1934–1941* (Manchester, 1989); Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–1945* (Aldershot, 1995); Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow* (Manchester, 2000). On Germany, see Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protest to Socialist State* (Princeton, 1997). On Czechoslovakia, see Kevin McDermott, *The Czech Red Unions, 1918–1928: A Study of their Relations to the Communist Party and the Moscow Internationals* (New York, 1988). There are also a number of studies exploring the international variety of Communist experiences. See Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds), *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919–1943* (Manchester, 1998); Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds), *Communism, National and International* (Helsinki, 1998); Matthew Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period* (London, 2004); Michel Dreyfus et al. (eds), *le Siècle des communismes* (Paris, 2000); Jean Vigneux et Serge Wolikow (eds), *Cultures Communistes au XXe Siècle: entre guerre et modernité* (Paris, 2003).

The Professional World of the Railway Workers

At the heart of this study is the unique political culture of the railway workers, one which developed through workplace practices and the realities of railway industrial relations. In the broad, global scholarship on railway workers and the political and social worlds they inhabited in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historians have long emphasised the deep solidarities and working-class identities which informed worker activism on the railways. Profoundly socialised into the railway world by the actions of railway companies and the promotion of an *esprit de corps* fostered by company discipline and a quasi-military ethos, railwaymen came to develop a strong sense of corporate identity which, it is argued, fed directly into their political activism.² In Britain, western Europe, America, and the European colonial possessions, railway workers took the lead in developing working-class political movements.

As David Howell and others have emphasised, however, the complexity of railway identities could not be reduced to this sense of a railway *esprit de corps* imposed from above. Significantly, railway workers were themselves agents in the development of powerful social and political identities which existed independently from, and in opposition to, those which the railway companies and the state attempted to inculcate.³ Key battlegrounds within the sphere of railway industrial relations revolved around questions of worker autonomy, supervision, and control. In the twentieth century the struggle for an independent, autonomous space for ordinary workers within the labour process increasingly emerged as a significant factor in the development of political activism on the railways. ‘The struggle to defend this space’, noted David Howell, ‘was important in the development of a more militant workforce’.⁴

The idea of a ‘militant workforce’ on the railways runs counter to the view of railway workers presented in much of the literature on interwar French labour history. Railway workers today in France enjoy a reputation for political radicalism and industrial militancy. This is the product of

² See for instance, Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, ‘Corporate Identity and Solidarity among the Railway Workers of Atbara, 1924–1946’, *New Political Science*, 23, 1 (2001), 113–129 (113). On British railwaymen see, Frank McKenna, *The Railway Workers, 1840–1970* (London, 1980), chapter 2 (*passim*), and idem., ‘Victorian Railway Workers’, *History Workshop*, 1 (Spring, 1976), 26–73. For the French case, see Georges Ribéill, *Les Cheminots* (Paris, 1984). On the transnational nature of company policy around the world, see Shelton Stromquist, ‘Railroad labor and the Global Economy: Historical Patterns’, in Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labor History: A State of the Art* (Bern, 2006).

³ David Howell, *Respectable Radicals: Studies in the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 1–10, especially pp. 3–4.

⁴ David Howell, *Respectable Radicals: Studies in the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism*, p. 4.

high-profile involvement in totemic post-war industrial actions such as 1947, 1968, and 1995, and above all, the legacy of the so-called ‘battle of the rails’, the cheminot-led resistance to the Nazi occupation in the closing stages of the Second World War which witnessed railway workers sabotaging the national rail network in order to disrupt German supplies and logistics.⁵ This contemporary profile stands in marked contrast to the presentation of cheminot militancy between the wars when it was their lack of political militancy and radicalism which was the subject of contemporary critiques and of subsequent historical commentary. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, railway workers were indeed at the forefront of the industrial strife which afflicted France during the ‘two red years’, with cheminots involved in violent confrontations with police on May Day 1919, and then taking the lead in major stoppages in 1920, culminating in a month-long strike in May. However, this proved to be the high-water mark of such militancy. Defeated in 1920 and the victims of a massive employer and state backlash which saw some 18,000 workers sacked, the railway workers, split into often warring communist and non-communist factions, proved unable to defend post-war gains such as the eight-hour day. What is more, faced with an activist, paternalist company management strategy, railway employees were encouraged to identify ‘vertically’ with the interests of ‘their’ railway companies rather than ‘horizontally’ with the wider French working-class. Railway workers, it is alleged, endorsed the conciliatory managerial style of railway directors such as Raoul Dautry,⁶ and their social and political ambitions shrank to working loyally for the railways, gaining promotion and generous pensions, and spending their money on housing and consumer goods supplied in company-backed economats.⁷ Under the deadening weight of company discipline and state surveillance, together with the material benefits to be gained from toeing the line, railway workers, according to their most recent historian, simply withdrew from the ‘social battles’ of the interwar years.⁸ Absent even from the celebrated Popular

⁵ On this, see Ludivine Broch, *Ordinary Workers, Vichy and the Holocaust: French Railwaymen and the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2016).

⁶ On Dautry’s social strategies, see Raoul Badouï, *Raoul Dautry, 1880–1951: Le Téchnocrate de la République* (Paris, 1992), and John M. Sherwood, ‘Rationalization and Railway Workers in France: Raoul Dautry and Les Chemins de Fer de l’Etat, 1928–1937’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15, 3 (Jul., 1980), 443–474.

⁷ Such a view is most recently outlined by Laura L. Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens* (Durham, NC., 2008), and classically put by Gérard Noiriel, whose interest is very firmly focussed upon workers in the ‘modern sectors’ of the economy, the metalworkers: Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xixe–xxe siècle* (Paris, 1986).

⁸ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001* (Paris, 2002).

Front ‘social explosion’ of May–June 1936, politics and industrial militancy were, it is argued, simply put to one side while cheminots got on with the business of running the railways, until the exigencies of the occupation once more forced them to make political choices.⁹

And yet, as this book demonstrates, the above picture is far from complete. To be sure, company discipline and the powerful arm of the state exercised a considerable restraining influence over cheminot industrial militancy, and the impact of the 1920 defeat certainly cast a long shadow which even the early years of the Nazi occupation were insufficient to exorcise. Yet, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, while playing no role in strike activity and only fitfully participating in national political demonstrations, railway workers nonetheless acted as one of the major forces in communist politics in France. Historians have understood this relationship as something quixotic, a detail of communist history in France with less overall relevance to the ‘forward march’ of communism than the development of communist support among the semi- and unskilled workers in the metal working factories of the Parisian Red-Belt – the ‘génération singulière’ identified by Gérard Noiriel.¹⁰ Yet, as this book makes clear, communism spoke to the experiences of the railway workers within the workplace. It drew upon and defined a complex repertoire of subaltern militant practices which challenged the authority of company and state. What is more, the realities of the railway experience take us to the heart of the meaning of the communist commitment in France for a significant number of ordinary working people.

The railways were a highly disciplined and tightly supervised environment. Even those workers who could escape the immediate supervision of managers, such as locomotive footplatemen, were nevertheless subject to the remorseless tyranny of the timetable and the ever-looming threat of fines and penalties for late-running. Even the highly polished, brightly shining locomotive – the symbol of cheminot pride in their work – was at least in part a function of the tight regimentation of the railway world: any mainline locomotive driver caught neglecting his engine would be immediately downgraded.¹¹ Respectability and deference in the workplace,

⁹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*. See also François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer, tome 2* (Paris, 2005).

¹⁰ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xixe–xxe siècle*; on the role of the ‘métallo’ and the other archetype of the ‘communist’ worker, the miner, in PCF iconography, see Marc Lazar, ‘Damné de la terre et homme de marbre: L’Ouvrier dans l’imaginaire du PCF du milieu des années trente à la fin des années cinquante’, *Annales ESC*, 5, 45 (1990), 1071–1096; idem, ‘Le Mineur de fond: un exemple de l’identité du PCF’, *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 35, 2 (1985), 190–205.

¹¹ Marcel Péroche, *Les mémoires du Marcel Péroche, ‘Sénator du Rail’* (Paris, 1984).

and in wider society, which feature so prominently in discussions of railway workers (and in contemporary communist literature, for instance in Paul Nizan's 1933 novel *Antoine Bloyé*) were, however, only one element in a complex social environment which this book explores. In the tightly regimented world of the railways, with its quasi-military discipline, the supremacy of the 'rule book' and the intrusive presence of company and state surveillance in what was considered a key sector of national security, railway workers were often forced to turn to activities short of direct confrontation in order to highlight their grievances and to challenge company and state authority.

Such practices, often overlooked in interwar labour history in France in favour of the more obvious measures of militancy – strike action and political demonstrations – are key to understanding the social and political worlds of the cheminots between the two world wars. These rank-and-file practices were deeply informed by two key motivations: the desire for autonomy in the workplace and, linked to this, for an independent working-class presence to challenge and to limit company authority, often described in terms of its arbitrary impact over cheminot lives. Autonomy, influence, and power emerge through this book as the key driving forces behind cheminot behaviour between the two world wars. This is an approach to labour history which is at variance with the more 'materialistic' emphasis which has tended to stress wage rises, job security, pension rights, housing, and consumerism as ends in themselves. This has resulted in the mistaken labelling of such strategies as straightforwardly 'reformist', an analysis most recently challenged in the work of Tyler Stovall on working-class consumerism.¹² Ultimately, as this book makes clear, communism spoke to the experiences of rank-and-file railway workers. Railway activists drew upon and defined a complex repertoire of subaltern militant practices which challenged the authority of company and state.

Railway Workers and the Interwar Labour Movement

In the aftermath of the First World War, the French labour movement was divided between a reformist Confédération Général du Travail (CGT), and a communist-led Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU). On a national level, in the immediate aftermath of the split, the CGT established itself as the numerically stronger of the two unions. As CGTU strength declined through the 1920s and 1930s, the CGT's preponderent position among French workers was further consolidated. When reunification of the two confederations occurred in 1936 in the midst of the Popular

¹² Tyler Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919* (Cambridge, 2014).

Front, the CGTU was by some significant distance the weaker of the two unions. The interplay of a number of factors worked to limit communist influence in the workplace nationally prior to the ‘social explosion’ of 1936. As Olivier Forcade has noted, the strength of mainstream anti-communism was one important element during the 1920s, ‘the fight against Communism had practically become one of the basic values of Republicanism’.¹³ Added to this was the significant employer backlash against trade union activity during the 1920s. Victimisation of communist militants went hand-in-glove with paternalistic employer practices that sought to marginalise communist influence and to depoliticise the workplace after the industrial strife of the period 1917–1920. Historians have equally drawn attention to the divide between communist militants and workers in the period prior to the Popular Front whereby the former’s privileging of political issues at the expense of more mundane questions such as working conditions and the immediate concerns of the workforce left the latter unmoved.¹⁴

If the period prior to the Popular Front and the social explosion of 1936 – when union membership in the reunited CGT exploded and membership of the main left-wing parties, the Socialist Party (SFIO), and the French Communist Party (PCF) also increased dramatically – was one of significant difficulty for the CGTU, the CGT also fared little better in making its mark upon the political and industrial landscape of the late Third Republic. Attempts to extend wartime reformism, marked by close contacts with state officials and employers and a collaborative approach to industrial relations, founded as the state pulled back from its wartime interventionism following the armistice and employers moved to reassert their authority. Unable to defend labour’s wartime gains such as the eight-hour day, the CGT was also unable to advance the cause of workers through the political sphere. Interwar politics essentially remained blocked as a centrist consensus worked to exclude the left from office, aside from brief moments such as the Cartel de Gauche government in 1924–1926. Where the CGT was able to influence policy, such as the legislation passed by the Herriot government in 1924 granting an amnesty to workers sacked after the 1920 general strike, the conservative French senate worked to halt or water down its impact.¹⁵ Such were the difficulties facing the divided labour movement prior to the Popular Front that one of the most eminent

¹³ Olivier Forcade, *La république secrète: histoire des services spéciaux français de 1918 à 1939* (Paris, 2008), p. 352; on anti-communism more broadly see Serge Bernstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme en France, tome 1, 1917–1940* (Paris, 1987).

¹⁴ See the discussion in Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry* (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 43–44.

¹⁵ See chapter four below.

historians of the French left characterised these years as a ‘dead end street’ marked by ‘revolutionaries without revolution, reformists without reform’.¹⁶

The railway industry, however, offers an alternative perspective on these years. While the broader national picture is one of union weakness, the two major unions representing the cheminots, the communist-led Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Unitaire (FNCU), and the reformist, CGT-aligned Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Confédéré (FNCC), continued to recruit strongly during the interwar period. In contrast to the broader national picture, it was the CGTU affiliate, the FNCU, that held the upper hand among the railway workers for much of the period prior to the Popular Front.¹⁷ While the divided unions were certainly in a subordinate position to management until the events of 1936 dramatically transformed the political and social context, workers on the railways were nonetheless often able to exert significant influence upon railway politics, and to ensure that railway managers in the privately owned railway companies were unable to ignore workers’ representatives in the union movement.¹⁸ At the forefront of these developments were communist activists on the railways.

The pragmatic policies pursued by communists in the workplace, evidence of what Nina Fishman referred to as the influence of ‘life itself’,¹⁹ won communist activists significant support among the railway workers. At reunification of the two cheminot Federations in 1935 in the period of the Popular Front, communists were the majority force in the newly reunited CGT organisation. However, the role which communist activists and the Federation leadership on the railways were forced to play in the structures of railway capitalism did not always sit comfortably with their self-proclaimed identities as communists and revolutionaries. Forced to improvise and negotiate a ‘communist’ response to their environment, this study emphasises how communist activists drew

¹⁶ Georges Lefranc, *Le Mouvement syndical sous la Troisième République* (Paris, 1967), p. 266; see also, Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 22–28; see further idem, *The Politics of Depression in France, 1932–1936* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 41–46; Daniel Brower, *The New Jacobins. The French Communist Party and the Popular Front* (New York, 1968); A number of historians emphasise the weakness of the labour movement prior to 1936, Michel Dreyfus, *Histoire de la CGT* (Brussels, 1995); Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class, vol. 2, Workers and the Bourgeois Republic, 1871–1939* (Oxford, 1992); Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xix–xxème siècle*; Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du front populaire* (Paris, 1964).

¹⁷ For a discussion of membership information see chapter three.

¹⁸ Prior to nationalisation of the French railways in January 1938, five private companies and one state-operated network dominated the interwar industry. These were the Compagnie du Nord, the Compagnie de l’Est, the Compagnie du Midi, the Paris-Orléans, the Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée and the state-owned Etat.

¹⁹ Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–45* (Aldershot, 1994).

upon a rich repertoire of syndicalist traditions to guide them, refashioning managerial committees from potential sites of collaboration into front-lines in the class war and seeking to transform work-place negotiations and conflicts into educative events, with the aim of utilising them to build communist influence in the workplace and to raise, albeit slowly, the revolutionary sentiments of the cheminots. Whereas Kathryn Amdur, challenging the important thesis of Annie Kriegel, emphasised the continuing significance of syndicalist legacies in France beyond 1920,²⁰ this work joins the recent research of Ralph Darlington in emphasising the ‘fusion’ of syndicalist and Bolshevik traditions, rather than the straightforward displacement of the one by the other.²¹

This pragmatic and flexible approach did not gain communist leaders and activists on the railways the unqualified support of the Communist Party nationally, however. Typical of the party response was the internal party memorandum in 1928, which condemned the cheminots’ parliamentary illusions and reformist inclinations. The same report, however, also recognised the importance of maintaining the support of the massive cheminot constituency which the communists had gained through the 1920s.²² The weight of this support meant the PCF was disinclined to interfere too deeply in cheminot affairs, in contrast to the constant PCF involvement in the Parisian metalworking Federation, as identified by Michael Torigian.²³

The perceived narrow corporatist outlook of the railway workers and their unwillingness to participate in national political strikes and demonstrations organised by the communist movement also drew much negative reaction and comment from within the communist-led CGTU. Radical federations such as that of the Building workers were not reticent in castigating their cheminot comrades for their lack of political commitment.²⁴ Benoît

²⁰ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One* (Urbana, IL, 1986); Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–20. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris, 1964).

²¹ Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Aldershot, 2008). Other significant works to explore the relationship between syndicalist traditions and Bolshevik politics from an international perspective include Neville Kirk, *Transnational Radicalism and the Connected Lives of Tom Mann and Robert Samuel Ross* (Liverpool, 2017); Kevin Morgan, *Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike: The Lost Internationalist World of A. A. Purcell* (London, 2013).

²² Archives Départementales Seine-Saint-Denis, PCF Archive, 3 MI 6/43, séquence 294, Conseil Syndical 1928, Aux Secrétaires de secteurs, Membres du Parti 28/02/1928, p. 1.

²³ Michael Torigian, *Every Factory a Fortress: The French Labor Movement in the Age of Ford and Hitler* (Athens, Ohio, 1999).

²⁴ CGTU, *Congrès national extraordinaire, 2ème congrès de la CGTU tenu à Bourges du 12 au 17 Novembre 1923, compte rendu* (Paris, 1923), p. 420.

Frachon, a prominent communist activist and soon to become leader of the communist-led CGTU, gave voice to these frustrations noting in 1934 that the strength of the railway workers within the French communist movement was one of the key reasons for the failure of a more vigorous, revolutionary communist movement to emerge in the country.²⁵

Such were the perceptions. However, while the communist railway activists were deeply implicated in the professional world of railway work, this study emphasises that such activities did not necessarily lead to communists on the railways sealing themselves within a closed corporate world. In a very real sense railway issues, notably the question of railway safety, were powerful issues of national consequence. The communist campaign for greater railway safety saw railway workers join with a variety of working-class and middle-class groups in condemnation of regularly lax safety standards. Moreover, far from being marginal figures in the history of French politics in the mid-to-late 1930s, the case of the railway workers rather takes as to the heart of these seminal events. The experience of the railway workers through the Popular Front to the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939 sheds important fresh light on this crucial period in modern French history. Building upon the work of Herrick Chapman, Antoine Prost, and Talbot Imlay,²⁶ this study foregrounds debates over power and the symbolic impact of the changes wrought in industrial relations in the aftermath of the Matignon Accords of June 1936. In so doing, this work offers a wealth of new material and a new interpretation of social relations in late-Third Republic France.

Structure of the Book

Fellow Travellers proceeds chronologically, charting the origins and development of communist-led trade union activism on the railways from the First World War through to its (temporary) dissolution following the signing of the Nazi–Soviet pact in August 1939. Chapter one examines the growth of cheminot political militancy during the First World War. Though largely supportive of the war efforts, rank-and-file cheminots nevertheless

²⁵ *Cahiers du bolchévisme*, 1/6/1934, p. 648.

²⁶ Particularly Talbot Imlay, ‘Democracy and War: Political Regime, Industrial Relations and Economic Preparations for War in France and Britain up to 1940’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 77, 1 (2007), pp. 1–47; see also idem., ‘Paul Reynaud and France’s Response to Nazi Germany, 1938–40’, *French Historical Studies* 26, 3 (2003), 497–538; and idem., *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France, 1938–40* (Oxford, 2003); Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*; Antoine Prost, *Autour du Front Populaire: Aspects du mouvement social au xxie siècle* (Paris, 2006).

continued to see the struggle in class terms, a tendency which became ever more visible as the war progressed. The sense of the workers having made sacrifices for the national war effort while others enriched themselves, contributed to a powerful moral critique: first, of the war effort, then of social relations in France itself. As workers poured into the new united Cheminot Federation, their sense of injustice and demands for change were sharpened. This sense of fighting the war in order to usher in an era of profound social change would form a significant element of the post-war radicalism on the railways as workers became increasingly disillusioned by France's social and political landscape following the armistice.

Chapter two examines the key developments in cheminot political militancy through the period 1919–1920, leading to the general strike of May 1920. At the heart of this chapter is the growing strength of the revolutionary ‘minority’ current among the railway workers. Yet, as the chapter demonstrates, the growing influence of the minoritaires through 1919 was far from preordained. Railway workers remained, for the most part, ready to allow the negotiations of the CGT leadership with railway company management to play out. In a move influenced by railway workers like Lucien Midol, the revolutionaires increasingly sought to place workers’ demands at the heart of their own programmes. This increased pragmatism and flexibility, combined with railway company intransigence, saw the minority current gain ground. This process of gradual extension of minoritaire support eventually culminated in the May general strike, fought for the nationalisation of the French railway network. The defeat of the strike would have profound consequences for the cheminots in the decades that followed. In the immediate term, however, the railway workers’ defeat led them to split with the established CGT, and to throw their support behind the newly formed CGTU, and its affiliation to the Bolshevik Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).

Chapter three analyses the debates surrounding this switch, and points to the many continuities between ‘syndicalist’ and ‘communist’ organisations. Chapters four and five examine communist trade union practices through the 1920s from a number of different angles, as the Communist Party and the communist leadership of the new Fédération des Cheminots Unitaire (FNCU) sought to adapt to the new realities of industrial relations after the defeat of the May 1920 strike. Facing an employer backlash, and a newly recalcitrant rank and file, communist activists on the railways had to improvise alternative means of maintaining grass roots militancy in the workplace. Such activities were not sufficient, however, to prevent cheminot involvement in France’s Ruhr occupation, or to engender significant rank-and-file support for the PCF’s anti-Rif War campaign in the mid-1920s, as chapter five demonstrates.

Through much of the 1920s, the communist-led FNCU sought to maintain its revolutionary identity as a fighting organisation, eschewing involvement in the official channels of railway industrial relations. Chapter six analyses the major shift that took place in the FNCU's approach during the period of 'class-against-class'. The late 1920s witnessed the union perform a significant 'turn to the workplace', demonstrating a new, pragmatic engagement with railway affairs and the everyday realities of the cheminot working environment. Such a move led to a marked growth in FNCU influence within the workplace, but also raised significant tensions within the communist leadership over the threat that such practices posed to the union's revolutionary identity.

Finally, chapter seven locates the cheminots within the wider experience of the Popular Front years of 1936–1938. Railway workers have largely been written out of this key moment in French history for the straightforward reason that they did not participate in the 'social explosion' of May–June 1936. This chapter does not seek to overturn the established facts that the cheminots did not strike or occupy the railway network in June 1936 (or, indeed, at any time subsequently), although, unsurprisingly, cheminots did demonstrate in large numbers in this period and were supportive of workers in other sectors who did go on strike. The chapter does point out that the cheminots did nonetheless play a significant role in the calculations of the French government. Concern that the cheminots might strike, with all the attendant implications that the nation's economic arteries might be blocked, played strongly into the hands of the now reunited Fédération des Cheminots (FdC) leadership.

While working to maintain rank and file discipline, the cheminot leaders pressed the Popular Front government for full implementation of cheminot demands. Through the collective contract, the application of the 40-hour week under FdC supervision, and the nationalisation of the railway network with the FdC represented on the board of the new SNCF, the Popular Front period saw the fulfilment of the aims of both communists and non-communists as set out over the previous decade or more. Two guiding principles came to define union strategy on the railways through the 1920s and 1930s. First, the extension of working-class power within the industry, notably the pursuit of independent representation for the cheminots at the highest levels of government and within the rail companies. Second, and related to the above, a significant advance in democratic representation within the workplace itself and a strong cheminot voice in all matters relating the day-to-day operation of the railway network. The 1921 Railway Act had laid the groundwork for a social contract on the railways and the engagement of the FNCU from the late 1920s onwards had carved out a role for communist-led labour within this structure. However, it took the coming

of the Popular Front government and the wider climate of May and June 1936 for the former unitaires to abandon their hostile participation in railway industrial politics. Operating now from a position of power, the newly united FdC engaged largely on their own terms with railway companies and the state. This Popular Front's social-democratic experiment was to endure, with the cheminots' support, through to November 1938, when it was overturned by ministerial decrees that ended the totemic 40-hour week legislation. In the struggles to save the 40-hour week, and the Popular Front's legacy, railway workers were once again at the heart of the popular struggle for the first time since 1920. The workers' defeat in the abortive general strike of November 1938 created a significant breach between the railway workers and the increasingly authoritarian Republic.

1

Railway Workers at War

On the eve of the First World War, the French railway network was dominated by a handful of powerful private rail companies and one state-operated rail network. These regional railway companies, working from their headquarters at the major Parisian termini operated under conventions agreed with the French state in 1883. These companies were the Compagnie du Nord, which, as its name suggests, serviced the north of France; the Compagnie de l'Est; the Paris-Orléans (PO), which operated the railway network to the west and south-west of the country; the Midi; and the Paris-Lyon-Marseille (PLM), which ran services from Paris into the south of France. Added to this list was the state-operated Etat rail network, created in 1909 following the collapse of the Compagnie de l'Ouest. All told, the *Grands Réseaux*, as the private railway companies were collectively known, employed around 350,000 workers in August 1914.

Pre-war rates of union membership among the railway workers, collectively known as 'cheminots', were low and distributed among a number of individual trade unions. The defeat of the major railway strike of October 1910 had caused a significant collapse in union membership on the railways. From roughly 40,000 members in December 1910 this figure had fallen to just 14,000 one year later.¹ The defeat of the strike left the workers deeply divided: between rival networks – workers on the Nord for instance felt that they had been badly betrayed by their fellow workers on the Est – and divided by hierarchies of skill. The largest of the unions representing railway workers on the eve of war were the Syndicat National, a general union which represented all grades of blue-collar workers, and the Fédération des Mécaniciens et Chauffeurs, the union representing the locomotive drivers and firemen. The latter were highly skilled workers who occupied the

¹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2007*, p. 85.

highest rungs of the blue-collar hierarchy on the railways. Pre-war efforts to unite the disparate trade unions representing railway employees had foundered, overwhelmed by the professional divisions within the industry whose complex hierarchies based upon type of profession and years of service created significant barriers between the various grades of *cheminot*.

After a brief flirtation with radical syndicalist practice, which culminated in the major national railway strike of 1910, the Syndicat National had moved steadily rightwards under the leadership of Maurice Bidegaray, a locomotive driver on the Etat network. By the outbreak of war, the Syndicat was one of the bastions of reformist trade unionism within the national Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). The experience of the First World War, however, transformed *cheminot* trade unionism and industrial relations on the railways in an increasingly militant direction. By 1920, the railwaymen had shifted even further from their pre-war reformism. Through the winter and spring of that year French railway workers embarked on a series of strikes, culminating in May in a nation-wide general strike, which at times raised the spectre of revolution. In the period leading up to the strike waves of 1920, railway union leaders delivered speeches threatening violence and bloodshed on the streets of Paris. Following the eventual defeat of the May general strike, the large majority of railway workers opted to throw in their lot with the newly created communist trade union movement, and became a bedrock of support for the new Parti Communiste Français (PCF). All this was a far cry from the political outlook of railway workers on the eve of war. The purpose of this chapter is to make sense of this shift in political outlook.

Historians who have explored the rise in working-class militancy in this period have tended to trace its origins to the growth in anti-militarist and anti-war sentiment on the left, a force that became increasingly prominent from 1917 onwards, and is linked to the impact of the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of defeatism among sections of the French working class.² The problem with this view is that it does not fit the experience of France's railway workers, the overwhelming majority of whom remained steadfast in their support for the national war effort down to the armistice of November 1918. This fact has led other historians to downplay the significance of the war years and instead draw attention to the radicalisation of the *cheminots* (along with French workers more broadly) in the immediate post-war period.³

² For instance, Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Union and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War I*.

³ The classic account is that of Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–20. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*. The work of Georges Ribeill

The fact is, however, that the war did matter. And it did so for three principle reasons. First, the war years contributed to the emergence of a sense of the railway workers as a single national body. The cheminots' sense of themselves as a national and cohesive social group with shared interests that cut across professional boundaries was powerfully reinforced by the war years. The sense of having done their duty and sacrificed themselves for the national cause, particularly during the crisis of 1914, played a powerful role in cheminot self-perceptions. Structural changes in railway employment as a result of the war were also important in this regard. Hierarchies among blue-collar workers based upon ideas of skill and social distinction were levelled out by the wartime manpower crisis and as a result of declining salaries and rampant wartime inflation. A shared sense of impoverishment was thus an important factor in bringing the disparate occupational communities on the railways together. This would lead in 1917 to the creation of the Fédération des Cheminots under the leadership of Bidegary, a single united union that at its formation counted 80,000 members. Though the Fédération des Mecaniciens et Chauffeurs continued its independent existence after this date, and indeed throughout the interwar period, its influence wained significantly as footplate men gravitated towards the Fédération.

Second was the expansion of the role of the state in the French economy during the war years. After years of adopting a more or less laissez-faire approach to economic affairs, state actors and government ministries became increasingly active, seeking to direct national economic affairs as well as intervening directly in labour relations. A corporation with a long tradition of looking to the state as an arbiter in disputes with the privately owned railway companies, French railway workers now increasingly came to view the state as a potential tool of social transformation.

Third and finally, as Jean-Louis Robert has argued, the war years infused working-class language generally with a profound moral dimension, one suffused with a rhetoric of sacrifice, service and duty.⁴ While workers had accepted the war in 1914 as a legitimate struggle pitting French liberties against German 'barbarism', the crises of 1916 and 1917 led to a reconfiguration of war aims. No longer simply a war to defeat German militarism, the war was reconceptualised as a struggle against the enemies of liberty both at home and abroad. For workers, such rhetoric raised expectations of a victory

is also very significant, see especially Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre: 1914–1920: les métamorphoses d'une corporation* (Paris, 1988); Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January–May 1920: New Syndicalist Ideas and Emergent Communism', *French Historical Studies*, 12, 4 (1982), 508–542.

⁴ Jean-Louis Robert, *Les ouvriers, la patrie et la révolution, 1914–1919* (Paris, 1995).

that would usher in profound upheavals – ‘a world turned upside down’, according to one railway employee in the spring of 1918. For those who had worked and made sacrifices for the national cause, the reward would be a new social Republic. For those who had spent the war profiteering and exploiting the efforts of the workers, notably railway company management, there would be a settling of accounts in the post-war world. It would ultimately be the frustration of these hopes during the ‘après-guerre’ that would lead railway workers to the brink of revolution and into the ranks of the communist trade union moment and the Communist Party after 1920.

Mobilisation

In his memoirs published in the early 1970s, the former cheminot leader and communist militant Lucien Midol recollected reactions to the outbreak of war among railway workers in his native Dijon. He recalled that he had been shocked by the ‘chauvinism’ of his fellow workers. The active membership of Midol’s local union (a branch of the footplatemen’s union, the Fédération des Mécaniciens et Chauffeurs) fell away dramatically in August and September of 1914. Midol wrote in his autobiography that membership had collapsed from 2,500 to just 80 between July and October 1914.

Union meetings became so poorly attended that at one, Midol had been the only person to show up.⁵ Membership figures fared better elsewhere, but precipitous falls in the numbers of cheminots adhering to syndicats were nonetheless registered. In the Lyon suburb of Oullins, union membership at the major PLM workshop halved in the summer of 1914 from over 400 to around 200.⁶ For Midol, this fall in union activity among the rank-and-file workers echoed the ‘treason’ of the leaders of French Socialism and the French labour movement who flocked to join the ‘Sacred Union’, suspending political and union activity and placing themselves at the service of the French war effort. In Midol’s account, political activity was effectively in abeyance through the first years of the war; it is not until 1917 with the emergence of anti-war protest, a general rise in working-class militancy and, of course, the Bolshevik revolution in October of that year, that political activity properly resumes.

Such an image of the Sacred Union, celebrated or reviled in equal measure by conservatives and left-wingers in the years following the armistice as a period of national consensus in which the normal political rules were suspended, has been significantly nuanced by subsequent historical analysis.

⁵ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970* (Paris, 1973), p. 50.

⁶ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité*, p. 92.

While Jean-Jacques Becker in his classic study *The Great War and the French People* argued that the CGT entered a state of ‘lethargy’ with the outbreak of war, works by John Horne and Jean-Louis Robert point to the continued significance of political campaigning at the local and national level within the French labour movement during this time.⁷ Indeed, as Horne notes, even in the summer of 1914 as CGT leaders contemplated the ‘choice’ of participation in the national war effort, ‘politics were less suspended than focussed on defining the national or imperial cause and stigmatizing the enemy’.⁸ Horne’s point here is significant. In the summer of 1914, political and union activity did not cease, rather it took on new forms and dynamics as union leaders adjusted to wartime conditions.

On the railways the summer of 1914 left little time for traditional trade union activity, as the French mobilisation, and then the crisis engendered by the German advance into the heart of French territory, placed the railway network and railway workers under tremendous strain. Once the front stabilised, however, union activity quickly resumed. Above all, in this early period of the war, union activity aimed to mitigate the most stringent and unpopular aspects of the cheminots’ wartime working conditions. Issues like the intrusion of military discipline into the railway workplace and the banning of union meetings assumed vital importance as workers chafed against their military mobilisation and the curtailment of their established peacetime rights and freedoms. Importantly, criticisms targeted not the state or the war efforts, but rather were focussed on railway company management, pointing to the ongoing importance of class-based politics within the railway workplace in these opening months of the conflict.⁹

Historians have long emphasised the profound disorientation that fell upon the French labour movement with the declaration of war in August 1914. The assassination of Jean Jaurès, the Socialist leader and France’s leading anti-militarist campaigner, caused profound shock across the left. In what John Horne has labelled ‘the choice of 1914’, over the course of less than a week the calls for anti-war demonstrations and strikes gave way to widespread support for France’s war effort. Underlying this choice, as Horne emphasises, was a conviction that the defence of trade union freedoms was tied up with the defence of the nation against external aggression. Trade

⁷ Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, p. 76; see also Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris, 1977).

⁸ John Horne, ‘Public Opinion and Politics’ in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War One* (Oxford, 2010), p. 280.

⁹ As such this analysis echoes the recent findings of Tyler Stovall, notably his insistence on the significance of class antagonisms in 1914, see Tyler Stovall, ‘The Consumers’ War’, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919*.

union leaders, along with the broader French public, were quick to cast the war in terms of a clash of ideologies, with France defending herself and her civilisation against German militarism and ‘barbarism’. This sentiment formed the instinctive theme of CGT leader Léon Jouhaux’s off-the-cuff oration at Jaurès’ funeral on 4 August, in which he laid the blame for war on the ‘hatred of democracy’ harboured by German and Austrian leaders.¹⁰ The CGT newspaper *La Bataille syndicaliste* illustrates the rapid shift of opinion among union leaders. On 31 July, the newspaper was calling for workers of the world to unite against the conflict. The mood shifted, however, following the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August – the same day as Jouhaux’s emotional eulogy. On 5 August, the newspaper was referring to a ‘guerre des peuples’. This was not an ‘egoist’ or a ‘chauvinist’ conflict, but a ‘holy war of a people under attack, who rise together to defend themselves against the odious regime of the imperial sabre’. The two Kaisers, argued the paper, ‘have thrown themselves into the criminal adventure. For the salvation of humanity, they must succumb to it!’¹¹ The same issue carried several short reports from the front, relating examples of German atrocities committed against civilians. One noted the murder of a French priest by German soldiers in Meurthe-et-Moselle, a second announced that 17 Alsatians had been shot while trying to cross into France.¹² Such atrocity stories, as historians have recognised, were an essential component to the popular mobilisation for war that cast the conflict as a struggle between civilisation and barbarism.¹³

Prior to the outbreak of war, railway workers had marched in tandem with the wider labour movement in their opposition to war and condemnation of militarism. This anti-war position had been reaffirmed as late as 31 July. In an editorial published three days after Austria-Hungary’s declaration of war against Serbia, the cheminot newspaper *La Tribune de la voie ferrée* denounced the conflict declaring, ‘vive la paix! A bas la guerre!’¹⁴ Following the German invasion of Belgium, however, cheminot leaders and the railway workers’ press joined with the wider national mood in expressing outrage at the German action, condemning the ‘militarisme barbare d’Outre Rhin’. As the German army advanced into France, fears in certain quarters that French railway workers would act as a fifth column to sabotage the national

¹⁰ John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 42–45.

¹¹ *La Bataille syndicaliste*, 5/8/1914, p. 1.

¹² *La Bataille syndicaliste*, 5/8/1914, p. 1.

¹³ See John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, 2001); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918: Understanding the Great War* (London, 2002), pp. 100–104.

¹⁴ *La Tribune de la voie ferrée*, 31/7/1914.

war effort were vigorously refuted by the cheminot leader Marcel Bidegaray. ‘They must be fools, these Teutons’, Bidegaray declared, ‘to believe that a single French railwayman could have the idea of obstructing the work of national defence!’¹⁵ Such fears as existed regarding cheminot loyalties were quickly proved to be baseless as rank-and-file workers responded positively to the crisis of 1914. Immediately following the declaration of war, local cheminot branches created funds to donate money to those impacted by the fighting, and to support families whose material circumstances had been degraded by the mobilisation of their men into the army. Such was the scale of the response that, by the end of August, a single national fund had to be created to coordinate the collection of monthly subscriptions from cheminots across France. These were intended to render aid to the wounded and the families of the dead, but also to children in the war zone as well as to unemployed workers.¹⁶

The inclusion of the unemployed among the victims of war in 1914 speaks to the very real distress caused to French working-class families, particularly those in urban areas, by the economic dislocations wrought by the general mobilisation in the summer of 1914. Reports by the ministère du Travail estimated that 68% of workshops in Paris, for instance, had closed following the outbreak of war. Some 600,000 individuals in the French capital were considered to be unemployed in the opening weeks of the war.¹⁷ Mobilised into their professions, railway workers and their families were spared such dislocating experiences. They used their relatively privileged position to support other workers who had been less fortunate in their circumstances. Class solidarities were thus not abandoned in the opening months of the war, but rather overlapped with national sentiment.

Railway workers also created a national orphanage to provide for working-class children whose parents had been killed during the fighting. As Jean-Louis Robert notes, wartime cheminot meetings in Paris invariably featured collections for the orphanage. Solidarity between railway workers and those fighting at the front was clearly marked through these charitable activities, which nevertheless continued to be overlaid with class sentiments. To contribute to collections was to play one’s role in the war effort, and shirking from such responsibilities was strongly condemned as an act that betrayed ideals of working-class solidarity. Robert quotes one union official

¹⁵ Cited in George Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre: 1914–1920: les métamorphoses d’une corporation*, p. 97.

¹⁶ *L’Humanité*, 26/8/1914, ‘Chez les cheminots’, p. 2.

¹⁷ Figures cited in Jon Lawrence, ‘The Transition to War in 1914’, in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 135–163 (139).

who emphasised that ‘to no longer pay one’s [union] subscription is to reduce six hundred orphans to misery, to refuse them bread.’¹⁸ The need to stand in solidarity with the victims of war was highlighted by Marcel Bidegaray in a speech in December 1915. The orphanage, Bidegaray announced, was then caring for 815 children, 15 of whom had recently been rescued from the battlefields themselves. 115,000 francs was raised by French cheminots for these children in the first 18 months of the fighting.¹⁹

From the very first hours of the general mobilisation, the national railway network was transformed into a vital theatre of the French war effort. On 31 July 1914, France’s railway network was mobilised, placed under direct military command following the provisions put in place by the law of 1877. This was passed in the wake of France’s defeat to the Prussian forces, whose superior use of the railways had been noted by French military planners. Following the issuing of the mobilisation orders, France’s various railway companies were united under a single military authority with each regional network directed by a *Commission de réseau* composed of railway specialists drawn from the military and from civilian life. At the local level, *Commissions de gare* were created, placing strategically significant railway stations under military command, the commission composed of a local military officer and the station master. These *commissions de gare* would serve as the key interface between the military and local railway workers.²⁰

Following the orders laid down by the French general mobilisation plan, trains from across France began the process of concentrating the French armies in the north and east of the country. During these opening days of the war, the *Compagnie du Nord* alone ran 6,519 military trains across its network in north-eastern France and across the Belgian border. A further 400 were required to disembark the British Expeditionary Force and to transport its soldiers and materiel across the region.²¹ Between 6 and 18 August, a total of 10,000 trains transported 870,000 soldiers, 19,000 officers, 277,000 horses, and 70,000 artillery pieces to the front.²² As workers vital to the national war effort, most cheminots were not called up to the front. Instead workers with at least six months’ continuous employment were mobilised directly into their professions. While continuing to fulfil the roles they were accustomed to in peacetime, the working lives of these

¹⁸ Jean-Louis Robert, ‘Mobilizing Labour and Socialist Militants in Paris during the Great War’, in John Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge, 1997), 73–88 (77).

¹⁹ Archives Départementales, Indre-et-Loire (hereafter AD I-L), *Le Réveil Socialiste d'Indre-et-Loire*, 4/12/1915.

²⁰ Colonel Le Hénaff and Henri Bourecque, *Les Chemins de fer Français et la guerre*, pp. 1–3.

²¹ Paul-Emile Javary, *L'effort du réseau du Nord pendant et après la guerre* (Lille, 1921), p. 15.

²² François Caron, *Histoire des Chemins de fer en France, tome II*, p. 541.

cheminots were significantly altered, not least as they were now subject to an often-severe military discipline, under which many chafed. Those with fewer than the required six months of service were mobilised into the army, as were the large number of part-time, non-permanent railway employees. In total 26,000 men, mostly apprentices and auxiliary staff, were called up to the front. Only 7% were returned from the front to railway work during the period of hostilities.²³

The railways coped well with the heightened demands of France's initial mobilisation. The impact of the German invasion of northern and eastern France, however, pushed the rail network close to breaking point. As the German advance forced the allied armies into retreat through Belgium and France, the railway network was the focus of significant efforts to ensure the withdrawal of men, materiel, and supplies. This effort, however, risked being jeopardised by the massive civilian exodus from the invaded departments. These refugees were joined in their flight by yet more civilians whose homes lay in the path of the German advance. The first train load of refugees from Belgium arrived in France on 11 August. By 20 August what had been a relatively modest evacuation became a deluge. Between 20 and 22 August alone, 14 trains passed through the town of Creil packed with Belgian refugees.²⁴ Some Belgian railwaymen found their way to Paris where workers at the Batignolles locomotive repair yard gave them refuge. From their temporary home these refugees conducted a desperate search to trace their loved ones from whom they had been separated.

Difficulties mounted as towns and regions designated to receive refugees themselves became caught up in the exodus. Populations in the northern French departments piled themselves onto any passing train heading away from the fighting. In the final days of August, more than 100,000 people crowded into the railway station at Laon.²⁵ The pressure on the railways created by the refugee crisis continued through August and into September. With Paris itself threatened by the German advance, Parisian railway stations became massively overcrowded bottlenecks. Paris-based newspapers regularly sent reporters to the Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est to receive the latest news from those fleeing the front. It was from these sources that many tales of German atrocities entered the French and wider Allied news.²⁶ Railway workers soon had their own atrocity tales to tell from this period. A story later picked up by the conservative *Le Matin* newspaper told

²³ *Révue Générale des Chemins de Fer et Tramways*, 1919, p. 54.

²⁴ Colonel Le Hénaff and Henri Bourecque, *Les Chemins de fer Français et la guerre*, p. 37.

²⁵ Colonel Le Hénaff and Henri Bourecque, *Les Chemins de fer Français et la guerre*, p. 37.

²⁶ Pierre Purseigle, 'A Wave to Our Shores: The Exile and Resettlement of Refugees from the Western Front, 1914–1918', *Contemporary European History*, 16, 4 (2004), 427–444 (435).

of a signalman who had been tied to his chair and burnt alive in his cabin by German soldiers angry at his role in turning back a supply train about to fall into enemy hands.²⁷ French and British newspapers informed their readers of the ‘dreadful things’ civilians fleeing the front had recounted to them at Parisian railway terminals.²⁸ The wave of refugees quickly fanned out from the French capital. Despite trains departing every few minutes, passengers were forced to queue for up to 30 hours for a ticket. On just a single day, 3 September, the Paris-Orléans railway company was responsible for evacuating more than 50,000 people away from the city.²⁹

The Compagnie du Nord was most directly affected by the invasion as much of its pre-war network lay in the path of the invading German armies. Not only did it have to bear the brunt of the military retreat and the refugee crisis, evacuating more than a million and a half inhabitants from northern France in just ten days, but it also faced the prospect of simultaneously salvaging its own rolling stock and supplies before they fell into German hands. In many respects, the Nord’s efforts were a success. As well as recovering almost all their own stock of locomotives and wagons, the company also managed to save 658 of the Belgian state railway’s locomotives and 175 of the Nord-Belge company engines.³⁰ The company was much less successful in evacuating its own employees, however, a fact that would remain in the memory of railway workers. Roughly 13,000 of the Nord’s employees were left cut off in German occupied France.³¹ In mid-September 1914, the Nord published several announcements in the Socialist newspaper *L’Humanité* appealing for any workers who had been separated from their posts to make their way to the company’s headquarters at rue de Dunkerque, Paris.³²

With the civilian flight threatening to overwhelm the network and, most crucially, impeding the vital function of maintaining the army’s supply lines, the railways were closed to all non-military traffic on 5 September. Throughout the battle of the Marne, as French forces first held and then drove back the German advance, trains ran around the clock between Paris and the battle zone, bringing reinforcements and supplies to the front and evacuating the wounded. Though the popular image of the battle of the Marne remains the spectacle of Parisian taxis transporting soldiers to the

²⁷ *Le Matin*, ‘Les Cheminots’, 6/1/1915, pp. 1–2 (2).

²⁸ Pierre Purseigle, ‘A Wave to Our Shores: The Exile and Resettlement of Refugees from the Western Front, 1914–1918’, *Contemporary European History*, 16, 4 (2004), 427–444 (435).

²⁹ Colonel Le Hénaff and Henri Bourecque, *Les Chemins de fer Français et la guerre*, p. 38.

³⁰ Paul-Emile Javary, *L’effort du réseau du Nord pendant et après la guerre*, p. 18.

³¹ *Révue Générale des Chemins de fer*, 1919, p. 54.

³² *L’Humanité*, 14, 15 and 16 September 1914.

front line, in reality this task fell for the very most part to the rail network during the crucial phases of the battle. In total some 680 trains operated virtually non-stop to ensure the French were able to meet the German offensive.³³ As the front stabilised, the railway network settled into a new pattern of operations, though demands on workers remained high. New supply routes needed to be opened, including the building and operation of narrow-gauge railways to link the trenches with the main rail network. Crucial repairs also needed to be effected in areas devastated by the summer's fighting. This included, for instance, the Saint-Maximin diversion, which saw the construction of 3km of new track together with a temporary bridge over the river Oise in order to maintain the connection between Paris and Creil following the destruction of the Laversine bridge. Work began on the diversion on 9 October 1914 and was completed just 35 days later.³⁴

In the aftermath of the battle of the Marne, the efforts made by France's railway workers were widely praised. Speaking following the victory, the French commander General Joffre acclaimed the role played by the railways and emphasised how 'the first victory was won by the railwaymen'.³⁵ Reports circulated of railwaymen working 37, even 72 straight hours to maintain supplies at the height of the emergency.³⁶ *Le Matin*, a conservative newspaper that had been no friend to the cheminots in the years prior to the war, lauded the service the railway workers had rendered to the nation. 'They have the right', noted the newspaper's correspondent, 'to feel a legitimate pride'. The paper went on to highly praise the 'dedication of all' within the railway industry.³⁷ The crucial role played by the railways in the first months of the war quickly became a touchstone among railway workers. Themes of duty rendered and sacrifices made in the service of the nation formed the core element of cheminot self-identification throughout the war years. It was the basis upon which the cheminots' representatives in the trade unions articulated their claims towards the state and railway companies throughout the rest of the war. In the aftermath of the crisis of 1914, however, as the fighting stabilised into what would become the trench lines of the western front, railway trade unionists began to turn their attention to the inequities faced by mobilised railway personnel.

³³ François Caron, *Histoire des Chemins de fer en France, tome 2*, p. 544.

³⁴ Paul-Emile Javary, *L'effort du réseau du Nord pendant et après la guerre*, p. 18.

³⁵ Cited in *Le Matin*, 6/1/1915, p. 1.

³⁶ *Le Matin*, 6/1/1915, p. 1.

³⁷ *Le Matin*, 6/1/1915, p. 1.

Class and Nation

The rhetoric of the heroic sacrifices made by the cheminots in the defence of France in the summer of 1914 immediately became central to the cheminots' own conception of their place within the national war effort. As 1914 gave way to 1915, this imagery of duties undertaken and sacrifices rendered hardened into a significant moral critique of the operation of wartime industrial relations and, in time, of the wartime economy as a whole. At the base of this cheminot moral critique was the workers' sense that there were those who were playing their full part in the war effort on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those who were unjustly exploiting or profiteering from these efforts. As Jean-Louis Robert has highlighted, the development of this moral critique of wartime industrial relations and economic organisation would play a profound role in fomenting the mounting industrial unrest from 1917 onwards. In a further section below, we will examine the growing rank and file militancy that developed in the final stages of the war. This section examines the railway workers' morale critique of wartime industrial relations through the lens of the cheminots' status as mobilised civilian workers. Ostensibly civilians, yet incorporated into military hierarchies and subject to military discipline, France's railway workers occupied an ambiguous 'grey zone' between the military and civilian worlds. The impact of this militarisation of railway hierarchies and company discipline created new tensions between workers and management in the industry. Workers loudly protested the arbitrary discipline and unfair managerial practices to which their status as mobilised civilian workers left them subject.

By military order of 7 August 1914, railway workers were placed under strict military discipline. Not only were unauthorised union meetings and political demonstrations – such as those organised by Lucien Midol – now illegal, but even professional errors and accidents were liable to result in the unlucky cheminot being summoned before a military tribunal.³⁸ Hanging over the heads of all mobilised workers was the threat of being sent to the front should they transgress military discipline. Following a collective protest by 250 railway workers at the Capdenac depot in November 1914 after the sacking of one of their number, local railway workers were reminded by the Commissaire militaire du réseau that their patriotic duty lay not only in working the locomotives, but also in submitting to military discipline.³⁹ Writing to his colleague at the War Ministry, the minister

³⁸ Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes (hereafter, SHD), GR7NN4 344, 'Rapport fait au ministre : Analyse sur les modifications à apporter à l'ordre ministériel du 7 août 1914, fixant le régime des punitions aux agents des compagnies de chemins de fer, 29/1/1915, pp. 1–2.

³⁹ SHD, GR7NN4 364, 6/12/1914, pp. 1–2.

of public works was blunt in his assessment. ‘Agents who feel dissatisfied with their situation on the network’, he wrote, ‘will be invited to make it known so that they can be reported to recruitment and incorporated into the service of the army, where they will find the occasion to pay with their person in a more active way than in the military service of the railways.’⁴⁰ This and other comparable instances are reminders that military discipline could act as a means of curtailing dissent within the ranks of the railway workers. Opposition to the war, particularly if this was of a political nature, could result in dismissal from the railways and imprisonment.⁴¹

Mobilisation also made it illegal to hold trade union meetings, a restriction that raised significant objections on the part of railway workers. Though the ban was partly relaxed in January 1915, its reaffirmation the following April brought widespread condemnation from railway workers who saw their traditional rights as French citizens being arbitrarily revoked. Such actions on the part of the government and military were all the more galling as they appeared to run counter to the spirit of the Sacred Union, as the cheminots understood it. Railway workers had done their part in 1914; they now demanded that the state uphold their side of the bargain and recognise the sacrifices that workers had made and continued to make in the national cause. A circular published by the Syndicat National gave voice to such sentiments. The union reminded railway managers and state officials of the cheminots’ dedication to the national cause during the mobilisation, and of the readiness of railway workers to continue to do their duty.⁴²

Though the restrictions were primarily the result of state and in particular military intervention, the constraints upon cheminot liberties were nevertheless identified as the work of railway management. Denouncing the companies’ position as ‘cruel’ and ‘unjust’, the union complained of being cast as outlaws by a law which they claimed harked back to the spirit of royal absolutism, reflecting as it did the ‘spirit of the *ancien régime*'.⁴³ The managers of the Compagnie du Nord were singled out for criticism, particularly in regard to the perceived lack of duty towards their workers during August and September 1914. While the ordinary cheminots had shown devotion to the national cause in the emergency, their employer had repaid their sacrifice by abandoning them to the Germans. The union highlighted that the company,

⁴⁰ SHD, GR7NN4 364, 6/12/1914, p. 3.

⁴¹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, p. 96.

⁴² Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte, Paris (hereafter AN), F/7/13667, Activités 1915–1920, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, ‘Dans les chemins de fer’, 17/4/1915, p. 1.

⁴³ AN F/7/13667, Activités 1915–1920, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, ‘Dans les chemins de fer’, 17/4/1915, p. 1.

having betrayed its workers once, was continuing to neglect its duties towards them, dragging its feet in providing material assistance to families of workers who had been caught in what was now occupied territory.⁴⁴

Following the government decision to uphold the ban on union meetings in April, the issue quickly gained national prominence. On 17 May 1915 the Socialist politician Renaudel and the national leader of the CGT, Léon Jouhaux, accompanied by leading national representatives of the railway workers' union including Le Guen and Bidegaray, met with the French Prime Minister René Viviani for negotiations over the *cheminots'* right to hold union meetings.⁴⁵ The result was an order issued jointly by the government and military, which emphasised that, henceforth, military discipline would only hold for mobilised workers in respect of obedience to direct orders from military superiors, and only in circumstances relating directly to the operation of military trains.⁴⁶ While meetings were now permitted (subject to prior approval by the local military commander), the impact of life as a mobilised worker continued to be a source of tensions. One area of concern which emerged was the way that the enforced immobility of mobilised railway workers left them open to unfair practices on the part of landlords who, conscious of their inability to easily move home without express military permission, were unscrupulously raising rents. *Cheminots* strongly objected to such individuals who, they felt, were enriching themselves at the expense of those who were working night and day for the French war effort.⁴⁷

With the effects of military mobilisation on trade union activity in part moderated by the negotiated easing of restrictions on union meetings, attention turned to the negative impact of wartime mobilisation on *cheminot* working conditions. In particular, the issue of military discipline on the railways figured as a key area of contention. As with the issue of trade union rights, the imposition of military discipline was understood to be an affront to the patriotic devotion of railway personnel. More significantly, it was viewed by railway workers as exploitative, as railway managers were vested with arbitrary powers similar to those that military officers and NCOs exercised over the *poilus* at the front.⁴⁸ Thus, the campaign against military

⁴⁴ AN F/7/13667, *Activités 1915–1920*, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, 'Dans les chemins de fer', 17/4/1915, p. 2.

⁴⁵ AN F/7/13667, *Activités 1915–1920*, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, 'Chez les *cheminots*: les droits syndicaux et les punitions', 9/6/1915, p. 1.

⁴⁶ AN F/7/13667, *Activités 1915–1920*, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, 'Decision Relative aux punitions en temps de guerre', 5/5/1915, p. 1.

⁴⁷ SHD, GR₇NN4 360, 'Monsieur le ministre de guerre', handwritten letter enclosed in 4/5/1917.

⁴⁸ The term *poilus* was used to describe French soldiers during the First World War, referring to their unshaven appearance.

discipline in the workplace through 1915 was aimed principally against the managerial hierarchies on the railways.

In a speech attended by more than a thousand railway workers who braved the December rain in Tours in 1915, one leading cheminot militant, Le Guen, voiced concerns over the ‘bizarre situation’ experienced by cheminots following their mobilisation. Caught in a grey zone between civilian and military life, ‘they enjoyed only a reduced civil liberty, but, on the other hand, they accumulated military punishments.’⁴⁹ The intrusion of military discipline into the relations between railway workers and their superiors in the workplace was a particular bone of contention. Insubordination and disagreements in the workplace were an everyday part of railway life. Where previously such incidents might be overlooked or be subject to company disciplinary procedures, behaviour between railway workers and their superiors now fell under codes of military discipline. The punishments for insubordination on the railways, therefore, mirrored those at the front. In his speech, Le Guen highlighted certain such instances, like the ten-year prison sentence handed down to a railway worker who had argued with a military officer. Or the one-year prison term received by a cheminot who had responded ‘a little cavalierly to a doctor’.⁵⁰ Accepting military discipline was hard enough, but it became particularly difficult when such discipline required, for instance, railwaymen to salute local company managers who had been raised to officer rank following the mobilisation, or to unquestioningly accept the authority of immediate superiors in the workplace such as foremen, who now held NCO status.

In a meeting in November 1915 in Paris, Bidegaray announced that the cheminots had done their duty; now it was time for the companies to do theirs: ‘we are answerable to military and administrative authority. However, we wish to be judged by one or the other of these authorities, but not by both. We have officers who command us who have never been soldiers in their lives, who wear stripes since the start of the war and who now want to lead the personnel under their orders with a relentless discipline.’⁵¹ The unchallengeable authority which military codes bestowed on railway managers, argued Bidegaray, had brought out the worst authoritarian attitudes in some. He recalled the case of a railway driver named Poirier who had been sentenced to one year in prison for having called a superior ‘Monsieur’. Another unfortunate cheminot named Treme had been

⁴⁹ AD I-L, ‘Chez les Cheminots: Une imposante réunion’, *Le Réveil Socialiste d'Indre-et-Loire*, 4/12/1915.

⁵⁰ AD I-L, ‘Chez les cheminots: Une imposante réunion’, *Le Réveil Socialiste*, 4/12/1915.

⁵¹ AN F/7/13667, Activités 1915–1920, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, meeting report, 21/11/1915. p. 2.

condemned to 16 years ‘travaux publics’ for having ‘bousculé un capitaine’.⁵² Bidegaray emphasised, however, that his personal appeals to Briand had secured a reprieve for Poirier, while Treme had been given permission to serve at the front, apparently at his own request.

L’Impôt du Sang

As John Horne has underlined, the demands placed upon France by the need to support both the military and industrial sides of the conflict produced significant tensions in a nation already facing a demographic shortfall compared to the other combatant powers. In such circumstances, notes Horne, there existed ‘fierce competition for mobilized manpower from the start’.⁵³ The manpower crisis in French industry in the early months of the war precipitated the passing of the Dalbiez law in August 1915. This piece of legislation returned qualified men from the front to serve in the war industries. The effect of this law, however, raised significant questions within French society over the equality of sacrifice being made by different social groups. While industrial workers were removed from the trenches, others, notably the middle classes and agricultural workers, remained. Such realities bred resentments, and soon industrial workers in the war industries were being labelled as ‘embusqués’ or ‘shirkers’. The continued strength of such attitudes would lead in August 1917 to the passing of the Mounier Law, designed to return many of these industrial workers to the front. The language of an equality of sacrifice in the service of the nation also played an important role in how workers framed their own role within the war effort. In this case the figure of the shirker became that of the wartime profiteer, who, as Jean-Louis Robert has noted, ‘put their personal interest over the collective destiny and of the people among whom they lived’.⁵⁴ This section explores these debates in the context of the railway industry.

As the words of the government minister from November 1914 cited above make clear, for many sections of the French population the wartime service rendered by the cheminots was held in lesser esteem than that undertaken by France’s soldiers at the front. Throughout the war, rail company managers were able to hold the threat of redeployment to the front over the head of workers who too openly challenged wartime industry hierarchies. The sense

⁵² AN F/7/13667, Activités 1915–1920, Dossier Syndicat National des chemins de fer, meeting report, 21/11/1915, p. 2.

⁵³ John Horne, ‘*L’impôt du sang*: Republican Rhetoric and Industrial Warfare in France, 1914–1918’, *Social History*, 14, 2 (May 1989), 201–223 (201).

⁵⁴ Jean-Louis Robert, ‘The Image of the Profiteer’, in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, pp. 104–132 (104).

that the cheminots occupied a privileged position within wartime society was one that was regularly voiced by observers. Such criticisms were made both by those who were hostile to the French labour movement and by those who were ostensibly its supporters on the political left. Many cheminots were highly sensitive to the perception that they enjoyed a favoured status on the home front. Some in 1914 chafed against the authorities' refusal to allow them to serve at the front. Others argued that railway workers ought to be armed, a demand that would have created a clearer visual divide between cheminots and 'civilian' workers. More broadly, it is not difficult to view the cheminot unions' employment of the language of sacrifice and duty as a means of countering existing impressions of railway workers as 'shirkers'. As we shall see, for the cheminot rank and file and the union leadership, the true shirkers were the company managers and financiers who enriched themselves from the war effort while others laboured for a French victory.

Complaints regarding the status of France's railway workers were voiced as early as the opening months of the war, notably by the Socialist politician (and future Communist Deputy) Marcel Cachin. In November 1914, Cachin argued that with the passing of the immediate crisis of 1914, the time was now ripe for large numbers of railway employees to be conscripted directly into the military to fight at the front.⁵⁵ For their part, some railway workers did chafe against the impact of being in a 'reserved' occupation and evinced a desire to serve in a more active fashion. Following the battle of the Marne, *L'Humanité* reported receiving a number of letters from cheminots demanding to be allowed to serve as soldiers at the front now that the emergency of August-September had passed. Noting that commercial traffic had dropped away to virtually nothing, and with military demands being met, these cheminots claimed that many of their number were being left with little to do. 'Without exaggeration', claimed a group of workers on the PLM network, 'we are 40,000 railwaymen ready for the front' ['capables de faire campagne'].⁵⁶ When *L'Homme libre*, the newspaper edited by Georges Clemenceau, launched a campaign against 'shirkers' among the cheminots, a furious patriotic response followed with cheminots defending the role they were playing in the war effort. Nevertheless, some workers still wished for a more active part – one cheminot correspondent argued that workers in stations should be armed in case of any surprise German attack.⁵⁷

Union leaders were at pains to highlight the heavy sacrifice that railway workers were paying in the national war effort, including the ultimate

⁵⁵ *L'Humanité*, 22/11/1914, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *L'Humanité*, 17/9/1914, 'Chez les cheminots: ils veulent se battre', p. 2.

⁵⁷ George Ribell, *Les cheminots en guerre: 1914–1920: les métamorphoses d'une corporation*, p. 98.

sacrifice of their lives. In December 1915 Marcel Bidegaray, future leader of the national railwaymen's union, paid public homage to the 1,000 railwaymen who had lost their lives in the fighting, either serving at the front or else working at their posts.⁵⁸ Indeed, working sections of the line which were in close proximity to the front was extremely hazardous. Railheads in the vicinity of the front lines in particular were highly vulnerable to artillery fire and aerial bombing. Trains supplying the front were a regular target for German gunners and airmen. The station and depot at Béthune, for instance, was just 8km from the fighting and regularly bombarded by enemy artillery, and later in the war by aerial bombing. In total, through the course of the war, 217 employees of the Compagnie du Nord were killed while working the rail network, and another 400 were injured.⁵⁹

The railway station was the principle focus of encounters between railway employees and the general public, and of course between railway workers and mobilised soldiers. In his work on the image of the *embusqué* (shirker) in France, Emmanuelle Cronier has suggested that French soldiers responded angrily to their encounters with railway workers behind the lines, an attitude that was particularly apparent on board the trains transporting soldiers on leave home from the front. From the institution of leave in July 1915, the railways were the main means by which soldiers were moved from the front and returned to their homes. Historians have noted the general lack of discipline on the leave trains, and the complaints that the long journeys and lack of organisation occasioned among ordinary soldiers. In particular, the station master, or Chef de Gare, appears to have become a figure of ridicule in trench newspapers and in songs sung by the *poilus*.⁶⁰ Such complaints, as Antoine Prost has noted, however, were not aimed at the special status of railway workers, but were rather symptomatic of several broader themes. The low priority afforded to trains transporting soldiers on leave, for instance, meant that the routes taken were often long and circuitous as the main line was kept clear for priority traffic – notably armaments.⁶¹ This, together with the particular atmosphere of release that predominated aboard these trains, in large part accounts for the general lack of discipline. Moreover, the satirical treatment of the figure of the Chef de Gare in *poilus* songs and imagery is better explained by the manner in which this individual

⁵⁸ AD, I-L, *Le Réveil socialiste*, 4/12/1915.

⁵⁹ Javary, *L'effort du réseau Nord pendant la guerre*, pp. 65–74.

⁶⁰ Emmanuelle Cronier, 'Les permissionnaires du front face aux cheminots pendant la Première Guerre mondiale', *Revue d'histoire des chemins de fer*, 36–37 (2007), 91–105 (96–97).

⁶¹ Antoine Prost, 'Les permissionnaires du front face aux cheminots pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Conclusion.' *Revue d'histoire des chemins de fer*, 36–37 (2007), 106–109 (106).

represented authority encountered by the travelling soldiers, rather than his acting as an embodiment of cheminot 'shirkers'.⁶² Following a number of incidents in April–May 1917, the railways introduced a number of changes to the process of taking soldiers on leave. Routes were shortened and an effort was made to reduce both the number of stops and the length of time that trains spent halted at stations and in sidings en route. Greater effort was also made to communicate the details of journeys to *poilus*. The resulting system remained in place until the end of the war and largely put an end to the indiscipline previously encountered.⁶³

The large number of railway workers of military age continuing to lead apparently normal lives behind the lines nevertheless did elicit strong reactions from some. Among them was a Conseiller-Général from Lot-et-Garonne who felt strongly enough to take up the issue with France's military High Command in January 1917. The local dignitary drew the military's attention to the deep discontent that, he claimed, soldiers returning on leave felt upon witnessing men of military age spared from the fighting. Cheminots in particular were singled out for criticism in this regard. Railway workers, argued the correspondent, 'complain about the cost of living, but one finds them at the bistro opposite the station as soon as they escape work'. In small towns across France, it was argued, military-age railwaymen were 'always last at the closing of the cafés' where they played cards and dominoes. The writer called for immediate action to be taken, 'to the armies these pillars of the cafés, here is the cry of the public! After the war you will see the welcome they will receive!'⁶⁴

Such concerns were not limited to railway workers, however. The image of the shirker extended across those of military age among the male working-class population whose vital role within the French war economy necessitated their absence from the army. Whereas skilled male workers had been recalled from the front by legislation passed in 1914 and 1915 to serve in vital war industries, growing popular clamour against such workers led to a reversal in 1917. In August of that year the Mounier law was passed, which targeted skilled workers and sought to return as many as possible to the front.⁶⁵ Such actions were loudly condemned by French railway workers, who argued that they ran counter to 'all good logic'. The centrality of the railway network to the French war effort, and the heavy burden already

⁶² Antoine Prost, 'Les permissionnaires du front face aux cheminots pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Conclusion.' *Revue d'histoire des chemins de fer*, 36–37 (2007), 106–109 (108).

⁶³ Colonel Le Hénaff and Henri Bourecque, *Les Chemins de fer Français et la guerre*, pp. 81–82.

⁶⁴ SHD Vincennes, GR7NN4 364, 'Réformés No2 et cheminots', 13/1/1917, pp. 1–3.

⁶⁵ John Horne, *Labour at War: Britain and France, 1914–1918*, pp. 184–185.

faced by those who worked on it, left little or no slack for further depletion of the workforce. In any case, noted the author of the article that appeared in the *Tribune*, the arrival of the American servicemen mitigated the need to redeploy France's cheminots to the front: 'Each of the Allies must play their part. Our burden is already heavy.'⁶⁶

Working the Wartime Railways

The language of sacrifice and service on behalf of the national war effort, which became the dominant lens through which the cheminots viewed their wartime experiences, did not just recall the events of the summer and autumn of 1914. Central to cheminot understandings of having fulfilled their wartime duty to the nation was their sense of having laboured night and day in ever deteriorating working environments so that France's armies and civilians might continue the fight against Germany. Following the crises of the summer, the stabilisation of the western front in the latter part of 1914 did not lessen the pressures upon the French railway network. As the belligerent nations began to plan for the long war that no-one had envisaged, questions of industrial and logistical organisation were now of the utmost importance. The national railway network thus assumed a new role as the vital connecting rod between the fighting front and the civilian war effort behind the lines, allowing the 'major industrialized economies to plug directly into the conflict'.⁶⁷ Throughout the hostilities, the railways, and those who worked upon them, were at the centre of efforts to keep the front supplied. Railheads located just a few miles behind the lines became crucial strategic points, disembarking men and materiel from across France and the channel ports and transferring them to an improvised network of light railways that connected to the trenches.⁶⁸

The unrelenting demands placed upon the railways by the need to keep the war economy and the troops constantly supplied took a tremendous toll upon railway material and upon the cheminots who worked around the clock to keep the trains running. The pressures of maintaining the total war effort soon told on track and rolling stock, particularly in regions directly connected to the fighting. The stabilisation of the front on France's northern and eastern frontiers had a major distorting effect upon the shape and operations of the national rail network. While regional private

⁶⁶ *La Tribune des cheminots*, Aug, 1917, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Theo Balderston, 'Industrial Mobilization and War Economies' in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War One*, pp. 217–233 (218).

⁶⁸ Theo Balderston, 'Industrial Mobilization and War Economies' in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War One*, pp. 217–233 (218).

companies operated services across France, the whole railway network was centred upon Paris, with fast main lines fanning out from the capital to major urban centres. Connecting routes bypassing Paris were slower and for the most part not constructed with the demands of heavy traffic volumes in mind. The shift of the railway's centre of gravity to the north and east thus took a tremendous toll upon the railway infrastructure in these regions. Traffic increased dramatically on the northern and eastern rail networks through the war years. By November 1916, traffic volumes on the Nord were double what they had been in peace time on a network that had been significantly truncated by the German occupation of the northern departments. However, it was not just the lines at the front which were affected. The Paris-Orléans, connecting Paris with the Atlantic ports, experienced a 66% rise in traffic volumes, for instance. The Etat serving the countryside and ports of Normandy and Brittany was carrying 46% more traffic than in 1914, and the PLM, servicing the south and east of France, was operating 49% above pre-war levels.⁶⁹ With the increase in traffic volumes, capacity on the rail network became a major problem, as did the availability and supply of rolling stock. Priority was given to military traffic, with a concomitant impact upon supplies to the civilian war effort, the effects of which were felt in significant shortages of goods and rising consumer prices. Crucial maintenance on locomotives, wagons, and carriages was either rushed or else delayed until the end of the conflict. The result was that by the armistice in 1918 the whole railway infrastructure was highly degraded and nearly at breaking point.

The demands of total war also placed severe strain upon those working on the rail network. Throughout the conflict, the increased traffic volumes on the railways had to be faced by a significantly diminished workforce. The impact of the mobilisation of young workers and auxiliaries into the army, together with the impossibility of replacing retiring or deceased cheminots, resulted in a serious manpower crisis. By June 1915 government estimates had the railway workforce 22%, or 80,000 workers, down on its 1913 levels.⁷⁰ Shortages were particularly acute in highly skilled roles such as engine drivers where shortfalls created by retirement and deaths could not quickly be made up. Personnel shortages also varied geographically, with those railway companies who bore the heaviest burden of the war effort suffering most from a lack of workers. The Compagnie de l'Est, for instance, was estimated to be 28% down on pre-war staffing levels. The Nord had seen its workforce contract by nearly one-third (32%).⁷¹ As

⁶⁹ Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots de 1920* (Paris, 1988), p. 23.

⁷⁰ François Caron, *L'Histoire des chemins de fer*, p. 593.

⁷¹ François Caron, *L'Histoire des chemins de fer*, p. 594.

François Caron noted, the extent of wartime pressures meant that the entire French railway network operated in a state of more or less permanent crisis throughout the conflict.⁷²

The impact of this personnel crisis was soon manifest in a considerable deterioration in working conditions among key railway personnel and notably the advent of impossibly long hours for those working on the footplate. After working shifts of 30, 40 even 50 hours, these cheminots had only the briefest of respites before heading back out onto the railway.⁷³

In an attempt to fill the gaps, the railway companies turned first to retired railway workers and to men too young to have been called up into the army. The quality of these workers, however, left much to be desired. Unskilled in railway work, younger workers in particular required significant training. ‘A good cheminot cannot be improvised’, argued railway management, ‘it takes several months to be trained, and if the proportion of novices is higher than usual then the duration of the training is necessarily longer.’⁷⁴

Such measures were insufficient to meet the industry’s requirements, however, and other options were sought. In response to the personnel shortages the army released large numbers of men from the army reserve and the army’s railway regiments to work the civilian network. Foreign workers were also employed. 3,500 former employees of the Belgian railways, evacuated from their homes in 1914, worked on the Compagnie du Nord during the war. As the war progressed, the rail industry also made use of enemy prisoners of war and colonial workers. Allied railwaymen also served in France, notably Americans from 1917. All of these measures challenged the rigid homogeneity of the railway workforce, which by law had long been the sole purview of native French workers. The uniform nature of the workforce was also profoundly challenged by the industry’s turn to women in ever-growing numbers in order to fill the desperate shortage of men. By October 1917, the number of women employed by the Compagnie de l’Est had risen from 1,000 in 1914 to 18,000. Across the whole network there were more than 50,000 women employed by 1919.⁷⁵

The presence of foreign and colonial workers on the railways could provoke significant tensions, and roused some unpleasant reactions among French cheminots. Violent confrontations occurred, for instance, between French cheminots and Algerian workers quartered just outside the entrance to the railway company workshops at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps on the outskirts of Tours. This violence followed in the aftermath of a fight in a bar between

⁷² François Caron, *L’Histoire des chemins de fer*, p. 586.

⁷³ Paul-Emile Javary, *L’effort du réseau du Nord pendant et après la guerre*, p. 67.

⁷⁴ *Revue Générale des Chemins de fer*, 1919, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, p. 90.

French and Algerian workers after one of the latter had propositioned a French waitress.⁷⁶ The use of foreign labour on the railway network, particularly in the highly skilled technical sectors of driving and signalling, was met with strong objections by the Cheminot Federation. In April 1917, one of the first meetings held between the leaders of the newly created national Cheminot Federation with the French prime minister focussed on the question of the employment of foreign workers employed on the engine footplate. Federation general secretary Marcel Bidegaray objected to the practice. The use of foreign workers who did not have sufficient command of the French language and who were not properly instructed in the rules, regulations, and signalling practices of the French railway network, were, he argued, leading to numerous incidents and accidents on the French railway network. The use of non-French nationals, Bidegaray underlined, was contrary to both the laws of 1846 and to company regulations. Above all, the Federation general secretary objected to the sanctions that, he argued, French railwaymen were facing as a result of accidents caused by non-French workers. In such circumstances, responsibility ought to be directed at where the blame actually lay, that is with the companies 'who command the service and not with those who execute it.'⁷⁷

The prospective arrival of 10,000 American railway workers in France in the summer of 1917 further inflamed tensions. On the one hand, the Federation welcomed the influx of new workers to aid France's transport crisis. The arrival of American forces was also welcomed for its symbolic impact. In order to have a legitimate voice in the post-war settlements, French railway workers recognised that the Americans needed to have paid the 'impôt du sang' alongside their allies. However, concerns were also raised about the arrival of the American railroad workers. The first major concern was that the French government would use the opportunity to further mobilise French cheminots into the army following the passing of the Mounier Law, as we have seen. Once more, the *Tribune* emphasised the difficulties raised by language differences and the lack of knowledge of French regulations and practices. 'Experience', noted the front-page article, 'has demonstrated that the homogeneity of the workforce is a condition of quality work.' As such, the Federation proposed that the American railway workers be employed in discrete groups composed solely of US citizens and led by their own managers. They ought not to be mixed with French workers. Moreover, the Federation called for the Americans, along with other foreign nationals, to be used solely in non-specialist labouring roles, such as track

⁷⁶ AD I-L, 1M341, Commissaire Spécial à M. le Préfet d'Indre-et-Loire, 23/8/1917, pp. 1–3.

⁷⁷ *La Tribune des cheminots*, May, 1917, p. 4.

and building maintenance, which were considered to be ‘the most straightforward tasks’.⁷⁸

The significant growth in the numbers of women employed by the railway companies, and their concomitant growing visibility in a previously male dominated working environment also led to critical responses from the existing male workforce. Speaking in April 1915, cheminot union leaders condemned the growing use of women workers by the railway companies. Le Guen argued that the employment of women would lead to the destruction of French homes, while Bidegaray sought to cast women as a disruptive influence upon the railway workplace, emphasising ‘continual promiscuity of women with men’. He went on to argue that women’s physical inferiority to men, their lack of ingenuity, and their absence from the home made them ‘bad workers and bad mothers to their families’.⁷⁹

The personnel crisis on the railways, as Christian Chevandier has emphasised, opened up new roles for women workers that had previously been the sole preserve of men. While there are no reports of women working on the footplate, Chevandier notes that women were soon occupying other traditionally male jobs in the workshops and in the foundries where a women’s presence would have previously been ‘inconceivable’.⁸⁰ Both Chevandier and Georges Ribeill are generally positive regarding gender relations on the railways. Following the initial tensions of the early years of the war, Ribeill in particular emphasises the growing support that women workers received from the overwhelmingly male cheminot trade unions. The work of numerous scholars, notably Laura Lee Downs and Margaret Darrow, should encourage us to inject a note of caution into these more optimistic analyses. As Laura Frader has underlined, although male observers of women in the workplace ‘marvelled at their abilities and applauded women’s labor as essential, they never viewed it as “normal”’.⁸¹ The evidence amassed by Georges Ribeill himself emphasises that male trade unionists on the railways only ever viewed the presence of women on the railways as a temporary wartime expedient, one that was to end once the crisis had passed and the men returned to their rightful place as the family breadwinner. As one voice underlined in the *Tribune des cheminots* in 1918, ‘If we welcome the occasional “cheminote” into our ranks, it is because it is a great opportunity

⁷⁸ *La Tribune des cheminots*, Aug, 1917, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Cited in Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 106, p. 110.

⁸⁰ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, p. 90.

⁸¹ Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model*, p. 16.

to perfect her social education. We wish that, once returned to her home, she can tell her husband, back from the trenches: When I was a “cheminote” I was a trade unionist. While you were fighting the external enemy, I was defending the cause, the cause of the working class.⁸²

Contre les Compagnies, Pour la Nation: War Weariness and the Remobilisation of Opinion

1917: Popular Attitudes to War

Through 1916 a shift took place in popular attitudes to the war. War weariness set in, and the mobilising ideas of 1914 began to lose their appeal.⁸³ There was growing dissatisfaction with the seemingly intractable stalemate on the western front and deepening social divisions took root. Increasing emphasis was laid through 1916 on the inequality of sacrifice behind the lines, particularly as rising inflationary pressures eroded the living standards of most workers. On the railways, deepening social discontent was engendered by company refusals to introduce ‘fair’ cost-of-living allowances, and by the inability of union leaders or the state to force management’s hand. Through 1916 union leaders, for their part, began to reconfigure their rhetorical justifications for supporting the war effort. Whereas the war had initially been understood as a struggle between French civilisation and German barbarism, workers’ support for the war effort was now increasingly elaborated in more explicitly class-specific terms. The various crises of 1917 – as mutinies in the French army at the front and widespread industrial unrest at home followed in the wake of the disastrous Nivelle offensive – resulted in a profound radicalisation of the French war effort. The ‘second mobilisation’ of 1917–1918 simultaneously witnessed the re-galvanising of French opinion behind the idea of victory while dealing a final, irrecoverable blow to the union sacrée. France’s commitment to a ‘total’ victory that would justify the sacrifices made by its soldiers and by those behind the lines significantly raised the ideological stakes of the war and deepened the cleavages within French society since, as a recent work of synthesis underlines, ‘no realistic form of victory could satisfy all these constituencies, or convincingly justify the cumulative sacrifices in blood and treasure’.⁸⁴ The result was ever deepening class antagonisms and growing expectations that victory would lead to social transformation.

⁸² Cited in Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d’une corporation*, p. III.

⁸³ John Horne, ‘Remobilizing for Total War: France and Britain, 1917–1918’, in John Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, pp. 195–211 (195).

⁸⁴ Leonard V. Smith et al, *France and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 116.

The Cost of Living Crisis

One of the principle causes of growing social tension through 1916 and 1917 was the deepening cost-of-living crisis that afflicted cheminots and other French workers alike. Spiralling inflation and stagnant wages led to growing impoverishment and demands for a cost-of-living allowance in order to offset the declining purchasing power of workers' salaries. The increasing difficulties faced by workers in meeting their basic material needs led to growing class tensions, as Tyler Stovall has emphasised. The disparity between those who made sacrifices and laboured for the war effort and those who grew rich on wartime profits became an ever more prominent theme in working-class and socialist newspapers.⁸⁵ On the railways, anger became increasingly focussed upon railway company directors and shareholders who continued to benefit financially while working-class cheminots suffered the hardships of wartime inflation.

Shortages and inflationary pressures had occurred in French cities prior to 1916. The outbreak of war in August 1914 had provoked immediate shortages and rising prices of key consumer goods. This was most marked in major urban centres like Paris where hoarding and the disruption of supplies left shops empty of key staples such as bread and dairy produce. The shortages provoked outrage, particularly among Parisian workers, as the lack of goods and inflation took the heaviest toll upon working-class budgets. Food riots occurred as workers targeted shops considered to be withholding goods from the market in order to further drive up prices. Among those shops targeted were those that were either owned, or were thought to be owned, by Germans. Such actions, as Stovall has argued, showed patriotism (and xenophobia) existing hand-in-glove with class grievances.⁸⁶ The initial shortages proved short lived as supply networks and consumers adjusted to wartime conditions. A better-than-expected harvest also alleviated fears of shortages through the autumn and winter. Price inflation, however, continued to cause unrest among industrial workers. The issue returned to the forefront of political life in the latter part of 1915 after sharp rises in food prices – it is estimated that prices overall rose by between 200% and 400% between 1914 and 1918.⁸⁷ Agitation among the cheminots for a cost-of-living allowance to offset the impact of inflation upon their salaries began in earnest in October 1915. Cheminot demands, however, met with strong opposition from the railway companies, who argued that any such measure would require a 15% increase in rail fares – an unlikely prospect

⁸⁵ Jean-Louis Robert, 'The Image of the Profiteer', in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (eds), *Capital Cities at War*, pp. 104–132.

⁸⁶ Tyler Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919*, pp. 31–32.

⁸⁷ Tyler Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919*, p. 50.

in a period of high inflation and when any such increase required parliamentary approval. The cheminot leadership responded angrily to this display of managerial intransigence. Speaking in November 1915, Bidegaray argued that the railway companies were reducing their employees to the point of destitution, and that many were being forced to turn to theft in order to make ends meet. He went on to underline the gross disparities between workers on the one hand and wealthy members of the bourgeoisie on the other. While cheminots were suffering, he underlined, the privately owned railway companies were continuing to pay large dividends to their wealthy shareholders.⁸⁸ Such disparities were taken up at the same meeting by the editor of the Socialist daily newspaper, *L'Humanité*, who attacked the speculators and powerful industrialists who profited from the war while workers were forced to make ever greater sacrifices.⁸⁹

Twelve months of negotiations between union representatives, railway company managers and government ministers did little to break the deadlock, while at the same time the material circumstances of railway employees continued to deteriorate. Though a minor concession was finally wrested in September 1916 in the form of a 12% cost-of-living allowance for the very lowest paid, this did little to meet the huge shortfall in cheminot budgets when inflation had reduced the value of salaries by as much as 40%. Through the latter part of 1916, government reports and cheminot publications shed light on the plight of France's railway workers. A publication of November 1916 sought to draw public attention to the straightened circumstances faced by the cheminots. Tellingly, though, the authors had to first confront existing perceptions which cast railway employment as privileged both in terms of its material benefits and in terms of job security. The authors regretted the lack of public awareness of the realities of life on the railways while emphasising that 'it must be known that there may be no corporation where the work is as hard, the discipline as strict, or the salaries more atrociously derisory'.⁹⁰ The authors of the pamphlet went on to outline the low salaries that many workers were having to endure, less than 3 francs a day for some male workers, while women's salaries could be as little as 30 sous a day. All this while the pressures of work had been increased enormously by the demands of the war economy. Train staff, the authors stressed, were in some cases working 370 hours a month on their machines. In the face of such hardships facing their employees, rail company profits and dividends continued to rise.⁹¹

⁸⁸ AN F/7/13667, 21/11/1915, p. 3.

⁸⁹ AN F/7/13667, 21/11/1915, p. 5.

⁹⁰ AN F/7/13667, 'ce qu'il faut dire', 27/11/1916, p. 1.

⁹¹ AN F/7/13667, 'ce qu'il faut dire', 27/11/1916, pp. 2-4.

The pamphlet itself fell foul of the censor, but the sentiments it expressed were echoed in police reports of *cheminot* morale arriving into Paris from all over France. Workers complained bitterly of their dire financial position and their loss of social standing as spending power fell relative to other social groups. Workers in the higher grades of railway employment, those with several years' experience working on the railways, felt the loss of social status and the indignities of their situation particularly acutely. A large number looked enviously at the growing wages in the armaments factories, whose employees were the only industrial workers whose salaries kept pace with inflation thanks to generous cost-of-living allowances instituted from 1916 onwards. Reports spoke of some higher-grade railway workers, even some senior white-collar office staff, taking on second jobs in the armaments factories in order to supplement their wages – a practice that ran counter to company regulations.⁹²

Above all, railway workers felt imprisoned by their mobilisation. Unable to change jobs and unable to resign from the companies without risking their pension entitlements, *cheminots* chafed against the constraints they faced. Workers went so far as to announce their intentions to demand their redeployment to the front in order that their families might receive the allowances paid to the dependents of mobilised soldiers, allowances that *cheminot* families did not receive.⁹³ Such frustration translated into growing rank and file militancy through the winter of 1916–1917. In late November 1916, 105 workers at the Noisy-le-Sec depot downed tools for a period of three days in protest at their ever-diminishing salaries. The strike, which was illegal under wartime conditions, was dealt with leniently by the local company authorities. No sanctions were taken against the strikers, though 20 employees were transferred to the nearby Pantin depot. This was portrayed as a benevolent action on the part of local company management as the individuals concerned would benefit from an immediate relocation bonus. The benevolence of the move was somewhat undercut, however, by the fact that leading local union activists were among these workers removed from the area.⁹⁴ In May 1917, as large numbers of strikes took place among French workers, notably in Paris, railway employees also participated. Women workers were particularly prominent in these May strikes. Having been omitted from the cost of living agreements voted by parliament in January, *cheminotes* joined the protests against the spiralling cost of living. 'Les femmes employées au lavage' at the PLM workshops ceased work demanding a franc per day salary, a 1 franc cost-of-living allowance and

⁹² AN F/7/13667, 22/10/1916.

⁹³ AN F/7/13667, various reports.

⁹⁴ AN F/7/13667, 7/12/1916, pp. 1–2.

payment for days off. They were joined by roughly 100 'employées du service des titres' who demanded the English working week and a cost-of-living allowance of 1 franc 25.⁹⁵ Following the strike movement the cost-of-living allowance was raised from 15% to 30% for the lowest paid cheminots and women, too, were now included.⁹⁶

The National Union and its Programme

In January 1917, in the midst of the campaign against 'la vie chère', the goal of cheminot union leaders, chief among them Marcel Bidegaray, was finally achieved. A single, national Cheminot Federation was established following a meeting of the principle organisations representing France's railway workers, held in Paris on 27 and 28 January. The fusion of the various unions was made possible, as a police report underlined, by the closing of the rigid hierarchies that structured railway employment, a function of the erosion of cheminot salaries by the cost-of-living crisis and a renewed sense of national professional solidarities fostered by participation in the national war efforts on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the ongoing mass campaign against railway employers. The new national Federation was dominated by the former Syndicat National, with its former leader Bidegaray now elected as head of the Fédération des Cheminots. With a membership of some 65,000 the Federation surpassed in size the growing Fédération des Métaux, claiming 18,000 members in the Paris region alone.

Writing in the first issue of the Federation's newly created journal, the *Tribune des cheminots*, Bidegaray set out the rationale behind the creation of the new Federation, and outlined a radical, ambitious agenda for the union. Noting how the demands of the various individual unions had foundered against the 'omnipotence' of the companies, he welcomed the formation of a single Federation, and called upon cheminots to join the union's ranks to fight against the companies and in favour of full nationalisation of the railway network – a demand that quickly gained popular support among the cheminots. Mass membership unionism was aimed at providing a powerful, united voice against the railway companies and was ultimately aimed, argued Bidegaray, at a radical redistribution of power within the industry, away from management and towards workers, represented by the national Federation. As Bidegaray announced, 'In a nutshell, what the personnel must achieve is direct involvement in management on all network boards and administrative branches, with staff representatives elected by the workers themselves.'⁹⁷

⁹⁵ AN F/7/13667, 'Les grèves parisiennes dans les chemins de fer', 31/5/1917, p. 1.

⁹⁶ AN F/7/13667, 'Au sujet de l'agitation des cheminots', 2/2/1918, p. 3.

⁹⁷ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'La Federation Nationale et son action', 1/3/1917, p. 2.

As the railway companies continued to drag their feet in negotiations over the award of the cost-of-living allowance that their employees demanded, insisting on the need for a significant rise in railway tariffs to cover the cost, cheminot frustrations intensified. As one cheminot writer put it in June 1917, the ‘stupid, ferocious and inappropriate autocracy of the railway companies’ had served as one of the primary driving forces, the ‘energising stimulant’, in breaking down the ‘ivory towers’ of professional distinctions that had previously separated the railway workers from one another.⁹⁸ In the context of growing industrial militancy and developing class tensions on the home front, the leadership of the Cheminot Federation began to boldly set out their vision of what railway workers should expect as a result of their wartime sacrifices. In May 1917, the Federation leadership saluted the efforts of the Russian revolutionaries of February, noting how ‘in the midst of battle’ workers in Russia had gained their rights and liberty, overthrowing the ‘odious regime of the tsars’. After expressing the hope that workers in Germany would soon follow suit, the cheminot leadership moved on to assert that workers in France too had new rights to conquer. The union’s task, wrote the FdC leadership, was to realise economic democracy by liberating work from the ‘humiliating tutelage of the wage-earner’. The writer concluded, ‘All men must be equal in law, since they are equal in the duties they owe’.⁹⁹

In 1915, cheminot leaders had justified workers’ participation in the war efforts through appeals to defend French civilisation against German barbarism. Now, in the summer of 1917 after three years of fighting, the railway workers’ representatives had upped the stakes of cheminot participation. The wartime sacrifices endured by workers demanded nothing less than a wholesale transformation of society.

These ideas found further expression in the pamphlet authored by the Federation’s General Secretary Bidegaray in the second half of 1917. With forewords from Marcel Cachin and Léon Jouhaux, the work carried the official imprimatur of both the SFIO and CGT. Through the thirty-page pamphlet, Bidegaray provided a scathing historic overview of the ‘omnipotence, arrogance and pride’ of the railway companies, who, he argued, ‘have always believed that the public, commerce and industry have been created for their profit’.¹⁰⁰ Returning once again to the events of September 1914, Bidegaray reminded his readers of the courage and sense of sacrifice demonstrated by ordinary railway workers and compared this to the comportment of the company managers who had, in September 1914, fled to Bordeaux, Tours, or Lyon leaving some 14,000 cheminots stranded in the

⁹⁸ *La Tribune des cheminots*, ‘L’Armee des Cheminots’, 1/6/1917, p. 1.

⁹⁹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, ‘Le 1^{er} Mai’, 1/5/1917, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Marcel Bidegaray, *Contre les Compagnies, Pour la Nation* (Paris, 1917), p. 28.

occupied regions.¹⁰¹ Bidegaray argued that in the face of the rail industries' failures and their exploitation of what ought to be a national resource for their own profit, there could be only one solution – nationalisation.¹⁰²

This call for a nationalised railway network reiterated a long-standing demand among French railway workers. Calls for the nationalisation of the railways had been a regular feature of Republican political discourse in France since the time of Gambetta, with Jean Jaurès being a determined advocate of breaking the railway companies' hold over the rail network in the name of the public interest.¹⁰³ In April 1912, the railwaymen's Syndicat National had officially added the demand to its programme, and two years later had elaborated a nationalisation plan 'which embraced the autonomous and decentralised model of a nationalised industry (run by representatives of consumers and workers)'.¹⁰⁴ In the context of the war, the Federation's reaffirmation of its commitment to nationalisation was highly significant. Striking a deep chord among the rank and file, the claim spoke to the ever-growing disillusionment with railway management, and to the aspirations of workers that the peace would bring radical social change. The sense that the workers desired more than the accumulation of reforms was given voice at a meeting in Paris in October 1917 attended by around 3,000 railway workers. One speaker argued that 'the cheminot union must not only pursue salary increases and the improvement of working conditions, but must also obtain the nationalisation of the railways'.¹⁰⁵ The same meeting, at which Albert Thomas also spoke in favour of a 'just peace', was marked by loud interventions from the floor by a group of 'revolutionaries' led by the cheminot and anarchist Henri Sirolle. After the meeting around 400 of the cheminots present remained behind to listen to speeches which condemned those who 'have betrayed the working class and made themselves the servants of the government and the companies'.¹⁰⁶

The 'Minoritaires': Against the Sacred Union

In January 1919, Lucien Midol rose to national prominence as the leading figure behind a brief, though widely supported, wildcat strike across the PLM railway network, a tangible symbol of the heightened militancy of railway workers following the armistice. By this point regional secretary of

¹⁰¹ Marcel Bidegaray, *Contre les Compagnies, Pour la Nation*, p. 17.

¹⁰² Marcel Bidegaray, *Contre les Compagnies, Pour la Nation*, p. 30.

¹⁰³ This is discussed in John F. Godfrey, *Capitalism at War: Industrial Policy and Bureaucracy in France, 1914–1918* (Leamington Spa, 1987), p. 32; Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France* (Montreal, 1984), p. 17.

¹⁰⁴ John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918*, pp. 200–201.

¹⁰⁵ AN F/7/13667, Meeting 14/10/1917, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁶ AN F/7/13667, Meeting 14/10/1917, p. 5.

the FdC's PLM organisation, Midol was among the leading representatives of the revolutionary opposition to Bidegaray's reformist leadership of the Cheminot Federation. He went on to play a key role in the strikes of February and May 1920, following which he fled into exile in order to evade arrest. Upon his return to France in 1924 he quickly assumed the leading role within the recently created communist-led Cheminot Federation while holding various positions within the national PCF. From 1928 he served as a Communist deputy in the National Assembly.

We have already encountered Midol through his autobiography lamenting the 'treason' of the Socialist Party and the 'capitulation' of the CGT in August 1914, as these bodies chose to support the national war effort. He also complained of the chauvinism of his fellow workers as they too rallied behind the national war effort. The account, published in 1973, suggests an early opposition to the conflict, but Midol's memories of his wartime union activism are most notable for the way they underline the isolation of the anti-war 'minoritaires' from the wider body of cheminot opinion during the first half of the war. Despite his stated anti-war position, Midol's actions through the early years of the war closely echoed those of the union leadership. Mobilised into his profession in common with his fellow railway workers, Midol was soon preoccupied with dealing with the practical challenges of wartime trade unionism. This involved, for instance, intervening on behalf of displaced workers, relocated by the railway companies according to the demands of the service without sufficient recompense. Midol also served on the committee administrating the local cheminot hospital in Dijon, a charitable organisation funded by the local railway workers to provide aid to wounded soldiers returning from the front.¹⁰⁷ Midol's involvement with the hospital even led a previously hostile chef de dépôt to confide that he had misjudged Midol's previous political radicalism. As Midol admitted in his autobiography, 'the cheminots' patriotism appeared unwavering. One knew only a few isolated individuals who opposed the war.'¹⁰⁸ Such was his immersion in union work that he knew very little of the activities of leading anti-war figures within the *Vie ouvrière* group, and followed only from a distance events at Zimmerwald and Keintthal.¹⁰⁹

Midol's experiences in Dijon mirrored those of the anti-war movement more broadly which, as John Horne among others have emphasised, generally

¹⁰⁷ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, pp. 50–51.

¹⁰⁸ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁹ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, p. 56.

lacked popular support through much of the conflict. The minoritaire voice was nevertheless significant, and presented a growing challenge to the majoritaire leadership through 1917 and 1918 as war weariness and growing rank and file industrial militancy fed into increased support for the minority.

This was particularly apparent among the cheminots. In the context of the growing agitation and the workers' increasing willingness to openly question the authority of railway managers, support for the minority current among the railway workers increased. This was notably the case in Paris, and was concentrated in particular upon two networks: the Etat and the PLM. The deep animosities of the anti-war minoritaires towards the reformist leadership of the CGT led to a brief schism among the Parisian cheminots in December 1917 as tensions between minority and majority currents boiled over into outright opposition, with Gaston Monmousseau and his supporters forming a parallel minority organisation in Paris. Born in 1883 in Indre-et-Loire, Monmousseau had first worked as a self-employed carpenter in his native department, a decision shaped, as Georges Ribeill notes, by his already well-developed anarchist beliefs which led him to eschew more traditional employment. Such independence, however, did not last, and in 1910 he moved to Paris to take up a job with the Etat railway where he was employed in the Batignolles-Marchandise maintenance workshop. He moved to Paris in 1910 to take up a job with the Etat railway network at the Batignolles-Marchandises repair workshops. Though he took no part in the 1910 railway strike, he joined the Syndicat National in 1911 and quickly rose to a position of local prominence. During the war he became a key figure in Parisian railway trade unionism, helping to build up the Paris-Etat-Rive-Droite cheminot union. From this base Monmousseau emerged as one of the leading spokesmen for the minoritaire faction within the Cheminot Federation. Close to Pierre Monatte, Monmousseau would emerge as one of the leading figures within the revolutionary *Vie ouvrière* group after the war.¹¹⁰ In this period, however, in the midst of the war, the cheminots' desire for unity, only just realised with the founding of the Federation, proved powerful enough to overcome the divisions, at least for a short time. The breach between minoritaire and majoritaire factions was temporarily healed in late January 1918, largely as a result of pressure exerted by the rank and file in favour of unity, but animosities remained sharp. The episode was a powerful foretaste of what was to come once hostilities ended.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ 'Gaston Monmousseau' by Georges Ribeill, in Marie-Louise Goergen avec Éric Belouet (eds), *Cheminots Engagés, 9500 biographies en mémoire*, CD-ROM (Paris, 2007).

¹¹¹ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, pp. 136–138.

In opposition to the leadership of the national federation, the minoritaires called for a more radical, revolutionary approach and condemned the passivity of Bidegaray and the union leadership. Taking up the idea of a revolutionary upheaval, leading minoritaire Henri Sirolle called for ‘the transformation of society and the return of the railways to the cheminots, the factories to the workers, the land to the peasants’. He concluded by calling for the overthrow of ‘this rotten capitalist society’.¹¹² Speaking at the same meeting, attended by 4,000 cheminots in Paris, Monmousseau called upon the cheminots to do ‘as they have in Russia: socialise the wealth and return it to those who can best use it in the interests of society – and thus return the railways to the cheminots’.¹¹³ The police report of the meeting noted that the minoritaires launched attacks upon Bidegaray and the cheminot leadership, whom, they alleged, ‘are in the service of the railway shareholders – and also in the pockets of the government, whose aim is to hypnotise the working class by holding out promises that are never realised’.¹¹⁴ Growing rank and file anger at the lack of progress on delivering on a satisfactory cost of living allowance fed into increasing support for the minoritaires, particularly on the Etat and PLM railway networks, and was above all concentrated in Paris.

Despite the overwhelming desire of grassroots railway workers to avoid ideological splits, the influence of the minoritaires among the cheminots had been growing from late 1916, as workers’ discontent at the rising cost of living merged with a general sense of exhaustion at the continuing war. On the railways, discontent focussed upon the railway companies who stood resolutely opposed to introducing the cost-of-living allowances that workers demanded to allay the damage done to household budgets by spiralling wartime inflation. However, the majoritaire union leadership was also subject to growing criticism as attempts to negotiate with management ran into the constant roadblock of company intransigence. The inability, or unwillingness, of the state to intervene within railway industrial disputes as it had in the case of the war factories served to increase union weakness in the face of the employers. The result was heightened unrest among the cheminot membership, which finally translated into a series of wildcat strikes. More than any official union negotiations, it was these that succeeded in pushing railway management into negotiations. Nevertheless, the cost-of-living allowances, when finally granted in late 1918, fell well short of cheminot expectations. The allocation failed to shore up shrinking cheminot budgets, which continued to fall relative to other industrial workers, notably those in

¹¹² AN F/7/13667, Report of Meeting, 11/1/1918.

¹¹³ AN F/7/13667, Report of Meeting, 10/1/1918, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ AN F/7/13667, Report of Meeting, 10/1/1918, p. 1.

the war factories. That the allocation came with an increase in railway fares, a measure which the Cheminot Federation negotiators eventually felt forced to support, sharpened the anger felt by railwaymen towards those within the industry who were felt to be profiteering from the war while exploiting the sacrifices made by workers.

Conclusion: The Armistice

On 11 November 1918 the guns on the western front fell silent as the armistice agreed between the Allies and the German army came into effect. Following the cessation of hostilities, French railway workers were once again the subject of official encomiums, this time from the government as the minister for public works publicly thanked the cheminots for their vital contribution towards securing victory.¹¹⁵ For its part, the cheminot trade union leadership was already looking beyond the immediate context to the peacetime world that the workers sought to build. Joy and relief there may have been, but the first issue of the *Tribune* to appear following the armistice on 15 November made no mention of the end of the war. Instead the front page was dedicated to plans for railway nationalisation and combatting the rising cost of living.¹¹⁶ Even as the fighting ceased, battle lines were being drawn to ensure that the sacrifices of the workers were not made in vain.

The war years had a profoundly destabilising impact on France's railways and placed extraordinary burdens upon those who worked upon them. From the moment of France's mobilisation in July 1914, through the crisis months of August and September, railway workers were plunged into the realities of modern industrial warfare. The railways were of central importance in these early months of the conflict and the tireless efforts and sacrifices made by France's cheminots were recognised by the highest echelons of French military command. As the western front solidified and the war settled into stalemate, the pressures on the national railway network remained profound. As military and state planners grappled with the implications of a long industrialised war which no-one had envisaged, the national rail network became the centrepiece of a logistical revolution, not only ensuring the supply of domestic markets, but also forming the vital conduit between the home and fighting fronts. The railways and those who worked them were thus at the very heart of France's total war effort. The efforts to fulfil the demands placed upon it forced the railways to work far beyond capacity with a much-reduced workforce for four and a half years. The results of this

¹¹⁵ SHD Vincennes, GR₇ NN₄ 364, 'Aux Cheminots Francais', Ministre des Travaux Publics à President du Conseil, 24/11/1918.

¹¹⁶ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/11/1918, p. 1.

massive effort were that by November 1918 both the railway's infrastructure and its rolling stock were in a parlous state of repair.

Railway employees had also felt the effects of the long years of war. The war had stretched railway personnel to their limits by placing enormous demands upon them. It also provoked profound structural changes among the railway workforce. Above all, however, the war years provoked the politicisation of French workers as growing class antagonisms became entwined with the ratcheting up of the ideological stakes of the war from 1916 onwards. Through 1917 and 1918, railway workers, in common with wider French society, began to consider victory not simply as the cessation of hostilities but as a moment that would usher in a period of social and political transformation. Ultimately, the failure of politicians and union leaders after the armistice to deliver on such ambitions would, in 1920, push French railway workers to the brink of revolution.

2

Railway Workers and the 'Après Guerre'

This chapter examines one of the seminal periods in French interwar social and political history, the series of railway strikes in the winter and spring of 1920, culminating in the month-long railway general strike of May. This is a subject which has drawn the interest of a number of historians, notably the early investigations of Annie Kriegel, who in her analysis of the cheminot strike was able to draw upon source material that has since been destroyed. During the 1980s, the publication of the highly significant respective studies by Georges Ribeill and Adrian Jones shed important new light on the period.¹ This chapter sets the 1920 strikes in the broad context of post-war labour militancy. Growing frustration at the emerging political and social settlement in the period after the armistice led French railway workers into an increasingly militant stance through the course of 1919. Though the reformist 'majoritaire' leadership were able to contain this discontent through 1919, by the end of this year they found themselves squeezed between, on the one hand, an increasingly pragmatic revolutionary 'minoritaire' current that was gaining ground among the cheminots and, on the other hand, an intransigent railway management keen to reassert their authority on the railways. In the winter and spring of 1920, the reformists would lose their control over the rank and file. The resulting major confrontation between railway workers and the French state would have significant consequences that shaped railway industrial relations for years to follow.

¹ Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–20. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*; Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*; Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January–May 1920: New Syndicalist Ideas and Emergent Communism', *French Historical Studies*, 12, 4 (1982), 508–542.

Railway Workers and the 'Spirit of 1919'

'Above all', argues Tyler Stovall, '1919 was a year of revolution, both actual and potential.² Internationally and in France itself, revolutionary change appeared imminent. In March, just a little over a year following the Bolshevik's revolution, the first Congress of the Communist International was held in Moscow. Though largely attended by Russian delegates due to the difficulties European socialists faced in reaching the newly created Soviet state, the official creation of a new International designed to spread Bolshevik-style revolution worldwide captured the imagination of revolutionaries in the west.

The founding of the Comintern in the spring of 1919 coincided with a period of labour unrest and worker protest that in certain European regions and cities erupted into revolutionary crises for the existing regimes. In Germany workers' uprisings and strikes were followed by counter-revolution. Short-lived Soviet regimes were formed in Munich and Budapest, and in Italy workers' councils formed in parallel to the government amid tumultuous strikes in what Italian historians refer to as the 'Biennio Rosso', or 'two red years'.³ In France the atmosphere in many towns and cities following the armistice was tense as the labour militancy of the final months of the war continued on into the peace. In some areas of the country the mere presence of a red flag carried at the head of a workers' demonstration was sufficient to provoke fears of Bolshevik revolution and to engender violent reactions. Thus, in Tours in December 1918, a large demonstration of railway workers marching in support of President Wilson's vision for a new democratic international order were attacked by at least one military officer, who sought to prevent them marching with a red banner. As the prefect of Indre-et-Loire noted to his superiors in Paris, the red flag was considered by many in his department to be a 'seditious emblem'.⁴

Membership of the national labour confederation, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), which had been expanding significantly in the final months of the war, continued to swell through 1919 and into 1920, reaching a peak of 1.6 million members, according to official statistics in May 1920.⁵ The Fédération des Cheminots also experienced significant growth in membership after the war. From 80,000 members in 1917, the

² Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, p. 4.

³ On this period generally see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002), Part II *passim*, but especially, pp. 165–175.

⁴ AD I-L, 4M1164, 'Manifestation', 14/12/1918, pp. 1–2.

⁵ Gerard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xix–xxème siècle*, p. 157. The CGT's own figures put the figure much higher at 2.4 million.

national union boasted a total membership of nearly 300,000 by 1919.⁶ This figure dwarfed even that of the metalworkers, whose role in the Parisian factory strikes of June 1919 has earned them significant historical attention. By 1919 membership of the Fédération des Métaux stood at 200,000, albeit having grown from the much lower wartime figure of some 18,000 in 1916.⁷

1919 was marked by unprecedented levels of rank and file militancy. Most notably, in Paris over 160,000 metalworkers struck throughout June, and over 500,000 took to the streets on 1 May.⁸ A massive spike in strike action through May and July 1919 left Paris in particular in 'an atmosphere of near-insurrection', according to Stovall.⁹ The waves of industrial unrest were not limited to Paris, however. Local archives present a picture of nationwide industrial militancy as workers tested the boundaries of the newly emerging post-war social order. Yet, the railways were a notable exception to the waves of unrest sweeping the country. There were some exceptions to this general picture. Workers in the Paris-Orléans company workshops in Périgueux, for instance, held a half-day strike to mark the arrival of President Wilson to France in January and, most notably, railway workers played a prominent role in May Day in Paris, where heavy handed policing brought violence to the streets of the capital.¹⁰ However, for all their militancy on 1 May, Parisian railway workers played no role in support of the metalworkers' strike of June. Despite appeals for cheminot participation, leading Parisian minoritaire Gaston Monmousseau refused to countenance a railway strike in support of the factory workers (see below).

In his work on labour reformism during the First World War, John Horne noted that the majoritaires within the CGT maintained the support of the rank and file through the immediate post-war period, their reformist outlook by and large retaining broad grassroots support through to the demoralising defeats of May 1920.¹¹ Time and again on the railways until April 1920, national cheminot congresses returned a majority to the reformist Federation leadership under Bidegaray. Yet, throughout the course of 1919 this reformist leadership did come under increasing pressure from a more radical minority current that was growing in strength, and from an increasingly militant rank and file impatient with the lack of progress towards the new future they had been promised during the war. By

⁶ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 137.

⁷ Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, p. 248.

⁸ Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, p. 238; Gerard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers*, p. 156.

⁹ Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, p. 246.

¹⁰ Archives Départementales, Dordogne (hereafter AD, D), 4M208, Dossier 1919, reports of 8/2/19 and 11/2/19; on May Day see below.

¹¹ John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918*, pp. 386–390.

the latter part of 1919, as we shall see, even previously moderate cheminot unions were passing votes in favour of a general strike and calling for revolution. Squeezed between an increasingly militant membership and an ever-intransigent railway company management, by the end of 1919 the majority leadership of the FdC were only barely exerting control over the cheminots. In the early part of 1920, they would lose this control entirely.

Demobilisation and the Transport Crisis

Following his tribute to the wartime service of the cheminots in November 1918, the minister for public works called for a renewed effort from France's railway workers in the face of the new challenges facing the country and its railway industry. Having worked ceaselessly to support the national war effort, it now fell upon the cheminots to redouble their efforts in support of the drive to rebuild France and its economy. 'It is upon their work', noted the minister, Claveille, 'that the future of our country in part rests.' He concluded by stating his confidence in the cheminots whom he knew would be 'ready to respond during peacetime as they had during the war.'¹² As Claveille's intervention underlines, the railways and those who worked upon them were at the forefront of government attention in the immediate period following the armistice as ministers sought to shift France away from a war economy and to encourage a swift uptick in peacetime commercial activity. The railways would by necessity be at the heart of the national recovery. However, after more than four years of destruction wrought by bombardment and the advances and retreats of the fighting at the front, to say nothing of the massive wear and tear caused by the unceasing logistical effort of supporting the front lines and the war economy, the scale of the challenge facing the industry was colossal.

The extent of the devastation of the network and material of the Compagnie du Nord and the Compagnie de l'Est was enormous. Huge swathes of track and other infrastructure had been laid waste by the fighting and much that had survived had been deliberately sabotaged by the retreating German armies in the spring and summer of 1918. A report produced by the Compagnie du Nord following the armistice summed up the scale of the destruction: 'the network found itself, over 2,123 kilometres, without a single existing bridge or tunnel, without a single locomotive depot, without a single station which had not been more or less completely destroyed.'¹³ With some 52% of the Nord's rail infrastructure damaged or

¹² SHD Vincennes, GR₇ NN₄ 364, 'Aux Cheminots Francais', Ministre des Travaux Publics à President du Conseil, 24/11/1918, p. 2.

¹³ 'Rapport sur l'exercice 1918', also quoted in Arnaud Gaboriau, 'Aux Origines de la cité

destroyed the cost of rebuilding this network alone was estimated at 1,260 million Francs in April 1919.¹⁴ Beyond the destruction wrought by war, the years of relentless wear and tear had left the industry's vital rolling stock in a poor state of repair. In the year or so following the armistice, more than one-fifth of the industry's entire stock of locomotives were out of service at any one time, receiving urgently needed maintenance and repair. Additional engines received from Germany and from the United States could not fill the gaps in service.¹⁵ Coal shortages and an ongoing recruitment crisis completed the picture of an industry operating on the brink of collapse.

The personnel shortages which the rail networks had been grappling with throughout the war years were exacerbated by the transition to peacetime conditions. With the signing of the armistice the rules excluding the employment of foreign workers on the railways were reapplied, depriving the industry of important numbers of highly qualified Belgian and Serbian railwaymen, as well as the prisoners of war who had been plugging gaps across the industry.¹⁶ In common with the wider experience in French industry, the desire for a return to normalcy led to the rapid dismissal of large numbers of women hired during the war. As David Lamoureux has noted for the case of the PLM maintenance workshop at Arles, of the 126 women employed in 1918 only 48 remained after the February strikes of 1920. After the general strike of May all workers at the Arles workshop were sacked by the PLM before being hired back on a case-by-case basis; none of the women employees were rehired by the company.¹⁷ Added to the wartime losses caused by death, retirement and the inability to recruit in the normal fashion, these shifts resulted in a major staffing shortfall for the companies. The bare figures spoke for themselves. From 330,000 railway employees in August 1914, numbers had fallen significantly to 280,000 by January 1919. The volume of traffic meanwhile had increased substantially, placing almost impossible demands on the railway employees. In a speech made before parliament in February 1919, the minister drew attention to the impact of the crisis upon the health of the nation, emphasising the trains full of goods and merchandise abandoned in sidings for want of qualified drivers and firemen to pilot them to their destinations.

de cheminots de Lille-La Délivrance (1921–1926)', *Revue d'Histoire des Chemins de Fer*, 31 (automne, 2004), pp. 101–138 (102).

¹⁴ François Caron, *L'Histoire des Chemins de Fer Français*, p. 639.

¹⁵ François Caron, *L'Histoire des Chemins de Fer Français*, pp. 640–641.

¹⁶ Marcel Peschaud, 'La Crise des Transports', *Revue Générale de Chemins de Fer* (Feb. 1920), p. 214.

¹⁷ Davis Lamoureux, 'Des Cheminotes en usine: des femmes aux ateliers d'Arles (1914–1920)', *Revue Historique des Chemins de Fer*, 28–29 (printemps-automne, 2003), 403–419 (404), (418).

In an effort to master the situation the government adopted a twin approach. First, the railways were effectively demobilised by decree on 2 February 1919. The railway companies were thus released from military control and returned to the management of their private owners. This followed the logic of the government's desire to remove wartime controls and state regulations 'as quickly as feasible' and to return the economy fully into private hands.¹⁸ This move also released the cheminots from the constraints of military authority. Secondly, the government acted to flood the railway industry with new recruits in the form of demobilised soldiers, offering the opportunity of an early release from the military in return for employment on the railways. This led to some 75,000 new recruits entering the railway companies in the first months of 1919, a fact that industry experts viewed retrospectively as a source of considerable problems for the railways. As one senior figure explained in the spring of 1920, 'if many among them seem decided upon making their career on the railways, there is a significant proportion who, desiring only their freedom [from the army], have rendered, so to speak, no service while often exercising a demoralising influence around them.'¹⁹

The introduction of the eight-hour day on the railways (discussed below) brought a fresh wave of new recruits into the industry. The immediate impact was a sudden surge in the numbers of unexperienced workers into the industry. Peschaud estimated that the situation was so bad that within certain companies as many as 50% of employees had fewer than 12 months' experience of railway work.²⁰ The pressing need for experienced staff was most keenly felt among locomotive drivers and firemen. With huge numbers of candidates eager to take up these positions, and a desperate need to recruit workers, training periods were significantly telescoped. Whereas prior to the war it generally took between three and four years of training to become a driver, this was now being undertaken in as little as six or seven months.²¹ Such measures, however, did nothing in the short term to redress the transport crisis.

Bidegaray and the Majority Leadership

For the Fédération des Cheminots and their supporters in the Socialist party, the transport crisis that followed the cessation of hostilities provided yet further evidence of the need for a profound social transformation of France's railways. In April 1919, the Socialist deputy Albert Thomas, drawing upon

¹⁸ John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918*, p. 357.

¹⁹ Marcel Peschaud, 'La Crise des Transports', p. 214.

²⁰ Marcel Peschaud, 'La Crise des Transports', p. 215.

²¹ Marcel Peschaud, 'La Crise des Transports', p. 216.

the project developed by Bidegaray and the Fédération des Cheminots during the war, presented a bill to parliament calling for the nationalisation of the rail industry. Blending long standing Republican critiques of the railway companies with the recent experiences of wartime state direction and intervention in the economy, which Thomas had experienced first-hand in his role in the armaments ministry, the bill called for the state to assume control of the industry on behalf of the nation.²²

The parliamentary arithmetic, however, was heavily stacked against those supporting major reforms to the railways, essentially blocking any parliamentary route to change. This situation would not be improved by the national elections held in November 1919, which returned a significant conservative right-wing majority which was to be even more hostile to the idea of nationalisation. As John Horne has underlined, the exclusion of labour and the Socialists from government – together with worsening relations between the CGT and the SFIO after the war – left labour reformists with no option but to continue their war time role of lobbying for change and attempting to influence elite opinion in favour of reform.²³ Nevertheless, the post-war strength of the CGT organisation and, on the railways at least, the presence in office of Albert Claveille, a reform minded minister who adopted an inclusive approach towards the CGT, inclined the reformist leadership towards the optimistic view that, despite the challenges, change could be achieved.

As during the war, Bidegaray remained the dominant figure within the FdC. ‘Increasingly sure of himself’, according to one recent historian of the Cheminot Federation,²⁴ Bidegaray was an enthusiastic supporter of the CGT’s Minimum Programme and of its fundamental goal of creating ‘an industrial democracy parallel to the political democracy created by the Republic’.²⁵ A close associate of Jouhaux, Bidegaray had also been a regular contributor to Socialist reformer Albert Thomas’s newspaper, *L’Information ouvrière*, a publication dedicated to spreading Thomas’s reformist social vision among French workers. For his part, Thomas was a staunch supporter of extending the ‘spirit of war’, the *Union Sacrée*, into peacetime, an outlook Bidegaray appears to have broadly shared.²⁶ As discussions concerning

²² Georges Ribeil, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, pp. 196–197; Francois Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France, tome 2*, p. 689.

²³ John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918*, pp. 351–352.

²⁴ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, p. 99.

²⁵ John Horne, *Labour at War: France and Britain 1914–1918*, p. 130.

²⁶ Martin Fine, ‘Albert Thomas: A Reformer’s Vision of Modernization, 1914–1932’, pp. 548–549, p. 551; Madeleine Rebérioux and Patrick Fridenson, ‘Albert Thomas: Pivot du réformisme français’, *Mouvement Social*, 87 (Apr.–Jun., 1974), 85–97 (92–96).

the future of the French railway industry continued through the course of 1919, Bidegaray was a regular figure in ministerial offices in Paris, and held meetings with French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau on the crisis which continued to plague the industry. Police reports from the early part of 1919 refer to Bidegaray as a ‘sincere and moderate’ man, someone with whom the government could work. His interventions on the subject of the crisis in the transport industry had earned him the congratulations of Clemenceau. Bidegaray’s ‘wisdom’ on transport matters earned him the praise of government officials.²⁷

The CGT’s wider attempt to influence post-war policy in a reformist direction ran into the determined opposition of key government figures, notably Louis Loucheur, who had taken over the armaments ministry from Albert Thomas and continued to head it under its new post-war guise as the Ministry for Reconstruction. Loucheur refused to engage with the CGT leadership and excluded Jouhaux from post-war planning discussions.²⁸ For their part, however, the Fédération des Cheminots enjoyed a more productive relationship with the French state on certain issues, notably over the question of a new national collective contract for railway workers. Demands for a collective contract on the railways had been at the core of the FdC’s programme from its creation as a national union in 1917. The idea of a statute as a guard against the arbitrary practices of management, and as a means of regularising and rendering transparent such issues as pay and advancement in the industry, was also important for the cheminot rank-and-file.

On the issue of the collective contract, the FdC leadership enjoyed a solid supporter in the form of the Minister for Public Works, Albert Claveille. A former director of the state-operated Etat network before the war, Claveille had himself been responsible for introducing a statute for Etat workers in 1911, which formed the basis for negotiations over a new national contract.²⁹ Nor were the railway companies themselves hostile to the idea. As the director of the Compagnie du Nord observed, a nationally agreed position on wages and working conditions would benefit the companies, who would then be able to respond to workers’ demands as a bloc, rather than being played off one against the other, which, Javary claimed, occurred under the system as it stood.³⁰

²⁷ AN: F/7/13675, chez les cheminots: la situation, 14/2/1919, p. 1.

²⁸ Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class, Vol. 2: Workers and the Bourgeois Republic*, p. 178.

²⁹ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 174.

³⁰ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 178.

Despite the general agreement regarding the principle of a collective contract, the negotiation of its details proved a slow process; painfully so for the FdC leadership, who faced growing impatience from the rank and file as well as determined opposition from the minority leadership within the union, who opposed any collaboration with the rail companies. As it was, a final draft of the statute was not agreed until April 1920 and its implementation further delayed until July by the general railway strike of May that year. By this point, of course, the delays in delivering upon their promises for significant improvements for the cheminot workforce had fatefully undermined the reformist position on the railways.

One of the key sticking points throughout the negotiation process was the issue of cheminot pay. Through the course of the war, rampant inflation had severely impinged upon the cheminots' standard of living, and reduced their sense of status with regard to other workers, notably the munitions workers, whose incomes had, conversely, grown as a result of government intervention in the award of a generous cost of living allowance. For their part, the railway companies had agreed to wartime cost-of-living allowances only late in the war, and then only following a series of wildcat strikes in 1917 and 1918 as workers despaired of their dwindling incomes that many found would not stretch to cover even basic expenses.

Under the terms of the agreement reached between the state and the railway companies, the wartime cost-of-living allowance was to continue for six months following the end of hostilities, whereupon it was to be officially rescinded. Facing mounting financial pressure and a calamitous imbalance between income and expenditure, the companies were keen to hold personnel costs to a minimum. The workforce, on the other hand, who faced continued price inflation of some 40% through 1919 and 1920, demanded wage rises. While some called for the maintenance of the cost-of-living allowance, others decried this as tantamount to charity from the bosses and demanded its incorporation into the cheminots' basic wage.

The wage issue was an early and enduring source of rank and file discontent, one which the revolutionary leadership among the cheminots quickly sought to harness. On Saturday 25 January 1919, following orders issued by the PLM regional union secretary and prominent minoritaire Lucien Midol, workers employed by the PLM company ceased work for a short period of time in a coordinated protest against their low levels of pay. Rank and file impatience at the slow pace of negotiations had been growing across the network, and was reflected in the near total support for the industrial action.³¹ The conservative press were deeply alarmed by this coordinated action, which, they argued, pointed to a Bolshevik threat

³¹ *Le Populaire*, 'le mouvement du PLM', 29/1/1919.

to a key national asset. Others were struck by the novelty of the action. The protest had been carefully adapted to the railways' differing working environments. While workshop employees and depot staff downed tools for an hour at 3pm, station staff were only required to cease work for 15 minutes. Locomotive drivers were asked to halt their engines for one minute. As a result, *Le Populaire* labelled the protest a 'grève platonique'. The reformist leadership were less impressed by the strike. News that it had taken place was not published in the union newspaper the *Tribune des cheminots* until 15 February (by contrast the event had been reported in the Socialist daily newspaper *L'Humanité* on 28 January).³²

Despite its limited nature, the PLM protest captured the national media attention and provoked a heavy-handed response from the authorities. Though the armistice had been signed, the railway workers were still mobilised workers, and the strike was thus interpreted by the government as an issue of national security. The strike organiser Lucien Midol was arrested in his hometown of Dijon and driven to prison in Bourges to await trial, transported by the police in a car rather than by train for fear that local railwaymen would otherwise sabotage the journey. Midol's arrest prompted considerable backlash from among the cheminots. Local cheminot unions on the PLM network began to prepare in secret for a general strike.³³ Though angered by the strike, Bidegaray nonetheless condemned the authorities' actions and sought to intervene on Midol's behalf.

Faced with the mounting rank and file discontent, the FdC leadership belatedly sought to position themselves at the head of the protest movement. Having initially ignored the fact of the protest, the union leadership published an article in the *Tribune* on 1 March praising the strength and the unity of the workers who had taken part.³⁴ Published above the article was an item which prominently announced a mass meeting to be held in Paris the following weekend on the issue of pay, at which the union leadership would address the cheminot rank and file. At the same time as placing the union leadership at the forefront of the protest, Bidegaray also sought to dissuade the membership from any such further displays of independent action. Calling for 'sang froid' and 'discipline', Bidegaray instructed the cheminots to await the outcome of the leadership's work and to ignore the 'malevolent insinuations' of the minoritaires.³⁵

While in public Bidegaray maintained a bullish attitude, police reports suggest that in private he was deeply troubled by the growing agitation

³² Joseph Jacquet, *Les Cheminots dans l'Histoire Sociale de la France* (Paris, 1967), p. 80.

³³ Joseph Jacquet, *Les Cheminots dans l'Histoire Sociale de la France*, p. 80.

³⁴ *Tribune des Cheminots*, 'Une minute d'arrêt', 1/3/1919, p. 1.

³⁵ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'Du Sang froid, de la Discipline', 1/3/1919, p. 1.

among the cheminots and frustrated both by the lack of progress with the official negotiations and by Claveille's failure to realise the gravity of the situation. Bidegaray was reported to be increasingly fearful that his leadership would be overtaken by a more radical minority. It was reported that amongst friends he complained that his meetings with Claveille were now dominated by his repeated appeals for the minister to do something for the cheminots as they were ready to take action if nothing was achieved.³⁶ Such reports of conversations may reflect a negotiating tactic on the part of Bidegaray as he attempted to mobilise the rank and file discontent as a means of pushing the government towards support of the Federation's position on salaries – the report in question also highlights the gap between the Federation's demand of a basic monthly salary of 2400 francs and the companies' counter offer of 1700 francs.³⁷ However, reports from March reveal Bidegaray having to adopt an increasingly hard-line position in the face of growing discontent from among the cheminot rank-and-file. Calls for a strike for 16 March were only narrowly averted by the FdC leadership when they agreed to set a 1 May deadline for negotiations with railway management. Should a settlement still be lacking, noted the report's author, Bidegaray was likely to find himself forced into supporting a railway strike.³⁸

As the above discussion indicates, Bidegaray's position was under growing pressure from the minority leadership on the railways, whose denunciations both of the CGT's wartime conduct and its leaders' involvement in the post-war negotiations with state and management became increasingly virulent through the spring of 1919. Dissent against the cheminot leadership was particularly focussed upon Paris, where leading minoritaires such as Gaston Monmousseau and Henri Sirolle enjoyed significant support among workshop employees at the Batignolles workshop operated by the Etat network. On 15 March these speakers had addressed a crowd of 5,000 cheminots who had gathered for a meeting at the Bourse du Travail to deliver their own final ultimatum to the government. Addressing the crowd, Monmousseau called for a 'struggle to the death between the proletarians and capitalists, it's the revolution'. Sirolle was equally revolutionary in his language, attacking the 'capitalists who adore "le veau d'or" while the workers die of hunger'. He went on to add that the workers had 'fought the war for us, and not for the capitalists'.³⁹ Other speakers demanded immediate direct action on the part of workers to gain the rights that were due to them following the war. One called upon the cheminots to dispose of government

³⁶ AN F/7/13667, 'Chez les cheminots. La situation', 14/2/1919, pp. 1–3.

³⁷ AN F/7/13667, 'Chez les cheminots. La situation', 14/2/1919, p. 2.

³⁸ AN F/7/13667, 'Chez les cheminots. La situation', 5/3/1919, pp. 1–3.

³⁹ AN F/7/13667, 'Chez les cheminots, le meeting d'avant hier soir', 17/5/1919, pp. 2–3.

and to institute a regime of Soviets in its place. Another underlined that 1 May would be ‘la bataille du pays tout entier’, the cheminots, argued the speaker, ‘must hold on until total satisfaction [is achieved]’.⁴⁰

May Day 1919

Following a meeting of the Federation’s Conseil fédéral, instructions were issued to union branches across France on how the cheminots were to participate in the first May Day protests since the war. Bidegaray himself spelt these instructions out to a meeting of 5,000 workers when he visited Tours on 19 April. Following the experience of the PLM strike in January, railway workers across France received specific orders regarding how they were to behave in the workplace on 1 May. While employees in the workshops and depots would join fully in the CGT’s 24-hour strike, others would participate in protests of a shorter duration. Signalmen and locomotive drivers, for instance, were only required to join the strike for three minutes at 10am.⁴¹ Writing in *L'Humanité* on 29 April, Bidegaray underlined the significance of the cheminots’ action. The centrality of the railways to the nation, he underlined, would magnify the importance of the cheminots’ protest. However, he reminded the railway workers to observe the Federation’s strike orders ‘to the letter’ and to ensure that safety regulations continued to be strictly observed and maintained. ‘The public’, wrote Bidegaray, ‘will be aware of your constant preoccupation with the safeguarding of public safety’.⁴²

Tyler Stovall has emphasised the historical significance of 1 May 1919. During the years of conflict, the traditional day of international working-class solidarity had gone largely ignored in France. May Day 1919 would thus be the first major test of working-class strength in the post-war period. For Stovall, the May Day demonstrations thus had a duel meaning. They ‘represented a celebration of the end of both the war and the *Union Sacrée*, and a return to the custom of militant, public class struggle’.⁴³ Yet, for the leadership of the FdC, participation on 1 May was above all about unblocking negotiations with the companies and government. This was underlined by one member of the Federation leadership who emphasised the concessions that the union was winning from the railway industry, and called upon the cheminots to ‘remain more than ever united’. The message emphasising all that had been obtained was reinforced in *L'Humanité* the day prior to the strike. For

⁴⁰ AN F/7/13667, ‘Chez les cheminots, le meeting d’avant hier soir’, 17/5/1919, p. 1.

⁴¹ AD I-L, 4Mr164, 19/4/1919, p. 2.

⁴² *L'Humanité*, 29/4/1919, p. 4.

⁴³ Tyler Stovall, *Paris*, 1919, p. 162.

the FdC leadership, May Day was to be a calculated show of strength in accordance with the logic of the ideas of mass unionism developed during the war. The approach was met by almost immediate success as, in the face of the threatened mass strike, French legislators passed the eight-hour day bill into law just eight days after its introduction in the National Assembly.⁴⁴ However, with the legislation leaving it to individual employers to negotiate the details of the implementation of the new working day, the CGT still had much to gain from a powerful collective demonstration.

For their part, leading minoritaires chafed against the Federation's stance and called for a more radical approach. At a meeting at the Paris Bourse du Travail on 29 April, Monmousseau attacked the timidity of the Bidegaray leadership, and turned as well on the locomotive drivers 'who, after having transported so many soldiers to the butchery, do not wish to strike for more than three minutes'.⁴⁵ Speaking before the same audience of 6,000 workers, Sirolle avowed that the railway workers were unafraid of the authorities. For his part, he conjured a vivid image of revolutionary violence on the streets: 'We will go to the demonstration; if they touch one single hair on a worker's head, blood will flow, the massacre will begin and not stop until we are the masters, when the rulers and the bourgeois will be under our boots'.⁴⁶

On May Day itself railway workers across France answered the National Federation's call to cease work. In the workshops and depots, the strike was almost uniformly observed with only union-delegated skeleton staff reporting for work. At the PLM's Oullins workshop on the outskirts of Lyon, only 150 workers were present out of a total workforce of around 9,000.⁴⁷ Workers in the major Parisian railway stations ceased work en masse at 10am. At the Gare de l'Est, workers gathered in the main concourse between 10am and 12pm for a mass meeting. The cheminots unfurled the union's banner and sang the Internationale.⁴⁸ At the Gare d'Austerlitz, a key centre for electrified commuter trains, workers cut the current to the tracks at 10am bringing all traffic to a standstill for three minutes.⁴⁹ At the Gare Saint-Lazare, staff sealed off the entrances and denied entry to the public for more than ten minutes until station managers forced their way in.⁵⁰ The order to halt locomotives for three minutes was also almost uniformly observed by footplate staff.

⁴⁴ Tyler Stovall, *Paris, 1919*, p. 244.

⁴⁵ AN F/7/15985, Fonds Gaston Monmousseau, 28/4/1923, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Cited in Stovall, *Paris, 1919*, p. 162.

⁴⁷ AN F/7/13667, Dossier 1919, 'PLM – Journée du Première Mai', p. 2.

⁴⁸ *L'Humanité*, 'Chez les Cheminots', 2/5/1919, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *L'Humanité*, 'Chez les Cheminots', 2/5/1919, p. 3.

⁵⁰ AN F/7/13667, Dossier 1919, 'Chemins de Fer de l'Etat', pp. 1–2.

While workers in stations and those operating trains asserted their own authority over the workplace, striking railway workers also took to the streets in large-scale demonstrations. In Rouen over 2,000 cheminots marched through the town, the procession passing off without incident.⁵¹ In Paris, however, demonstrators encountered a heavy-handed state response that sparked violent clashes between workers and police. Railway workers fought street battles with police near the Gare du Nord station resulting in a number of injuries.⁵² Violence also followed an attempt by groups of cheminots to force their way across the Alexandre III bridge in the centre of Paris, a route blocked by police.⁵³ Later in the day the Gare de l'Est became the focal point of significant fighting as workers retreated to the eastern suburbs on trains leaving the station.⁵⁴ The violence of the day left two of the demonstrators dead, one of them killed by gunfire at the Gare de l'Est, and large numbers injured including CGT leader Léon Jouhaux and the Socialist Deputy Marcel Cachin, the latter seriously wounded while attempting to quell the fighting.⁵⁵ The following day the socialist daily *L'Humanité* carried outraged reports of what was viewed as the disproportionate police response. Incensed at the workers' treatment by police, cheminots at a number of locations in the capital refused to work the following day. At the Vaugirard depot the local union leader went so far as to declare himself the acting foreman and to announce that the union had taken control of operations.⁵⁶

Reform and Revolution After 1 May

Following the passage of the eight-hour day legislation on 23 April and the events of 1 May, a commission was formed by the minister of public works under the chairmanship of the vice-president of the Ponts et Chaussées engineering college to analyse the application of the law within the railway industry. The strength of the workers' demonstrations on 1 May and the fear of revolutionary violence had shocked French elites into action. Sub-committees composed of CGT officials and management met from May until 24 November to discuss the operation of the eight-hour day in the various branches of the industry.⁵⁷ For François Caron, the outcome of the discussions represented a major shift in authority within the railway

⁵¹ AN F/7/13667, Dossier 1919, 'Nord', p. 1.

⁵² AN F/7/13667, Dossier 1919, 'Nord', p. 1.

⁵³ Tyler Stovall, *Paris, 1919*, p. 164.

⁵⁴ Tyler Stovall, *Paris, 1919*, p. 164.

⁵⁵ Tyler Stovall, *Paris, 1919*, p. 168.

⁵⁶ AN F/7/13667, Dossier 1919, 'Chemins de Fer de l'Etat', p. 2.

⁵⁷ François Caron, *L'Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p. 670.

industry away from the companies and towards the state. The Minister of Public Works Claveille played a prominent and, in the end, determining role in the implementations, intervening directly in the deadlocked negotiations over the application of the law to footplatemen and train staff with a decree of 8 November which steamrollered over company objections.⁵⁸ For Caron, the introduction of the eight-hour day demonstrated that the companies had lost their autonomy when it came to the management of their workforce.⁵⁹ The findings of Georges Ribeill, however, suggest a need to nuance such views. Certainly, the overall authority of the Ministry of Public Works was vital in ensuring the application of the law, but locally the eight-hour day in fact led to a tightening of managerial authority over the workplace.⁶⁰

While Bidegaray and the FdC leadership celebrated the progress that was being made, the reformist strategy came under determined attack from leading minoritaires. Writing after the national cheminot congress held between 14 and 17 May, Pierre Monatte poured scorn over the CGT's 'successes'. 'Eight-hour day! English week! Salary rises! Reforms which weaken the workers. Momentary relief which must not and cannot impede the inevitable revolution.'⁶¹ During the congress itself, Monmousseau had himself criticised the approach adopted by the leadership, arguing that without a revolutionary change workers would be locked inside a 'vicious circle of reforms, demands without results, from which we must now exit, or else fail in our historic mission'.⁶²

Monatte nevertheless celebrated the results of the 'beau congrès' which had seen the minoritaires advance significantly, with Monmousseau's challenge to the leadership receiving the support of 108,538 votes, against 136,670 for Bidegaray.⁶³ Yet, despite such advances, the congress had also served to temper the enthusiasm and confidence of the leading minoritaires. This was notably the case during the concerted attacks they had faced from provincial delegates who condemned the Monmousseau and Sirrole faction as a Parisian grouping who did not speak for the whole union.⁶⁴ The more sombre mood among the minoritaire leadership was captured by Lucien Midol in an article published in Monatte's journal *La Vie ouvrière* in early

⁵⁸ François Caron, *L'Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p. 670.

⁵⁹ François Caron, *L'Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p. 671.

⁶⁰ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 188.

⁶¹ Pierre Monatte, 'Le Congrès des Cheminots', *La Vie ouvrière*, 21/5/1919, p. 4.

⁶² Cited in George Ribeil, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 160.

⁶³ Pierre Monatte, 'Le Congrès des Cheminots', *La Vie ouvrière*, 21/5/1919, p. 4.

⁶⁴ See the discussion in Ribeil, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, pp. 158–159.

June. Here, in contrast to Monatte's enthusiasm, Midol emphasised that, for all the recent expansion of rank and file militancy, Bidegaray and his supporters had nevertheless won the day. In particular, Midol emphasised that, despite the minoritaires' efforts, their 'propaganda has not yet lifted the cheminots from their sense of professional pride [conception de métier]' Effectively repudiating the position of Monmousseau and Monatte, Midol called for a shift in the minoritaire's revolutionary strategy. Recalling his own experiences leading the protests over salaries on the PLM, and pointing to the achievements gained by the Federation, Midol underlined the need for the minoritaires to take seriously the demands made by the cheminot rank-and-file, and to push the Federation leadership hard on these issues. 'It is our task', wrote Midol, 'to constantly recall these promises and to keep watch.'⁶⁵

Midol's letter chimed with a wider sense among revolutionaries that the cheminots still remained too attached to their sense of professional pride and continued to view their political commitments through the lens of narrow workplace issues. In an open letter to his 'camarades cheminots' published on the eve of the cheminot congress, an unnamed former railway worker who had been sacked for his part in the 1910 railway strike took issue with the 'narrow corporatism' among railway workers. 'Are you prepared', asked the writer, 'to play the role of Judas? Are you ready to sell your souls, my former comrades?'⁶⁶ Bidegaray's victory at the congress may have seemed to leading minoritaires such as Midol to have provided a troubling answer to this question. It made all the more urgent Midol's call for a new sense of realism among the minoritaires and a more pragmatic engagement with cheminot demands.

The discussion thus far illustrates the dilemmas which the new mass membership trade unionism posed for both majority and minority leaders alike. For the reformist majority, the huge membership of the Fédération des Cheminots was a vital bargaining chip to be deployed by the leadership in their negotiations with management and state. In a situation where the labour movement was deprived of access to the levers of power and therefore perforce impelled to act as a lobby group before government, the scale of the membership and its disciplined demonstrations of force could act to multiply the weight that the CGT's voice carried in the corridors of power. The reverse side of this, however, was the constant anxiety that the relatively inexperienced new recruits, who now formed a significant proportion of the Fédération des Cheminots membership, might not prove as disciplined as the leadership hoped. Fears that this newly unionised rank and file might

⁶⁵ Lucien Midol, 'Le Congrès des Cheminots', *La Vie ouvrière*, 4/6/1919.

⁶⁶ *La Vie Ouvrière*, 'Lettre amicale aux cheminots', 14/5/1919, p. 4.

abandon the reformist leaders for the more radical options offered by the minority were a significant cause for concern; hence the union's regular appeals for prudence, patience and discipline, and the constant speaking trips made by Bidegaray and his fellow majoritaire leaders around the country.

While the Federation leadership worried about the reliability of the new cheminot membership, the minoritaire leaders also nurtured their own doubts in this regard. For the minority the problem was not the indiscipline of the new recruits but rather their apparent lack of political commitment. This apathy moved some to distraction, as summed up in the anonymous *Vie ouvrière* piece referred to above. For the revolutionaries, mere numbers were not enough. As the anonymous writer emphasised, 'what matters most in the battle, is one's moral force, the will to vanquish'⁶⁷ This spoke to a major problem which the minority leadership were now having to confront. The events of the first half of 1919 demonstrated that the new mass membership could be a force for reform as much as constituting a revolutionary army. This was the crux of Midol's point when he called upon his fellow minoritaires to engage more closely with the lived experiences of their fellow workers so as to demonstrate more clearly the link between everyday demands and the need for revolutionary change. From this point on leading minoritaires began to retreat from their all or nothing stance towards revolution and instead placed themselves at the forefront of cheminot corporative demands, putting ever-increasing pressure on Bidegaray and the leadership to deliver on the promises they were making. The shift in the minoritaire's approach, which Georges Ribeill dates from the autumn and winter of 1919, was thus in gestation from the spring of that year.⁶⁸ Its first concrete implications were felt in the cheminots' response to the Parisian metalworkers' strike in June 1919.

Cheminots and the Metalworkers' Strike, June 1919

In a year profoundly marked by industrial action, the Paris metalworkers' strike of June 1919 stands out, both for its scale – over 160,000 metalworkers participated in the strike throughout June – but also for its seeming revolutionary potential. In June 1919, industrial unrest swept through the European continent, Soviet workers' regimes having been temporarily formed in Bavaria and Hungary, and waves of strikes in other Parisian industries joining the metal workers to swell the number of strikers in the region to a quarter of a million. June 1919, then, appeared to many observers both at the time and subsequently as a genuine revolutionary moment in the history of twentieth-century France.

⁶⁷ *La Vie Ouvrière*, 'Lettre amicale aux cheminots', 14/5/1919, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre*, pp. 168–169.

The immediate context for the strike was the passing of the eight-hour day legislation at the end of April. As historians have noted, the adoption of this law by the French parliament sparked a wave of industrial unrest across France as workers struck to exert pressure upon employers to apply the legislation on favourable terms. In particular workers pushed for the adoption of the 44-hour 'English Week', together with an agreement that no pay would be lost as a result of the reforms. As Tyler Stovall has noted, the seemingly intractable spiralling levels of post-war inflation added a political valence to these demands, leading many workers to conclude that political change needed to occur in order that workers might enjoy an adequate standard of living.⁶⁹ These issues affected workers across French industry, however. What was particular to the Parisian metalworkers was, first, the high levels of politicisation within the Parisian metalworkers union and, second, the particular dissatisfaction aroused among the rank and file by the agreement reached between the national Fédération des Métaux and the employers' organisation concerning the application of the eight-hour day in local factories. As Stovall underlines, a sharp division existed between the national leadership of the FdM and the Parisian rank and file. Whereas the national FdM had originally been a bastion of anti-war sentiment, its leader Alphonse Merrheim had led the national union in an increasingly pro-war direction, healing his rift with CGT leader Léon Jouhaux and emerging as a passionate pro-majoritaire voice in the closing months of the war. The Parisian metalworkers, on the other hand, retained their anti-war stance, a position reinforced by the admission of thousands of new union recruits after the armistice who tended to share the anti-war platform of the Parisian organisation.⁷⁰

The already hostile atmosphere between the national Federation and the local organisation was exacerbated by the agreement reached over the application of the eight-hour day between Merrheim and the employers on 17 April. In a manner similar to that already seen on the railways, the shift in the metalworking industry from a ten-hour day to an eight-hour day led to a tightening of managerial control over the working environment. Preparation time, breaks, and washing after shifts, which had previously been considered part of the working day, were now no longer accepted as such by employers. However, the major contrast with the cheminots concerned the question of piecework. Where the vast majority of railway workers were paid an hourly wage, the majority of Parisian factory workers were paid by the piece. While the agreement between the FdM and the employers maintained the principle that hourly paid employees would not

⁶⁹ Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, p. 247.

⁷⁰ Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, pp. 248–249.

lose any salary as a result of the changes this did not extend to piece-rate workers. Thus, 'for many metalworkers in Paris and its suburbs, the eight-hour-day agreement negotiated between the Metalworkers' Federation and representatives of industry seemed to promise lower wages, a harder working day, or a combination of the two.'⁷¹

Attempts by the national FdM to smooth over the divisions led to an improved agreement on 24 May, but this failed to assuage rank and file anger. Wildcat strikes broke out towards the end of May. Sensing that the national union no longer represented the interest of grassroots workers, the Parisian union opted to take matters into their own hands. The strike began on 2 June and by the end of the first day 100,000 metalworkers had joined, growing to 165,000 by the end of the next.⁷² The metalworkers were joined by thousands of local transport workers, tram drivers, and metro employees whose numbers swelled the ranks of the strikers and shut down the capital. The major question now concerned the attitude of Paris's railway workers. If the cheminots joined the strike, the industrial unrest would be magnified exponentially, potentially into a national movement the outcome of which would be impossible to predict. On 6 June Paris's cheminots gathered at the Bourse du Travail to consider their response.

The meeting was attended by several thousand cheminots, spilling out from the main meeting room into adjacent spaces. The speakers consisted of leading figures from the Federation, both majoritaires and minoritaires. Bidegaray and the FdC leadership were met by a confrontational atmosphere as they sought to make their case against a cheminot strike over the din of hostile voices calling for them to resign.⁷³ Recalling the meeting in the *Tribune des cheminots*, Bidegaray condemned the 'insults' that he and his supporters had suffered at the meeting, many of whom present, he noted, were not in fact cheminots. Updating his readers on events he noted how 'irresponsible men – above all the metalworkers – wanted to force the Federation into declaring a strike, merely for the sake of a strike'.⁷⁴ Loud voices among the audience present, including a number of the Federation's speakers, called for an immediate railway strike and invoked the spectre of revolution. Crucially, however, the leading minoritaires present, Gaston Monmousseau and Henri Sirolle, refused to endorse a cheminot strike that was only limited to Paris. A strike, declared Monmousseau, would have to have the backing of the Federation nationally, as well as the CGT. These words were greeted by a furious reaction from the audience, one

⁷¹ Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, p. 251.

⁷² Tyler Stovall, *Paris 1919*, pp. 253–55.

⁷³ See Jean-Louis Robert, *Les ouvriers, la patrie et la révolution, 1914–1919*, p. 394.

⁷⁴ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'Du sang froid, de la discipline', 1/7/1919, p. 1.

individual declaring it to represent a betrayal of the working class and of the metalworkers, who as a result would be forced to return to work ‘en baissant la tête’.⁷⁵

As the audience present realised, and as Robert later highlighted in his analysis of the meeting, the railway workers’ decision not to down tools in solidarity with the metalworkers deprived the latter’s strike of its revolutionary impetus. As Robert notes, however, the reason for Monmousseau and the minoritaires’ refusal to join with the metalworkers was not down to any ideological cleavage between the leaders of the metalworkers’ strike and the cheminot minority. Monmousseau and Sirolle, for their part, were convinced revolutionaries. The differences boiled down to questions of strategy. As Robert puts it, in refusing to throw his support behind the strike, Monmousseau had privileged the cheminot corporation over the Parisian workers.⁷⁶ Put simply, after the setbacks of May and the significant opposition they had encountered at the cheminot congress, the minority leadership elected to privilege their longer-term campaign to win over the cheminot rank-and-file, whom they judged to be as yet unprepared to support revolutionary action, above the immediate need to support the metalworkers in their strike. For his part, Bidegaray writing in the pages of the *Tribune* underlined the support he personally had received after the meeting from ordinary cheminots who wrote in large numbers to him, both individually and in groups, to assure him of their support for his anti-strike stance.⁷⁷

Through the autumn and into the winter of 1919, however, the reformist leadership of the Cheminot Federation found itself increasingly squeezed between the newly pragmatic minoritaires on the one hand and, on the other hand, an increasingly resolute railway management, who were unwilling to cede any quarter to the cheminots. The difficulties facing Bidegaray and his supporters within the Cheminot Federation increased following the election of November 1919. The landslide victory of the right at these elections did not only firmly shut the door upon any hopes of a legislative path to the reforms which the CGT desired. It also made the strategy of lobbying ministers even less effective as previously sympathetic members of the government were replaced by more hard-line figures. At the Ministry for Public Works, the conciliatory Claveille was replaced by the more combative, and pro-industry, Yves Le Trocquer. For the cheminots, the chances for reform, and above all of achieving the longstanding ambition of nationalisation, appeared increasingly remote without wider, more radical upheavals.

⁷⁵ Jean-Louis Robert, *Les ouvriers*, p. 395.

⁷⁶ Jean-Louis Robert, *Les ouvriers*, p. 396.

⁷⁷ *La Tribune des cheminots*, ‘Du sang froid, de la discipline’, 1/7/1919, p. 1.

By December, reports of cheminot morale pointed to mounting discontent among the rank and file. Within the workplace, relations between local managers and workers were becoming increasingly fraught. At Tours, workers rejecting any compromise with management over key cheminot demands had begun to elect their own shop stewards, prompting the local police commissaire to note that 'the predominant idea among the cheminots is to become the master.'⁷⁸ In contrast to the national picture, local cheminots were also reportedly buoyed by the success of the left at the November elections in Tours, particularly by the results at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps where SFIO left wingers had gained control of the municipal council.⁷⁹ The cheminots at Tours were ready to face down management and the authorities in a general strike, but, significantly, only if it were called by the Federation leaders.⁸⁰ At the close of 1919, therefore, though passions were running high among the cheminot rank-and-file the railway workers were not yet ready to abandon the CGT leadership and throw in their lot with Monmousseau and the minoritaires. The events of the spring of 1920, however, would decisively alter the cheminots' outlook.

1920

The events of January to May 1920 have not lacked for historians. The series of railway strikes beginning in Périgueux in January 1920 and culminating in the general railway strike of May 1920 presented a major challenge to the post-war Third Republic. The May strike was viewed as a 'civic battle of the Marne' by the authorities at the time, who presented the threat posed by workers to the French state as analogous to that of the German army as it bore down on Paris in September 1914. Following a wildcat strike of rank-and-file workers in January, and then a large-scale unofficial strike by railway workers in February which was only just contained by the national Federation leadership, the strike called to begin on 1 May 1920 garnered the support of the national CGT leadership. As railway workers began their strike for the nationalisation of the French railway network, they were supported by workers in other key sectors of the economy who participated in the CGT's strategy of calling out workers in waves, industry by industry,

⁷⁸ AD I-L, 4M1164, December 1919, 'Situation actuelle chez les cheminots de Tours', 16/12/1919, pp. 1–2.

⁷⁹ AD I-L, 4M1164, December 1919, 'Situation actuelle chez les cheminots de Tours', 16/12/1919, p. 3.

⁸⁰ According to the 'ordre du jour' voted at the end of a mass meeting of railway workers at Tours in December, AD I-L, 4M1164, December 1919, Reunion General Syndical de Tours PO et Etat, 6/12/1919, p. 3.

so as to exert the maximum pressure upon the government. As both Annie Kriegel and Georges Ribeill have related in detail, the CGT strategy ultimately failed. The approach of striking in echelon failed to garner the support of workers who in any case proved reluctant to participate in a sympathy strike for the cheminots. Though metalworkers and building workers showed solidarity, support quickly fell away, and the cheminots were thus forced to pursue their strike alone. The chances of success, already slim, were shrunk further by the preparations made by state and railway management ahead of the strike, and by the determined actions of the government in mobilising the police and army to occupy key railway sites and arrest prominent cheminot leaders. Groups of volunteers drawn from civic life worked to help maintain a patchy service on the affected networks, while on the Nord the call to strike received little support.

The general strike of May 1920 ended in traumatic defeat for France's railway workers. According to the calculations of Ribeill, around 18,000 cheminots were sacked by the railway companies. 200 leading militants were arrested. One of the strikes' leaders, Lucien Midol, fled into exile in Switzerland rather than face imprisonment. Having been in the vanguard of labour militancy through the spring of 1920, the defeat of May effectively curtailed cheminot militancy. For almost the whole of the rest of the interwar period the cheminots would be unwilling to challenge the power and authority of the state so openly. Only in November 1938 would railway workers once again countenance a national strike in defence of the Popular Front, but here too memories of 1920 and the impact of state repression ultimately held the cheminots back. In the immediate aftermath of May 1920 deep divisions and widespread anger aimed at those deemed to have 'betrayed' the strike precipitated a schism within the Cheminot Federation, prefiguring the broader split within the CGT and the subsequent formation of the CGTU. These splits and the debates surrounding them are the subject of the next chapter. In the remainder of this chapter we will explore the growth in rank and file radicalism on the railways through the early months of 1920, leading to the eventual rupture between the bulk of the railway workers and the Bidegaray leadership during the May strike.

Precursors to May: The Strikes of January and February 1920

Throughout the second half of 1919, cheminot attention had been firmly fixed upon the ongoing pay negotiations between the National Federation and representatives of the railway companies. At long last, in mid-January 1920, the companies came forward with a concrete offer. They proposed an increase of 1,000 francs in the cheminots' basic annual salary, taking the

starting wage to 2,400 francs. But, as Adrian Jones underlines, the company offer came at a cost. Industry managers insisted that the award of the pay increase was contingent on the removal of the housing and cost-of-living indemnities granted during wartime, the combined worth of which was greater than the value of the proffered salary increase. 'In effect', argues Jones, 'the companies were offering a wage cut for their employees.'⁸¹

The companies' offer stunned the Federation, who promptly rejected it and made their own counteroffer of a 3,800-franc minimum wage together with the maintenance of the existing indemnities. But the damage was already done. Having staked their reputation on the negotiations, the Federation were left with little to show for their six months' worth of effort. The minoritaire leadership wasted no time in tearing into the outcome and castigated the majoritaire leadership for their pursuit of a chimera of reform, 'but it [the Federation] has been negotiating for more than a year!', decried one minoritaire observer, harking back to the pay discussions that had begun immediately following the signing of the armistice. 'Its negotiating to such an extent that it can't stop negotiating!'⁸²

Across France, rank-and-file cheminots too shared the anger of the minoritaires, though not all went so far as their co-workers in Cahors who called for a general strike. Rank and file pressure for a more radical departure was signalled by the actions of a number of union branches who passed motions in the wake of the company pay offer calling for the immediate nationalisation of the railway network. For growing numbers of the cheminot grassroots, it appeared that any genuine improvement in working conditions required a more profound transformation of the political and social landscape of the industry. In the midst of these tumultuous weeks, the Cheminot Federation, its authority among the workers significantly weakened, faced a serious challenge in the form of a major strike among railway workers at Périgueux.

The strike among employees of the Paris-Orléans company at Périgueux in January 1920 was closely analysed by Annie Kriegel in her major study of the events of 1920. For Kriegel, the Périgueux strike served as a significant marker of growing cheminot militancy, and a curtain raiser for the future, more significant confrontations of February and May.⁸³ The strike developed from growing tensions between management and workers, led by local minoritaire activists and socialists, Olivier and Delagrange. Following the strike both would play prominent roles within the Communist Party and the CGTU, though Delagrange ultimately shifted to the extreme right following a spell as the Communist mayor of Périgueux between 1921 and 1925. The

⁸¹ Adrien Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January–May 1920', p. 515.

⁸² Cited in Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January–May 1920', p. 516.

⁸³ Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots 1920*.

immediate spark for the strike arose out of workers' complaints regarding the working environment in the enormous PO maintenance workshops (in French known as the *ateliers*). In particular, workers complained of the insufficient washing facilities at the Périgueux *atelier*, a situation made worse by the massive increase in the size of the workforce at the site as a result of the introduction of the eight-hour day. In protest at the situation, on 2 January, Olivier led the whole workforce out of the workshop five minutes early – some 2,000 workers participated. In response, the company sacked ten of the leading union militants within the workshop, including Olivier. This led to an immediate strike that lasted until 17 January when an agreement was reached between the company and the national Federation. However, it failed to satisfy the local workers who refused to countenance a return to work unless the PO dropped its threats of sanctions against the striking workers. Under pressure from the French President, Millerand, the company finally acquiesced to this on the 19th, and the workers returned to their posts.⁸⁴

The strike was by far the most serious yet to threaten the post-war railway network. However, as Ribeill emphasises, its impact did not reach far beyond the local context of the Dordogne.⁸⁵ At this stage, even workers employed elsewhere by the Paris-Orléans were unwilling to take action to extend the strike. Thus, when delegates from Périgueux arrived at Tours they were given a sympathetic hearing by local railway workers, but the workers here refused to support a strike that did not have the backing of the national Cheminot Federation.⁸⁶ The Périgueux strike nevertheless highlights a number of highly significant factors that characterised railway industrial relations at the outset of 1920. On the one hand we see the willingness of the minoritaires to launch strike action, and the willingness of at least some of the rank and file to support such action, independent of the national leadership. On the other hand, we see the growing resolution of railway company management, who were increasingly seeking to confront the more militant labour activists in the workplace. While the government ultimately chose to placate the workers and force the company to back down in January, this situation would not long endure. The Bloc National government aimed to rein in the labour militancy that had dogged post-war French society – a major confrontation was thus brewing.

Buoyed by the sudden upswing in cheminot militancy, the minoritaires now went onto the offensive, pushing the Federation leadership into setting a 10 February deadline for the culmination of new wage negotiations. A

⁸⁴ Georges Ribeill, *Les Cheminots en guerre*, p. 214.

⁸⁵ Georges Ribeill, *Les Cheminots en guerre*, p. 214.

⁸⁶ AD I-L, 4Mn164, 1920, 15/1/1920.

new company offer barely improved upon the first, with an improved wage settlement and the maintenance of the residence indemnity offset by the loss of the cost-of-living allowance. The Federation once more rejected management's offer and were left with no other option but to adopt the minoritaires' call for a general strike on 10 February. Just two days before the strike was due to take place government pressure once more told, and the companies acquiesced, reinstating the cost of living indemnity to their second improved offer. Much to the anger of the minoritaires, who had sought to raise the stakes of the negotiations by adding railway nationalisation to their list of demands, the National Federation accepted the new company offer. Despite the hostility of the minoritaire leadership, the new settlement was readily accepted by the cheminot rank-and-file, and the 10 February deadline passed off peacefully.

There was little time, however, for the national leadership to enjoy their success in heading off a general railway strike for, just a little over a week later, a strike that began at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges spread quickly across the national railway network. The spark this time was the sacking of a union official, one Campanaud, who had attended a union congress after local management had refused him leave from work to attend. The sacking of Campanaud elicited an immediate reaction among workers at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges who downed tools in protest on 19 February. In response the PLM closed the workshop and locked out the workers. Following an unsuccessful meeting with PLM management aimed at securing Campanaud's reinstatement, the regional secretary, and leading minoritaire, Lucien Midol, called a national strike of PLM workers. This strike soon spread beyond the PLM company to include cheminots from across France. By 23 February the strike effected the whole of the PLM network, but also affected that of the PO. Workers in Paris joined the strike, who were in turn also joined this time by workers in Tours, who explained their reasons to the local population. First and foremost, emphasised a correspondent in the Socialist newspaper, the *Reveil Socialiste d'Indre-et-Loire*, cheminots were protesting against the threat to union rights represented by the sacking of a union activist for going about union business. But the strike quickly broadened out to include a raft of measures which spoke to the cheminots' dissatisfaction with the emerging shape of France's post-war settlement. The cheminots of Tours spelled this out in a series of articles in the *Reveil* through the course of the February strike.⁸⁷

The strike continued to grow and develop until 1 March, driven forward, as Adrian Jones demonstrates, by rank and file action, while the Cheminot

⁸⁷ See for instance AD I-L, *Le Reveil Indre-et-Loire* 'A la population Tourangelle: Pourquoi nous faisons grève', 29/2/1920 and the edition of 3/3/1920.

Federation leadership sought to find a means of ending the strike by getting the Bloc National government to intervene on the workers' behalf to force the railway companies to give ground. The Federation made five demands of the company, among which the main sticking point was the demand that striking workers not be subject to punishment. Negotiations continued through the evening and into the night of 1–2 March before, again under pressure from Millerand, the companies gave away and agreed to the Federation's five-point agenda. The strike was lifted the next day.⁸⁸

The February strike was yet further evidence of the growing militancy of the union rank and file on the one hand, and the railway companies and the French government on the other hand. In his attempts to intervene directly with the Ministry for Public Works to intercede with the railway companies, Bidegaray was furious to be rebuffed by the Bloc National's minister, Yves Le Trocquer. Having listened to the minister's refusal to countenance any concession, Bidegaray exploded with anger once back among his fellow union leaders.⁸⁹ The companies had in Le Trocquer a firm supporter of a more hard-line position, but in February 1920 the then President of the Council, Millerand, was inclined to continue to play an arbitrating role. Through March, however, the government position shifted in favour of Le Trocquer and the companies. Though the 2 March agreement that had ended the strike had been a victory for the union, the railway companies, backed by Le Trocquer, soon began to row back on the guarantees they had offered. In particular, the railway companies dismissed leading *cheminot* militants, something they had expressly promised not to do under the terms of the 2 March agreement. Through March and April, the railway companies in concert with the government began to prepare for a significant showdown with the *cheminot* militants.⁹⁰

Historians disagree over the impact that the February 1920 strike had upon the *cheminot* rank-and-file. Adrian Jones has concluded that the February strike prompted a final rupture between the rank and file and the majoritaire leadership, pushing the former to withdraw their support for the reformist approach of the latter, and embrace instead the revolutionary approach of the minoritaires. In her work on labour activism in Saint-Etienne and Limoges, however, Katherine Amdur casts doubt upon the extent of rank and file support for the minoritaires after February. Even down to the calling of the May general strike, argued Amdur, local militants remained unconvinced by the revolutionary appeals of Monmousseau and his

⁸⁸ Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January–May 1920', pp. 528–532.

⁸⁹ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 215.

⁹⁰ On railway company planning see Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots*, pp. 115–158.

supporters. For Amdur, cheminot participation in these two towns flowed from their highly developed sense of professional solidarity and 'not from genuine revolutionary fervour'.⁹¹ Indeed, overall Amdur sees rank and file support for the May strike in starkly different terms than Jones. At its root, for Amdur, cheminot support for the strike flowed from 'personal interest and trade union solidarity'.⁹² According to Amdur's account, it is the events of May, particularly the impact of the arrests of local and national cheminot militants during the strike, which formed the basis for the cheminots' radicalisation in the areas she examined.

Certainly, local factors appear to have been significant in determining the attitudes of the cheminot rank-and-file in this crucial period through March and April 1920. In Périgueux, already by this stage a hotspot for revolutionary activity, the hostility of workers was sharpened by the convictions handed down to six striking workers, who received prison sentences ranging between eight days and 6 months.⁹³ The evolution of cheminot attitudes in Tours, however, is perhaps more revealing of the growth in revolutionary sentiment among French railway workers following the February strike.

In Tours the atmosphere among the town's railway workers as glimpsed through the local press appeared tense. During the February strike, the *Réveil Socialiste d'Indre-et-Loire* had reported notices that had appeared through the town bearing the macabre instructions, 'if you meet a cheminot, kill him'.⁹⁴ In late March, huge numbers of cheminots joined with other workers for a mass demonstration of 15,000. The approving chronicler in *Le Réveil* noted the significance of this display of strength: 'In a town such as Tours, aristocratic and bourgeois, surrounded by a calming atmosphere that quells the most excessive temperaments, a demonstration such as that of last Sunday seems to me suggestive of the profound and formidable changes that await the masters of the hour'.⁹⁵ The revolutionary potential of the scene was not lost upon local notables. The local prefect reported that the presence of thousands of workers on the streets of Tours had emboldened the demonstrators while at the same time suggesting to the town's middle-class population that the authorities were powerless to stop the workers.⁹⁶ This was not a view shared by the prefect, however, who reported to his

⁹¹ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, pp. 142–144, quote at 142.

⁹² Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 145.

⁹³ AN F/7/13924, 'Périgueux', 16/3/1920.

⁹⁴ AD I-L, *Le Réveil*, 'Dites la vérité Messieurs de la presse', 29/2/1920.

⁹⁵ AD I-Loire, *Le Réveil*, 'Espoirs', 27/3/1920.

⁹⁶ AD I-L, 1M338, 30/3/1920.

superiors in Paris that he had sufficient resources at his disposal to confront any insurrectionary movement.⁹⁷

The prefect's report highlighted the revolutionary character of the march, with speakers directly criticising the government and proclaiming class war. Orators also invoked the Russian revolution and the Soviets. 'The word "revolution", noted the prefect, 'is very widely heard and the opinion among the wider public is that some upheaval is to be expected in the near future.'⁹⁸ As significant, perhaps, as what was said was the route of the march itself. It is instructive to compare the symbolism of the demonstration of March 1920 with that undertaken by workers in Tours less than a year previously, on May Day, 1919. On that day, as workers and police fought running battles on the streets of Paris, the local CGT in Tours followed a route agreed with the local prefect which took them through the streets of the town and ended at the graves of local workers who had been killed during the war.⁹⁹ While this march undoubtedly contained a strong class element, the symbolism of ending at the workers' graves served to reinforce the broader CGT message of the sacrifice of France's working-class population in the national interest during the war years. The general lack of revolutionary sympathies among Tour's railway community was further emphasised a few weeks later when leading minoritaire Gaston Monmousseau was reportedly given an unenthusiastic hearing by local cheminots.¹⁰⁰ Between 4,000 and 5,000 workers marched on May Day 1919 in Tours. Roughly three times that number took the streets in March 1920, as we have seen. Attitudes by this stage had sharpened considerably. In part this can be put down to the heightened militancy among railway workers locally following the February strike and the disillusion felt locally by the CGT's settlement with the railway companies. Highly significant too was the existence of the newly elected Socialist municipality in the railway suburb of Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, on the outskirts of the town.

The new Socialist municipality, the only one in the department, together with its cheminot constituents played a prominent role in the demonstration. A large cohort of railway workers, led by the newly elected mayor 'Robespierre' Hénault, set off from Saint-Pierre-des-Corps ahead of the official demonstration, processing into Tours to rendezvous with the main body of the march. The cheminots then led the assembled workers back through the streets of Tours and into Saint-Pierre-des Corps where Hénault welcomed them, announcing that they had arrived 'chez eux'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ AD I-L, 1M338, 31/3/1920.

⁹⁸ AD I-L, 1M338, 31/3/1920.

⁹⁹ AD I-L, 1M338, 22/4/1919, p. 2 for details of the agreed route.

¹⁰⁰ AD I-L, 1M338, 25/5/1919, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ AD I-L, 1M233, 20/3/1920, p. 2.

In the week following the march, the tempo of mass *cheminot* meetings in Tours remained high, as reported with growing alarm to Paris by the prefect who noted that the population of Tours ‘now fear seeing the Revolution in the not-too-distant future’.¹⁰² Fears of revolution were further stoked towards the end of April when a demonstration of 200 soldiers, led by Hénault and a delegation of railwaymen, marched through the town. The soldiers circled the Place de la gare, reportedly singing the *Internationale* and announcing their refusal to take part in any military mobilisation against the forthcoming 1 May strike.¹⁰³ The political atmosphere in Tours was particularly tense, in large part shaped by the particular social contours locally which juxtaposed the strongly middle-class town with a distinctive working-class railway suburb just a kilometre away. Added to this was the presence of the Socialist municipality at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps and the strong character of Hénault as mayor. Yet, the growing radicalism of workers in Tours was mirrored by a broader radicalisation of France’s railway workers in this period. In April 1920 this increasingly militant outlook would see the minoritaires, albeit by a narrow margin, finally oust Bidegaray and the reformist leadership from their position at the helm of the *Cheminot* Federation.

May 1920: The Great Strike

The negotiations of 1 March brought a formal end to the February strike. The final agreement reached between the Federation leadership and the railway companies represented a significant victory for the *cheminots*. It quickly became apparent, however, that railway company managers were in no mood to acquiesce in their defeat. In a clear breach of the terms of the settlement, railway managers refused to reinstate workers sacked in the course of the February strike. This was followed in early March by further disciplinary action taken by management against those who had participated in the strike. Company sanctions, implemented in flagrant breach of their agreements with the *Cheminot* Federation, deepened rank and file anger, which had been stoked by the February strike. The Federation leadership, anxious to preserve their ‘victory’, were lucklustre in their condemnation of company victimisation, in turn drawing down upon themselves the wrath of large parts of the *cheminot* workforce. The irony that a strike launched in defence of a victimised worker (Campanaud) had ended in an agreement which left many more *cheminots* the target of company victimisation was not lost on France’s railway workers. It was, notes Ribeill, the ‘Achilles’

¹⁰² AD I-L, 1M233, 27/3/1920, p. 1.

¹⁰³ AD I-L, 1M233, 20/4/1920, p. 1.

heel of the majoritaires' victory', and one that the minoritaires were ready to exploit.¹⁰⁴

At the stormy national congress in late April, Monmousseau and the minoritaires led the attack against the Bidegaray leadership and their conduct of the strike. There was widespread condemnation of 'the victory that shames' from those who spoke. Despite an impassioned defence of the March agreement by Bidegaray, the Federation leadership suffered a resounding defeat at the hands of the assembled delegates. In response, Bidegaray resigned from his position as union general secretary, leaving the Federation in the hands of Monmousseau and the minoritaires. The scale of the minoritaires' victory was impressive: 59% of the assembled delegates voted in support of Monmousseau in the crucial vote over the 'rapport morale'; just 37% of those present backed Bidegaray and the leadership.¹⁰⁵ However, while the assembled delegates had rallied in large numbers behind Monmousseau in condemnation of the majoritaires, this did not subsequently translate into widespread enthusiasm for the minoritaires' own proposed strategy. A vote called the next day (24 April) over the new leadership's call for a general strike to be held on 1 May passed by just 25,390 votes out of a total electorate of 335,155.¹⁰⁶ Following this vote the new minoritaire leadership agreed to coordinate any plans for a May Day strike with the national CGT. This final resolution was then endorsed by the assembled delegates. As Kathryn Amdur underlines, such a concession on the part of the minoritaires effectively meant that the new revolutionary leadership of the Cheminot Federation were agreeing to submit 'its plans to the CGT for approval'.¹⁰⁷

What caused Monmousseau and the cheminot minoritaire leadership to vacillate at this late stage in deferring to Léon Jouhaux and the national CGT over the calling of a general strike? For Amdur, the concessions made by the minoritaires – among which Amdur also adds the inclusion of corporative as well as political demands to the strike resolution – were testament to a lack of confidence among the revolutionaries. First, there existed concerns that the cheminot rank-and-file might not yet be ready to countenance a general assault against the capitalist system. Second, leading minoritaires feared the consequences of the cheminots being left to go it alone should the wider CGT refuse to back the railway workers in their

¹⁰⁴ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 225.

¹⁰⁵ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 235.

¹⁰⁶ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 239.

¹⁰⁷ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 140.

struggle. Ultimately, Amdur questioned the revolutionary imperative behind minoritaire strategy ahead of the May strike. She viewed Monmousseau and his supporters as principally motivated by the lesser ambition to 'restore the revolutionary momentum', which Amdur argued had fallen away through the course of 1919, rather than in provoking a final reckoning with the capitalist order.¹⁰⁸

Certainly, there was a good deal to give the minoritaires pause in April 1920. The slim overall majority in favour of a general strike at the Cheminots' annual congress hid much deeper divisions over the direction of Federation strategy – only the PLM and Etat network returned majorities in favour of the May Day general strike, while the Nord and Est had been strongly opposed.¹⁰⁹ Concerns at being left to go it alone against the combined power of rail companies and state was also important in the decision. Yet, it does not necessarily follow that the minoritaires had abandoned their revolutionary goals. The events of February 1920 had demonstrated to the minoritaires the power of seemingly narrow corporative issues to inspire widespread industrial militancy which might quickly break free of its original justifications and develop in a more political direction.¹¹⁰ The call for railway nationalisation, a powerful but also a suitably vague rallying cry, had the potential to win support from across the spectrum of cheminot opinion.

Launched on 2 May 1920, the day following a very well-supported 24-hour May Day strike by French workers generally, the rail strike was marked by the broad level of support it gained from much of the railway community. Support was high across all networks, barring the Nord.¹¹¹ Quickly, however, the strike began to run into difficulties. Immediately on the 2nd, the government moved to have the leading cheminot militants arrested. As Annie Kriegel notes, this effectively left the cheminot union 'decapitated' and without effective direction for almost a week during the crucial opening days of the strike.¹¹² At the same time, the CGT's plan to pursue the strike 'in echelon', with workers in key sectors of the economy striking in support of the cheminots one after another, industry by industry, began to unravel. Impatient to take action, and suspicious that they were being marginalised in the planning, Parisian metalworkers unilaterally launched their own strike on 6 May. Following this decision by the Parisian

¹⁰⁸ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁹ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914–1920: La métamorphose d'une corporation*, p. 240.

¹¹⁰ Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre*, p. 225.

¹¹¹ Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots*, p. 162.

¹¹² Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots*, p. 163.

metalworkers, other Federations that had not been included in the CGT's original plan for the opening period of the strike also decided to take matters into their own hands. Building workers and the national metalworkers' Federation announced they would join the strike on 10 May. The effect of these decisions made 10 May the most impressive single day of the strike, with as many as 400,000 metalworkers joining the cheminots' stoppage. Yet, as Kriegel notes, this display of strength, though impressive, left the CGT with nowhere to go. With the major sectors of the economy now on strike, the original plan for a limited, carefully orchestrated strike had fallen apart. The options were either to press on towards a 'grève illimitée', or else to find a way to climb down.¹¹³ All the while, careful company and state planning ensured that some trains continued to run and supplies, carefully stockpiled, held out. With support for the strike ebbing, the CGT finally called for a return to work on 22 May. On 29 May the cheminots, too, were forced to admit defeat and return to work.

The outcome of the strike was a complete defeat. Some 18,000 railway workers lost their jobs as a result of company victimisation. Around 200 of the leading cheminot activists were arrested. Lucien Midol chose exile in Switzerland rather than face arrest, becoming in the process an early hero of the communist movement in France and a symbol of the political repression faced by communist activists (see chapter four below). Workshop employees, who had been at the forefront of the post-war labour militancy, bore the brunt of the sackings. Viewed as a 'heterogeneous element', these workers were understood by company managers and industry observers to have been the conduit through which revolutionary ideologies had entered the cheminot workforce. As a later report emphasised, the *atelier* workers 'bring to the interior of the networks a foreign état d'esprit which is a cause of trouble'.¹¹⁴ After the events of May 1920, the railway companies sought where possible to isolate the workshops and those employed within them from the wider cheminot workforce. In some instances, this meant relocating large workshops out of Paris to smaller towns that were less suspect politically.

More commonly, companies turned over the vast maintenance yards to private contractors to own and operate. Where this occurred, rail companies sacked the *atelier* workforce en masse. The private companies then rehired these workers often in the same roles as previously, though at reduced salaries and with inferior working conditions and benefits. At Saintes, for instance, where the May strike had been widely observed, the Etat sacked the entire workforce and contracted out the operation to the CIMT company. Workers

¹¹³ Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots*, pp. 168–172.

¹¹⁴ Roger Lazard, *Situation économique des agents des chemins de fer*, p. 84.

were then rehired, but on private industry terms. As Marcel Péroche, then a young apprentice in the Saintes workshops later recalled, 'that meant they lost a fortnight's holidays, pension rights, free travel and other benefits. But the most important thing for me was the training college which looked after the young apprentices in the Etat section of the railways.' For young railway workers like Péroche, being sacked in 1920 did not simply impact upon working conditions and benefits. It put their whole future in jeopardy. Fortunately for Péroche, the Etat agreed to continue to run the school and allowed him to apply.¹¹⁵

At Tours, the Paris-Orléans rail company sacked all 970 employees at its repair workshops at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, before handing the site over to a private contractor. Those rehired wrote to the local prefect to complain of their treatment. Despite the significant deterioration in their material circumstances, these workers found the new company suspiciously similar to the former regime. They wrote how they were 'working in the same place as before, on the same machines, managed by their former bosses'. For its part, the private contractor argued that it had 'nothing in common with the Compagnie d'Orléans'.¹¹⁶ There was no turning back the company decision, despite appeals made by the sacked cheminots to the prefect of Indre-et-Loire.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Through 1919 and into 1920, French railway workers had demonstrated growing impatience with the emerging shape of the post war settlement. Barely contained during 1919 by the leadership of the Fédération des Cheminots, rank and file militancy erupted in the winter and spring of 1920, culminating in the May general strike. A significant aspect of these developments was the melding of revolutionary ambitions and more narrow corporative goals, such as the demand for railway nationalisation, which gave the events of May 1920 their particular flavour. The collapse of the strike and the sackings and victimisation that followed it, however, would have lasting consequences for cheminot political militancy, as we shall see. From their vanguard position in May 1920, the railway workers now retreated from open confrontations with management and state. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, this did not stop them from shifting their support towards the appeal of Moscow and the newly created Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), a partner organisation to the Communist International.

¹¹⁵ Marcel Péroche, *Pacific Senator: A Train Driver's Life* (Argyll, 2005), pp. 24–25.

¹¹⁶ AD I-L, 4M164, 'Rapport de la Situation des Cheminots', 23/7/1920, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ AD I-L, 4M164, 'Rapport de la Situation des Cheminots', 23/7/1920.

3

Railway Workers and the Communist Choice

The collapse of the May strike had a profound and lasting impact upon the cheminot community. Individually, many workers experienced the loss of their job, prospects and security as a traumatic event. There were reports of suicides among the workers in the days and weeks following the termination of the strike. The cheminots' defeat led to a general sense of disillusionment and many turned away from the union and from political activity. Yet, for large numbers of railway workers, defeat turned to anger. This targeted for the most part the reformist CGT leadership, who, it was alleged, had betrayed the workers throughout 1920. This anger led first to the schism within the railway Federation, as the minoritaires under Gaston Monmousseau and Pierre Semard wrested control of the union away from the supporters of Maurice Bidegaray.¹ This was soon followed by an analogous schism within the wider CGT as the minoritaires split with the reformists and went on to form a new organisation, the CGTU.

The new 'unitaires', however, were soon themselves divided over the relationship the new confederation should pursue with the Bolsheviks in Moscow, and with the newly created French Communist Party at home. While Moscow's supporters argued for adherence to the new Bolshevik International, anarcho-syndicalists rejected Moscow's overtures and any submission of the union movement to a political party. These debates continue to animate historical discussion. In her seminal thesis published in the 1960s, Annie Kriegel emphasised the significance of this moment as would-be revolutionaries turned away from the traditions of French

¹ In the literature, Pierre Semard's name is spelled both with, and without, an accent over the 'e' of Semard. Throughout this book I have followed the convention adopted in Serge Wolikow (ed.), *Pierre Semard: Engagements, discipline et fidélité* (Paris, 2007) and omitted the accent.

syndicalism and towards an embrace of Russian-style Bolshevism.² This interpretation has since been challenged, most notably in the work of Kathryn Amdur, who emphasised the continuing significance of a distinctive revolutionary syndicalist current within French communism at least down to 1924, as well as the continued legacy of revolutionary syndicalist thinking and practice outside of the communist movement beyond this date.³ Most recently, Ralph Darlington's wide-ranging comparative study of working-class political activism has rejected the thesis of a clear rupture between revolutionary syndicalism on the one hand, and communism on the other hand. Instead, Darlington has explored how the immediate post-war period and the early 1920s saw a process of rapprochement between the two political cultures, with former syndicalists moving towards the Bolshevik position, and the communist leadership in turn accommodating themselves to key elements within revolutionary syndicalism.⁴ While the process of rapprochement was particularly marked at the national level, locally divisions between syndicalists and communists could have devastating effects upon union organisations, as we shall see in the case of the railway union at Périgueux. However, as we shall also see in the chapter, as well as in those that follow, syndicalist practices did not disappear within the FNCU in the wake of the 'communist choice', rather they remained an essential element in the *unitaire* approach to railway industrial relations throughout the 1920s, and beyond.

Railway Schism

The sacking of 18,000 railway workers who had participated in the strikes of 1920 had profound consequences. The individuals themselves who lost secure, often well-remunerated jobs felt the impact of this upheaval. Losing one's job on the railways in such circumstances had a profoundly dislocating effect, both in terms of a cheminot's sense of professional identity and in the severing of links with communities as individuals left their homes in search of work elsewhere in France. This combined experience of political defeat and subsequent dismissal carried a traumatic charge for some, as the reports of suicides among the révoqués attest.⁵ Railway workplaces and cheminot communities also registered the shock of the dismissals. For some sacked

² Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–20. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*.

³ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in two French Cities in the Era of World War One*.

⁴ Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism* (Aldershot, 2008).

⁵ The term 'révoqué' was used at the time to refer to a laid-off cheminot.

workers the experience of losing their job, their status, their prospects, and their pension was overwhelming. Having learnt of his dismissal, the local secretary of the Cheminot Federation in Alais killed himself in the Foyer des Cheminots.⁶ One of the leading figures within the CGT Federation, Jean Jarrigion, also took up the theme of suicides among the révoqués. He spoke movingly of the bodies of cheminots retrieved from the waters of the Garonne after May 1920.⁷

Police reports produced in the immediate aftermath of the May 1920 strike present a complex image of cheminot morale. A common theme that emerges is one of dejection and a generalised disengagement with politics and trade-union activity. In Dijon union membership had fallen from 4,700 to 800. In the neighbouring Yonne department only the Laroche depot had come out en masse in support of the strike. Here 742 out of the town's population of 900 cheminots had gone on strike in May 1920 (together with another 16 from nearby Joigny). Following the defeat 75 had been sacked as a consequence of their actions, and a further 30, mostly younger workers, had resigned rather than face disciplinary action. Nearly all of these cheminots, noted the department's prefect, had been obliged to leave the region in search of alternative work. Out of a pre-strike union membership of 1,868 – this out of the department's total cheminot workforce of roughly 3,000 – union strength had more than halved, down to 732.⁸ In the Rhône department, the local prefect wrote that union membership among the cheminots had dropped by more than two-thirds between May and July 1920, from roughly 7,000 to 2,500.⁹ Similarly in the Doubs, the cheminots were reported now to wish only to be left to work in peace, evincing a marked hostility to 'all revolutionary agitation' and 'reject[ing] extremist theories'.¹⁰

There may well have been a good deal of disillusionment among the cheminots in the summer and autumn of 1920. But what is particularly striking is that union membership levels were far from a state of complete collapse in this period, and indeed in certain places union organisations remained in rude health. In some of the areas already noted, such as Dijon or the Rhône department, membership fell considerably but nevertheless remained at historically high levels. In the Drôme department only 12 cheminots resigned their membership from the Cheminot Federation. Here

⁶ Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–20. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*, p. 154.

⁷ Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–20. Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*, p. 154.

⁸ AN F/7/13684, Prefet de l'Yonne à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 29/7/1920.

⁹ AN F/7/13684, Prefet du Rhône à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 29/7/1920.

¹⁰ AN F/7/13684, Prefet du Doubs à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 2/8/1920.

we can see the significance of Pierre Semard's popularity and influence among local railway workers, notably at Valence where he had worked for a number of years. Similarly, in Savoie only 12 cheminots chose to leave the union. Where membership did fall it did not follow that apathy was the best word to describe those who remained within the union. At Laroche, for instance, those who left the union tended to be those who had been lukewarm toward or indeed against the 1920 strike action. The result was that the local union became even more radical than had previously been the case. Meetings were dominated by left-wing 'extremists' and 'Midolistes' (supporters of Lucien Midol) who loudly proclaimed the need for the cheminots to break with the CGT and the Bidegaray leadership.¹¹ In October 1920, Bidegaray himself attended a stormy meeting of local cheminots in Tours, where he was met with significant hostility by those present. Bidegaray was in no mood to mollify his opponents. His speech contained a strongly worded criticism of local cheminots whom he claimed had abandoned the local union organisation. Prior to the strike, noted the cheminot general secretary, the Tours local union had numbered more than 6,000 members. Its numbers were now reduced to 700. Next, Bidegaray turned his attack on the local minoritaire leaders of the Tours branch, and the meeting became even more raucous with cries of 'sell out' and 'traitor' hurled at Bidegaray from the audience.¹² In September 1921 the local Paris-Orléans cheminot union, the largest railway union in the town, voted by a significant margin to break with the Bidegaray leadership and to follow Pierre Semard and Gaston Monmousseau. A letter from Bidegaray asking for the local cheminots' support went unanswered.¹³

The collapse of the strike, and the victimisation that followed it, left deep divisions within the cheminot community. Accusations of treason aimed at the Bidegaray leadership for having sold out the strikers were met with counter-denunciations of the minoritaires for provoking an unwinnable confrontation with management and the state authorities. In a relatively short space of time, these deep divisions, nourished by profound and growing ideological differences between majoritaires and minoritaires on the railways, would lead to an acrimonious split within the Cheminot Federation with the minoritaires – now fully in the majority – leaving the CGT to help form a rival national confederation, the CGTU. This schism took place in the summer of 1921 and would continue to divide the labour movement until reunification of the CGT and CGTU in 1935. In the immediate aftermath of the strike, however, it was the majoritaire leadership under Marcel

¹¹ AN F/7/13684, Prefet de l'Yonne à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 2/8/1920.

¹² AD I-L, 1M233, La Gauche en Indre-et-Loire, report of meeting, 16/10/1920.

¹³ AD I-L, 1M233, 1921, 14/9/1921.

Bidegaray who were first to regain the initiative and to reassert their grip over the Cheminot Federation. At an extraordinary congress held in early September 1920, the gathered cheminot delegates rejected the Monmousseau leadership by 155,478 votes to 116,417. Only in the PLM regional union, now under the leadership of Pierre Sémard following the imprisonment of the leading cheminot minoritaires, did a majority of delegates vote to support the positions adopted in April.¹⁴

Three weeks' later, the national congress of the CGT held at Orléans saw the majoritaire leadership firmly reassert their authority over the entire Confederation. The stormy meeting was punctuated throughout by emotional speeches and angry interventions from the floor. Jouhaux, speaking on the fourth day of the congress made no attempt to paper over the deep divisions within the CGT.¹⁵ When heckled from the floor by delegates who condemned him as a reactionary, he angrily responded that those who believed such a thing ought to leave the CGT.¹⁶ Yet, the overall response to Jouhaux's speech from the assembled delegates was positive, the regular interruptions of applause from the floor moving a frustrated Sémard to intervene to condemn those applauding the CGT leader.¹⁷

Bidegaray, for his part, delivered a typically forthright speech in response to his critics on the third day of the congress.¹⁸ The general secretary of the Cheminot Federation set forth a detailed account of events leading up to the May strike, emphasising throughout the principle role played by the leading minoritaires Monmousseau, Midol, and Sirolle in orchestrating events that forced the CGT into calling a general strike. Bidegaray was adamant that responsibility for the disaster of May lay squarely with the minority leadership, and he mocked them for what he saw as their hypocrisy when, as 'their' strike fell apart around them, they had sought to reopen negotiations with the rail companies and the government, having previously attacked the CGT leadership for their collaborationism. Bidegaray argued that when he and his fellow majoritaires sought to influence government opinion they had not only been given a hearing but often gained genuine concessions, whereas the minoritaires, 'you, you returned having received the government's foot

¹⁴ Joseph Jacquet, *Les cheminots dans l'histoire sociale de la France*, p. 90.

¹⁵ CGT, *XXIe congrès national corporatif (xve de la CGT). Tenu à Orléans du 27 septembre au 2 octobre 1920. Compte rendu* (Paris, 1920), pp. 191–219.

¹⁶ CGT, *XXIe congrès national corporatif (xve de la CGT). Tenu à Orléans du 27 septembre au 2 octobre 1920*, p. 197.

¹⁷ CGT, *XXIe congrès national corporatif (xve de la CGT). Tenu à Orléans du 27 septembre au 2 octobre 1920*, p. 208.

¹⁸ CGT, *XXIe congrès national corporatif (xve de la CGT). Tenu à Orléans du 27 septembre au 2 octobre 1920*, pp. 119–130.

up your arses!' He concluded, 'it would have been more honourable not to have gone there at all.'¹⁹

The Orléans congress resulted in a convincing victory for the CGT majority. The minoritaires responded to this setback by organising themselves into Comités Syndicalistes Révolutionnaires (CSRs), seeking to prepare the way for a more favourable outcome at the next annual congress. The original motivating force behind the CSRs was the revolutionary syndicalist and leading figure in the *Vie ouvrière* group Pierre Monatte. Railway workers were prominent in the new group at the national level – among the leading lights in the CSRs were Monmousseau, Semard, Sirolle, and the leading anarchist Pierre Besnard – and at the local level. Railway workers, as Kathryn Amdur underlines, were the leading members of the local CSR in Limoges.²⁰ This activism, however, proved insufficient to stop Bidegaray and his majoritaire supporters within the Cheminot Federation from wresting control of the national union away from the minoritaires at the cheminots' congress that year.

The bitter conflict between majoritaires and minoritaires continued through the autumn and winter of 1920. From their prison cells at the Santé in Paris, the minority leadership continued to play a significant role in events, with Pierre Monatte and Gaston Monmousseau in particular continuing to publish in *La Vie ouvrière* under pseudonyms. Following the majority's reassertion of control over the Cheminot Federation, Monmousseau penned a furious denunciation of Bidegaray and his supporters and their alleged conduct in the run up to and during the May strike. Published under Monmousseau's nom de plume of Jean Brécot, the piece included a signed letter from the 'détenues de la Santé' again restating the treason of the majority leadership.²¹ The release of the imprisoned strike leaders in early 1921 transformed the situation. At the Federation's highly fractious June congress, Monmousseau and his supporters seized control of the union, narrowly defeating the majoritiare's candidate for the Federation leadership.

This led to a period of significant tension as the majoritaires sought to ignore the outcome of the vote and refused to vacate the union headquarters. The Federation newspaper and the membership accounts, as well as the valuable union typewriter, also remained in the hands of the majoritaires. Following a confrontation at the union offices, the former majoritaires were forced out of the building and Monmousseau and his supporters took

¹⁹ CGT, *XXIe congrès national corporatif (xve de la CGT). Tenu à Orléans du 27 septembre au 2 octobre 1920*, p. 125.

²⁰ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 165.

²¹ Jean Brécot, *La grande grève de mai 1920 et la lutte actuelle des fonctionnaires* (Paris, n.d.).

possession.²² This was not the end of the matter, however. Under French trade union law, all trade union assets had to be registered under a single named individual, rather than in the name of the union organisation. For the Cheminot Federation, this named individual was Marcel Bidegaray, leader of the Federation upon its creation in 1917. As a result, the union headquarters and all other material assets were legally his possessions. This was confirmed by the French courts. The minoritaires' victory in June proved to be a hollow one as Bidegaray and his supporters utilised the French legal system to reassume control of the national Federation.²³

There was little that Monmousseau and his fellow minoritaires could do at this stage than to decamp to the new headquarters of the minoritaires at 33 rue de la Grange aux Belles, the building that was soon to become the general headquarters of the newly created Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU). From here they proclaimed themselves to be the genuine leadership of the Federation and denounced Bidegaray and the CGT majoritaires for their dirty tricks.

Bolsheviks and Syndicalists: The RILU and Divisions within the CGTU

The Founding of the CGTU

The creation of the new revolutionary rival to the CGT, the CGTU, has been labelled by Kathryn Amdur as a 'schism of desperation', 'a gesture not of strength but of profound weakness'.²⁴ Collapsing union membership and an economy in the grip of a post-war recession left workers vulnerable to a determined employer backlash that saw wage cuts and job losses in many industrial sectors. Strike activity fell away markedly, and where workers did attempt to defend their working conditions, they encountered employers who were now in no mood to compromise. Whereas only 25% of strikes between 1917 and 1920 had failed to reach some form of positive outcome for workers, now half of strikes ended in total defeat for workers.²⁵ National CGT membership declined markedly through 1921, from a peak of nearly two million in May 1920, it reached a nadir of one million by the early part of 1921.²⁶

²² Joseph Jacquet, *Les cheminots dans l'histoire sociale de la France*, pp. 95–96.

²³ Joseph Jacquet, *Les cheminots dans l'histoire sociale de la France*, p. 96.

²⁴ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 188.

²⁵ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, p. 181.

²⁶ Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, vol. 2, *Workers and the Bourgeois Republic, 1871–1939*, p. 190.

This fall in numbers served to accentuate the influence of the radical minority, whose militancy had been further sharpened after the 1920 defeat by the employer backlash during the recession of 1921. The deepening antagonisms and the majority's fears that they would lose control over the national confederation had made a split all but inevitable by the close of 1921. Matters came to a head following the CGT's Lille congress in July 1921, at which the Jouhaux leadership had only barely retained their hold over the confederation, in part due to the vagaries of a voting system which favoured the majoritaires. In an effort to reassert their authority, the CGT leadership voted to expel those unions affiliated to the CSRs, while inviting defeated reformist blocs (such as Bidegaray's supporters in the railway federation) to join the CGT as independent entities. In response to these moves, the minoritaires held their own congress in Paris in December 1921, which, though it claimed the mantle of unity was in fact all but confirmed the schism within the French labour movement. The split was confirmed when the newly created *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU) was officially created at a congress held at Saint-Etienne in 1922.²⁷

The question of responsibility for the schism, which profoundly weakened the labour movement in France throughout the 1920s and through much of the 1930s, continued to generate controversy for decades following the event. The debate resurfaced in the 1950s and provoked a heated exchange between the protagonists in the two camps, with Pierre Monatte defending the behaviour of the unitaires and laying the blame for the schism at the feet of the CGT majority who had expelled their opponents on the left.²⁸ Certainly the actions of the CGT leadership were significant, but so too were those within the CSR, who had been convinced of the need to break with the CGT reformists from early on following the Orléans congress of October 1920.²⁹

Regardless of its origins, the schism was felt deeply on both sides of the divide, exacerbating the already profound antagonisms that existed between the main protagonists. In such circumstances, the Comintern's United Front policy adopted at its third world congress in 1921 – in which revolutionaries were instructed to work within existing reformist unions and political parties – cut little ice with the unitaires in France. Nor was it favourably received by the French Communist Party, which had itself only recently been created

²⁷ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One*, pp. 189–200.

²⁸ Jean Maitron and Colette Chambelland (eds), *Syndicalisme révolutionnaire et communisme: Les archives de Pierre Monatte* (Paris, 1968), pp. 273–274.

²⁹ David Berry, *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917–1945* (London, 2002), pp. 119–120.

following the split within the French Socialist party at the Tours congress of December 1920. At a meeting of the PCF's Comité Directeur on 17 January 1922, the new approach was rejected as 'not applicable in France'.³⁰ Nor did revolutionaries within the trade unions welcome the new Comintern instructions. After all, just as the united front was being adopted in Moscow, the 'minoritaires' were being expelled from the CGT by the reformists. The leaders of the newly constituted CGTU had little inclination to now make advances to those whom they had spent the past four years vehemently opposing. Nevertheless, the CGTU did embrace the core Comintern theme of building a united working-class movement. In its earliest statements, the CGTU sought to position itself as the legitimate heir to the CGT and rejected the latter's claim that the unitaires had been responsible for the scission. Addressing French workers ahead of the 31 January 1922 congress, the leadership of the CGTU laid the blame for the schism squarely at the feet of the CGT leadership. French workers were invited to rally to the ranks of the new organisation, which its leaders referred to as 'la CGT, 33 rue de la Grange-aux-Belles', a reference to the address of the CGTU headquarters. The unitaires concluded their appeal with a ringing cry of 'la CGT continue, "Vive la CGT"'.³¹

Given the levels of animosity it is unsurprising that questions of any potential rapprochement with CGT leaders was given short shrift by the unitaires. At the Fédération National des Cheminots Unitaire (FNCU) Federal Conference in May 1922, the question of the united front was repeatedly discussed by the new cheminot leadership. Any idea of working alongside CGT leaders, however, was firmly rejected by the FNCU. As far as the cheminots were concerned, the united front would only be a question of rank and file activity and, furthermore, would only occur under the aegis of the CGTU.³² Frustrations with the united front strategy continued to be voiced through the remainder of the decade up to the advent of the Comintern's 'class-against-class' strategy in 1928–1929. In 1926, for instance, Gaston Monmousseau made his feelings on the subject clear in a report presented to the PCF's Commission Syndicale. In April that year a piece written for the Ecole du Parti had reiterated the Comintern's united front tactic, underlining the International's logic in demanding communist involvement in reformist unions. Rejecting claims that communists should shun such unions due to their being hopelessly and irrecoverably counter-revolutionary, the report's author insisted instead on the need to engage

³⁰ Philippe Robrieux, *Histoire intérieur du parti communiste, 1920–1945* (Paris, 1980), p. 103.

³¹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'Au-dessus des chefs confédéraux, l'unité ouvrière se réalise', 1/1/1922, p. 1.

³² *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/5/1922, p. 2.

with the CGT, ‘to renounce action in the unions is precisely to leave the masses under the influence of reformist leaders like Jouhaux’.³³ Speaking two months later at a Commission Syndical meeting at the PCF’s Lille congress, Monmousseau offered his response. Merely working within existing reformist unions could only yield limited results, he concluded. Drawing lessons from the recent collapse of the British General Strike, Monmousseau emphasised that ‘when the leadership of the union movement eludes us, we run significant risks of losing the serious class battles’.³⁴ The previous year, Monmousseau had been even more forthright. The united front, he emphasised, should not be considered a major factor in communist tactics in a country such as France ‘where the CGTU holds within the trade union movement a preponderant place’. Monmousseau called for a more radical approach, one less concerned with directing CGTU militants towards bureaucratic wrangling with CGT leaders and oriented more towards practical activity in the workplace, conducted through the CGTU.³⁵ Speaking from his own experiences of battles with the CGT leadership, Monmousseau emphasised the many administrative weapons that union executives had at their disposal to isolate and exclude communist activists. In such circumstances, successful opposition to the reformist leaderships from within such unions was virtually impossible.³⁶

At the July 1921 congress, the final united congress of the CGT, French railway workers had voted overwhelmingly against the Jouhaux leadership. The figures, 38,153 votes for the CGT leadership against 64,280 opposed, pointed to the strength of the minority position within the Cheminot Federation by this stage.³⁷ The figures, however, also emphasise the bare facts of union weakness on the railways compared to just a few months previously. From a membership of 374,000 the total number had collapsed to less than a third of that figure by the time of the Lille congress.³⁸ Within the newly formed CGTU, the Cheminot Federation represented something of an anomaly. From the outset, those Federations with the highest rates of unionisation, notably the miners and to a lesser extent the textile workers,

³³ Archives Départementales Seine-Saint-Denis, Fonds PCF (hereafter ADSSD, PCF), 3Mi6/24, Séquence 163, l’École du Parti (1926), ‘Cours Numéro 7, Le Travail Communiste dans les Syndicats’, 29/4/1926, p. 2.

³⁴ ADSSD, PCF, 3Mi6/19, Séquence 140, Ve Congrès de Lille, ‘^{1ère} séance de la CSC, Juin 1926’, p. 1.

³⁵ ADSSD, PCF, 3Mi6/13, Séquence 104, Rapports entre la CGTU et le PCF, pp. 15–35.

³⁶ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 35.

³⁷ There were also 732 abstentions, see Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du front populaire* (Paris, 1964), p. 178.

³⁸ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du front populaire*, p. 178.

voted by significant margins to back the CGT leadership in 1921. From the outset therefore, the Cheminot Federation was by far the largest of the professional groupings within the new CGTU. The majority of the remaining membership, aside from the metalworkers who also represented a significant presence within the new confederation, were drawn from the smaller artisanal trades where anarchist traditions remained strongest. The CGT's preponderant position among French workers was further consolidated as the 1920s progressed. Overall CGTU membership fell away significantly through the 1920s, and the national confederation was quickly overtaken by its CGT rival. This was not the case on the railways, however, where the new FNCU remained in constant competition with the CGT through to reunification in 1935. Cheminot numerical dominance of the CGTU, which lasted through to 1935, did not, however, translate into political authority within the new confederation. Suspicious of the bloc vote that gave disproportionate influence to larger unions within the CGT, the unitaires adopted an alternative voting system that worked in favour of smaller unions.

The Syndicalists and Moscow

The struggle against the reformist CGT leadership had served to hold together the divergent tendencies which made up the revolutionary wing of the labour movement. At the CGTU's first congress at Saint-Etienne an effort was made to continue to draw upon this common enemy in order to maintain the alliance. In a detailed analysis of the causes of the scission covering the war years through to the 'capitulations honteuses' of 1920 and the congresses of 1921, the reformist and collaborative goals of the CGT were once more held up for rebuke. Furthermore, the responsibility of the CGT leaders for the schism was vehemently maintained.³⁹ With the scission cemented, however, the need to decide upon the new political orientation of the CGTU and, above all, to agree the confederation's relationship with Moscow and the new international communist movement ended the fragile unity that opposition to the CGT leaders had wrought. Divisions that had become increasingly apparent since the December 1921 CSR congress in Paris over the question of syndicalist autonomy and the relationship between trade unions and the new Communist Party now came fully, and occasionally violently, to the fore.

The Bolshevik revolution had been almost universally acclaimed by those on the French revolutionary left, and the Bolshevik's desire to found a new revolutionary International similarly found strong support in France.

³⁹ CGTU, *1er Congrès de la CGTU, tenu à Saint-Etienne du 25 juin au 1er juillet 1922. Compte rendu* (Paris, 1922), pp. 51–84.

As Wayne Thorpe has highlighted, this was even true of the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement, which saw in the Bolsheviks' emphasis upon the organisation of revolutionary soviets a practical reflection of their own belief in a revolutionary society based upon the syndicat. The publication in France of Lenin's *State and Revolution*, which many contemporaries saw as bridging the divide between anarchism and Marxism, just as the founding Comintern congress was taking place in March 1919, further stoked the enthusiasm of anarcho-syndicalists for the new Bolshevik International.⁴⁰

Such enthusiasm was tempered, however, as fuller information reached French and other western anarchists clarifying the nature of the emerging Bolshevik state, and as the Bolshevik position on doctrinal and organisational matters with regards to the new Communist International solidified. The Second Comintern Congress held in the summer of 1920 proved particularly troubling for many anarchists who had hitherto been supportive of the new Third International. Hopes for a loose alliance between the workers' own existing revolutionary organisations and the Communist International were dashed when the congress appeared to endorse the view that union organisations were required to be subordinated to Communist Party control. At the congress itself, Zinoviev, head of the new Communist International, and the leading Bolshevik Karl Radek, proved particularly intransigent in opposing anarchist calls for a more open organisation.⁴¹

Attitudes towards the Comintern were also cooling among those associated with the *Vie ouvrière* group who, from the refounding of the eponymous journal in April 1919, had maintained vocal support for the Bolsheviks. In a similar fashion to the anarcho-syndicalists, leading figures within the *Vie ouvrière* group, such as Pierre Monatte and the railwaymen's leader Gaston Monmousseau, were unsupportive of the Bolshevik's calls for the supremacy of the political party over the union movement. They and others argued that this ran counter to French traditions of the separate spheres of political and union activity as enshrined in the Amiens Charter. A further area of contention, however, was the nature of the newly created French Communist Party, formed in December 1920 following the split within the SFIO over the adoption of Lenin's 'twenty-one conditions'. The new party, known as the Section Française de l'International Communiste, continued to be dominated by leading figures from the old SFIO, whose

⁴⁰ Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Amsterdam, 1999), p. 115.

⁴¹ On the debates at the Second international see Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923*, pp. 134–145; Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions, 1920–1937* (London, 2016), pp. 159–174.

wartime record of support for the war effort and the Union Sacrée made them anathema to those on the revolutionary left. In conversation with the Swiss revolutionary and Comintern agent in France, Jules Humbert-Droz, Monmousseau spoke in stinging terms of the new Communist Party leadership in France.⁴²

Dissatisfaction with the early Communist Party was also registered in Moscow, where from an early point leading figures viewed the French syndicalists as a significant revolutionary presence among the French working class and an important counterweight to the right-wing socialists within the early PCF. While we have seen how leading Bolsheviks such as Zinoviev and Radek nurtured a deep antipathy towards the anarcho-syndicalists, others, notably Lenin and Trotsky recognised the need to win support from among this group. As Ralph Darlington has emphasised, despite his critiques of the approach of the syndicalists in *Left-Wing Communism*, Lenin nevertheless viewed his syndicalist opponents as fellow revolutionaries to be won around to the Bolshevik position, rather than simply dismissed.⁴³ For his part, Trotsky too ‘sought to conciliate rather than to estrange, explicitly characterising syndicalism as a revolutionary tendency within the international working class movement’.⁴⁴

The onus in Moscow at this point, therefore, was to win over syndicalist support for the Communist International, an approach marked by a conciliatory attitude towards those who were judged amenable to Moscow’s embrace. The approach adopted was twofold. First, the Bolsheviks and their supporters in the international labour movement, notably the French syndicalist Alfred Rosmer, sought to develop a new international trade union organisation outside of the Communist International, thus aiming to quell syndicalist fears of union subordination to the communist political apparatus. In parallel to these efforts, the Bolshevik leadership launched major efforts to engage the syndicalists, notably those connected to the *Vie ouvrière* group, with the Communist Party in France, and placed growing pressure on the newly formed French party to develop its ties with the revolutionary workers’ organisations.⁴⁵

The formation of the International Trade Union Council in 1920 was part of the effort on the part of the communists to develop a compromise

⁴² Jules Humbert-Droz, *De Lénine à Staline: Dix ans au service de l'internationale communiste, 1921–1931* (Neuchâtel, 1971), p. 20; p. 26.

⁴³ Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism* (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 196–197.

⁴⁴ Ralph Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism*, p. 197.

⁴⁵ See Trotsky’s correspondence with the SFIC, in Trotsky, *The Communist international: The First Five Years*.

position between the Bolshevik view of the revolutionary party and the syndicalist concerns over union autonomy.⁴⁶ This initiative led in July 1921 to the formation of a trade union international, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), or Profintern, which existed separately to the Communist International. The congress took place in Moscow at the same time as the third congress of the Comintern. It was met with much suspicion by leading syndicalists, particularly the French delegation, for whom the railwaymen Henri Sirolle spoke, condemning political parties as a moderating influence on the revolutionary syndicalist organisations, and rejecting union subordination to the party. Nevertheless, the RILU congress and that of the Comintern were marked by a highly conciliatory approach on the part of leading Bolsheviks towards their syndicalist opponents. This included Zinoviev who, while continuing to denounce the idea of trade union autonomy, nevertheless announced that he was in favour of an RILU independent of the Comintern, 'provided that it had a close connection' with that organisation.⁴⁷ Such were the concessions offered in Moscow that Sirolle and the rest of the French Syndicalist delegation agreed in a secret meeting to sign a common declaration with the communists, agreeing to the formation of an action committee to serve as a 'connecting link' between the two Internationals.⁴⁸

The accord, however, did not survive the French syndicalists' return home, where they encountered an atmosphere that remained highly critical of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Even as the RILU congress had been taking place, leading figures within the CSR – including important future communists Monmousseau and Pierre Semard – signed an open letter published in *Vie ouvrière* on 22 July condemning the proposed relationship between the Comintern and the RILU.⁴⁹ Following the schism with the CGT, efforts were redoubled to win around the support of those within the *Vie ouvrière* group to the Bolshevik side. In May 1922 the Comintern agent Jules Humbert-Droz was dispatched to France with the express mission of bridging the gulf between the Communist Party and the syndicalists. Meeting with Monmousseau, now head of the *Vie ouvrière* group following Monatte's temporary withdrawal from political activity, Humbert-Droz received a clear signal of the group's position. Monmousseau, noted Humbert-Droz,

⁴⁶ See Alfred Rosmer's assessment of the ITUC at the founding congress of the Profintern in July 1921, cited in Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions, 1920–1937* (London, 2016), p. 363.

⁴⁷ Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions, 1920–1937*, p. 404. On Sirolle's position, see *ibid.* pp. 363–364.

⁴⁸ Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions, 1920–1937*, pp. 473–474.

⁴⁹ The letter is reproduced in full in Jean Maitron and Colette Chambelland (eds), *Syndicalisme révolutionnaire et communisme: Les archives de Pierre Monatte*, pp. 299–301.

'admitted the necessity of the political struggle, including the conquest of the state, but he did not recognise the need for a Communist Party, and certainly not that of the SFIO rebaptised as the Communist Party, as was the case in France'.⁵⁰ Humbert-Droz did, however, receive from Monmousseau an olive branch in the form of a proposal of how to win over his support. The transformation of the Communist Party into a genuine workers' party was the condition he set for joining. Armed with this information, Humbert-Droz set about attempting to boost the presence of working-class militants within the party. His attention fell directly upon Pierre Semard whom he saw an important bridge between the communists on the one hand and the syndicalists on the other.⁵¹ In the short term Humbert-Droz's efforts came to nothing.⁵² However, the identification of Semard first, as an up-and-coming militant of working-class origins and second, as someone able to bridge the gap between the syndicalists and the communists would lead to his rapid advance within the party. From a position of relatively obscurity in 1922, Semard would rise to the leadership of the Communist Party by 1924 as Moscow, in tandem with their French syndicalist sympathisers, sought to build a genuine revolutionary workers' party from the remnants of the Socialists who had voted in favour of the 'twenty-one conditions'.

Personal clandestine interventions in France by Humbert-Droz and Lozovsky, the head of the RILU, went some way towards winning around reluctant syndicalists to the communist position. More significant, however, were the genuine concessions offered by Moscow to the syndicalists. Assurances were made by the executive bureau of the RILU that they by no means envisaged 'the subordination of the trade unions to the party. An organic link between the two, it was now said, was "desirable", but not "necessary". Local conditions and traditions would also be respected'.⁵³ Such assurances may have been enough on their own to win around support for the Bolsheviks. However, the communist hand was strengthened in the run up to the congress by the publication of the CSR's secret pact, the existence of which led many to see the 'pure' syndicalists as underhanded. As a result of such events, Reiner Tosstorff notes that 'there was now a swing in the mood of many of the delegates: the anarcho-syndicalist bloc lost its majority at the congress'.⁵⁴ By the end of the deliberations at Saint-Etienne, the *Vie ouvrière* group had assumed leading

⁵⁰ Jules Humbert-Droz, *De Lénine à Staline: Dix ans au service de l'internationale communiste, 1921–1931*, p. 26.

⁵¹ Jules Humbert-Droz, *De Lénine à Staline: Dix ans au service de l'internationale communiste, 1921–1931*, p. 26.

⁵² Jenny Humbert-Droz, *Une pensée, une conscience, un combat: la carrière politique de Jules Humbert-Droz retracée par sa femme* (Neuchâtel, 1976).

⁵³ Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions, 1920–1937*, p. 484.

⁵⁴ Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions, 1920–1937*, p. 485.

positions within the CGTU and Gaston Monmousseau was elected as general secretary, a post he would hold until 1934.

Though the so-called 'pure' syndicalists lost ground at the 1922 CGTU congress, debates were nevertheless impassioned. Members of the Cheminot Federation were prominent in the interventions at Saint-Etienne. We have already seen how Monmousseau and Semard positioned themselves as cautious supporters of Moscow, but others took a much firmer line in favour of affiliation to the RILU and argued for close links between the CGTU and the Communist Party. One such figure was Olivier who had famously led the January 1920 strike of workers at Périgueux. Drawing upon his experiences of 1920 he argued that events had proved that the syndicalist idea that 'le syndicalisme suffit à tous' was no longer applicable. In the face of a centralised powerful state, he argued, revolutionaries needed to respond with a centralised, coordinated effort uniting all revolutionaries, whether working in the party or the unions. 'In a country such as France, it is not possible to have several revolutionary groups on the philosophical, political and syndical terrains.' He went on, 'at the moment when the revolutionary forces are in full action, we cannot do otherwise than to unite in a single core all the revolutionary forces opposed to this collapsing capitalism.' He concluded by calling for the CGTU to adhere to the RILU.⁵⁵

Following the Saint-Etienne congress, support for the syndicalists fell away. This was particularly apparent within the Cheminot Federation, where arguments concerning syndicalist autonomy and the revolutionary general strike ran into the realities of the cheminots' experience in May 1920. At the Federation's congress held in August 1923 powerful voices continued to be raised in defence of syndicalist traditions. A prominent anarchist and opponent of any accommodation with Moscow, Pierre Besnard, argued that union autonomy would not be respected by the RILU. He claimed that the Communist Party had declared war on syndicalism.⁵⁶ The vast majority present, however, were unsympathetic to such arguments, one speaker claiming that Besnard and his supporters were sabotaging the party of the revolution.⁵⁷ Monmousseau also spoke at the congress, and condemned those who, he argued, wished to conserve their syndicalism pure as though in a bottle.⁵⁸ The result was a massive victory for Monmousseau and Semard in favour of adhesion to the RILU and to working with the Communist Party in France. 55,216 voted with the communists, only 7,057 with Besnard.

⁵⁵ CGTU, *1er Congrès de la CGTU, tenu à Saint-Etienne du 25 juin au 1er juillet 1922. Compte rendu*, p. 44, p. 46.

⁵⁶ AN F/7/13668, 1923, Congrès de la Fédération Unitaire des Cheminots', pp. 1–3.

⁵⁷ AN F/7/13668, 1923, Congrès de la Fédération Unitaire des Cheminots', p. 4.

⁵⁸ AN F/7/13668, 1923, Congrès de la Fédération Unitaire des Cheminots', p. 5.

The November 1923 CGTU congress recorded similar, though less emphatic majorities on the same questions.

These debates at the national level were mirrored by vehement disagreements within local cheminot unions. This was for instance the case at Périgueux where divisions between communist supporters and those arguing in favour of syndicalist autonomy within the Cheminot Federation clashed repeatedly through the years 1922 to 1924. The atmosphere among the cheminots at Périgueux was particularly tense following 1920. Company and state victimisation had fallen hardest on the Périgord town. Police reports traced the diaspora community of former cheminots as it spread out through the west and south-west of France to cities such as Bordeaux and Nantes.⁵⁹ Cheminot resentments against the railway companies and threats of revenge were carefully noted and passed on to prefects and to the government in Paris. In the autumn of 1920, reports emerged from Bordeaux of former Périgueux railwaymen plotting sabotage and reprisals against their former employer, the Paris-Orléans railway company. Railwaymen who had remained in the town itself had been heard discussing openly the possibility of a campaign of derailments during the winter months.⁶⁰

The deep anger felt by many of the Périgueux militants was slow to diffuse. Through the spring and early summer of 1922 leading figures within the unitaire organisation in Périgueux spoke in clear, unequivocal terms of the need for widespread sabotage and violence in the context of a future general strike. The 1920 defeat had made a deep impression upon the leader of the Cheminots Unitaire in Périgueux, Emile Leymaire. Having observed the combined actions of the state and the railway company in arresting strike leaders, Leymaire argued that in any future confrontation the railway workers would have to be prepared to meet force with force. 'We must operate in a completely different manner', he argued, 'we must coldly contemplate sabotage, to be armed; in the workshops – grenades, revolvers, etc.'⁶¹

In the wake of the collapse of the railway strike and the mass sackings which afflicted the region, railwaymen responded with anger, but also with despair. In June 1920, an open letter was published from Périgueux's cheminots addressed to the head of the Soviet trade delegation, then in London, Leonid Krasin. The writer evoked the misery which existed among the afflicted cheminots as a result of the intransigence of their former employers and that, as a result, these cheminots had resolved to place 'all their working energy, all their technical competence in the service of the great Russia of the workers'. There were, affirmed the correspondent, 600

⁵⁹ AN F/7/13690, 'La situation à Périgueux', 11/6/1921.

⁶⁰ AN F/7/13689, Commissariat de Périgueux, 14/9/1920.

⁶¹ AD D, 4M 208, Dossier 1922, Rapport 15/6/1922.

cheminots in Périgueux who were ready to emigrate to Russia, as well as many others in centres across the south-west of France who also sought asylum in the Soviet Union.⁶² Elsewhere on the PO network, the prefect of Loiret informed the minister of the interior that many cheminots were making inquiries regarding emigrating to ‘Cicilie [sic]’ or Morocco, as well as to Russia.⁶³

The former railway worker and Communist mayor of Périgueux, Marcel Delagrange was unrepentant, however. ‘The Cheminot Union of Périgueux’, he declared, ‘had made the bourgeoisie of this region tremble. Our town was cited at the international congress in Moscow as being the most revolutionary town in France, always the first into the struggle, the last to lay down its arms.’⁶⁴ Yet, even Delagrange, himself a révoqué, noted the damage that the mass sackings had done to both the local Communist Party, and the cheminot trade union. In 1920, noted Delagrange, there had been roughly a thousand communists in Périgueux, largely drawn from the town’s cheminot community. By October 1922, this figure had fallen to just 266 as those workers had been forced away from the area.⁶⁵ Political activity among the railwaymen had similarly fallen away. In April 1922, the secretary of Périgueux’s Bourse du Travail, another former railway worker, announced that local cheminots would take no part in that year’s May Day demonstrations. Instead it would be down to other workers in the town to carry on the struggle, to ‘demonstrate the force of the proletariat, to demand the respect of their liberties, of their rights’.⁶⁶ In a town dominated by the railway industry, such an announcement amounted to the effective cancellation of the May Day demonstration.

The local Communist municipality did what it could to aid the defeated, jobless railwaymen. By June 1921 the majority of the ‘Etat-Major’ of the local Bolshevik leaders on the railways had been given employment by the town’s communist-controlled municipality, or at the local Bourse du Travail. Though the PO railway company had brought in a new largely non-unionised workforce to staff the engine sheds and workshops, the former cheminot communists, now drawing municipal salaries thanks to the local PCF administration, were working hard to rekindle the

⁶² AN F/7/13689, Le Secrétaire adjoint du Syndicat des Cheminots de Périgueux à Camarade Krassine, 13/6/1920, cited in *Le Populaire*, ‘Des Milliers de travailleurs veulent partir en Russie’.

⁶³ AN F/7/13689, Prefet du Loiret à M. le Ministre de l’Intérieur, 4/6/1920.

⁶⁴ Cited in Jean-Serge Eloi, *Le monde cheminot à Périgueux: Une communauté perdue* (Périgueux, 2005), p. 44.

⁶⁵ AD D, 4M192, ‘Rapport de Parti Communiste, Congrès Fédéral de la Dordogne’, 10/10/1922, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁶ AD D, 4M208, ‘Rapport’, 24/4/1922, p. 1.

left-wing political climate in the region. From their base in Périgueux, these ex-cheminots fanned out into the local countryside, holding large public rallies and demonstrations in the Dordogne countryside. As a result, the prefect's office estimated that membership of the Communist Party in the largely rural Dordogne had risen to 1800 by June 1921. The new membership was sustained and organised by révoqué cheminot militants from the town.⁶⁷

Soon after schism between the CGT and CGTU, deep divisions opened within the FNCU branch at Périgueux between supporters of the town's Communist mayor, Delagrange, and the syndicalists grouped around the leader of the local cheminot syndicat, Emile Leymaire. Over the course of a fifteen month period, from the CGTU's Saint-Etienne congress in June 1922 through to the final defeat of the syndicalist faction in September 1923, the bitter internecine conflict among local cheminots drove much of what remained of the membership away from the union, and left the union and the Communist Party organisation locally in disarray.

An early indication of the divisions to come occurred following the CGTU's Saint-Etienne congress, at which local unitaire leaders Pierre Aumont and Emile Leymaire declared themselves supporters of adhesion to the RILU only on condition that the principle of autonomy for the unions be respected within the new International.⁶⁸ Following the vote at Saint-Etienne, which as we have seen returned a majority for adhesion to the RILU, the leadership of Aumont and Leymaire came under fierce attack from Delagrange who criticised the 'anarchists' within the local syndicat as being 'as dangerous for the working class as the bourgeoisie'.⁶⁹ Tensions were significantly exacerbated when in August 1922 Delagrange moved to suspend Aumont, a révoqué employed within the municipality, from his job. Condemning the actions of the mayor, Leymaire wrote of his own volition to the regional union demanding Delagrange's expulsion from the Syndicat des Cheminots. In a chain of events that is in itself revealing of the close connections even at this early stage between the FNCU and the Communist Party, Leymaire's letter was forwarded by the union on to party headquarters in Paris, who in return passed it on to Delagrange. In a stormy meeting on 8 September, Delagrange produced the letter and the assembled cheminots voted to condemn the actions of the local union secretary by eight votes to five – the numbers representing the collapse in cheminot engagement with union affairs occasioned by these divisions.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ AN F/7/13690, 'La situation à Périgueux', 11/6/1921.

⁶⁸ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 15/6/1922.

⁶⁹ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 10/7/1922, p. 3.

⁷⁰ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 8/9/1922, p. 3.

By the spring of 1923 the divisions were worsening as the crisis within the local syndicat deepened. When in April 1923 a vote on the expulsion of Delagrange from the syndicat split local cheminots roughly into two equal opposing factions, a schism was all but a foregone conclusion. Reporting on the state of the union in May, Leymaire noted that over the preceding six months the cheminot syndicat at Périgueux had not gained a single new member. Police estimates suggest a total membership of 335 at this point, a figure which was falling daily, noted one observer.⁷¹ The ongoing divisions prevented the local cheminots from attending May Day demonstrations in 1923. By June the two factions were holding opposing union meetings, as Leymaire and his supporters sought to reconstitute the cheminot union at Périgueux 'by stripping away all the sacked railwaymen' whom they considered to be in the grip of the communists.⁷² For their part, the pro-communist faction were holding their own meetings at the municipal Bourse du Travail, enjoying the official trappings offered by the local Communist mayoralty. The outcome of the saga was eventually decided by the FNCU leadership in Paris who, dismayed by the all-but-complete collapse of a once powerful local organisation, finally decided to act to bring the divisions to a close. In October, Pierre Semard himself visited Périgueux to chair a meeting open to workers of all political stripes. The result was a significant endorsement of the communist faction by the local cheminots present, receiving 88 votes to the eight gained by Leymaire. As the local police report noted, 'this meeting has consecrated the victory of the communists over the pure syndicalists'.⁷³

These political divisions, on top of the impact of the defeat of 1920 and the company repression that followed it, did significant damage to the local cheminot union organisation. By January 1924 there were estimated to be only 147 cheminots within the FNCU at Périgueux.⁷⁴ Locally, however, the cheminots continued to constitute the major source of Communist Party membership, but the numbers remained low – in 1925 the cheminot cell in the town numbered 45 members, and was by far the largest of Périgueux's eight communist cells.⁷⁵ The continuing low levels of local political activity among the cheminots drove the town's mayor to an angry outburst at the end of September 1925: 'if the militants fear losing their positions with the PO, they have only to quit the party. When one is a communist [...] one does not recoil from any danger, and one is ready to sacrifice oneself for

⁷¹ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 26/5/1923, pp. 1–3.

⁷² AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 11/6/1923.

⁷³ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 19/10/1923, p. 3.

⁷⁴ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 8/1/1924.

⁷⁵ AD D, 4M208, Dossier 1925.

the communist cause and the revolution.⁷⁶ His efforts to rouse cheminot militancy were not enough, however. At the municipal elections later that year, the PCF were defeated, and a Radical mayor took Delagrange's place. From this point on Delagrange's political career took a sharp turn to the extreme right. Correspondingly, records show that by October 1926 Emile Leymaire was a leading local union official, though now within the CGT rather than the CGTU. He headed the Dordogne's Union départementale for the confederation.⁷⁷

Party and Union

At the Tours Congress in December 1920, a significant majority of the Socialist Party delegates supported the adherence to the new Third (Communist) International in Moscow. One year after its creation at Tours, the newly formed Communist Party, at this stage known as the Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste (SFIC) boasted 109,591 members – the majority of the Socialist Party membership, which had stood at 176,767 in 1920, having chosen to join with the new Communist Party.⁷⁸ In a short time frame, however, these respective positions were reversed. SFIO membership recovered slowly but steadily through the early 1920s. By 1923, membership topped 50,000 and then expanded more rapidly, reaching 111,368 by 1926. Though it fell back again following the disappointments of the Cartel de Gauche government (1924–1926), which the SFIO had supported but not joined, by the election year of 1932 Socialist Party membership had recovered much of its strength. By this year, the SFIO claimed 137,684 members. More stagnation followed, but expansion occurred once more with the arrival of the Popular Front, party membership reaching an interwar record of 286,604 in 1937.⁷⁹

The experience of the newly formed Communist Party, however, was very different. The dominant party on the left in terms of membership upon its founding, the SFIC haemorrhaged members through the early 1920s. By 1923 Communist Party membership had more than halved, with just 55,598 members at this stage, putting it on just about level pegging with the SFIO.⁸⁰ From this point until the late 1920s and the

⁷⁶ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 20/9/1925.

⁷⁷ AD D, 4M208, 'Rapport', 27/10/1926.

⁷⁸ Figures from John Bulaitis, *Maurice Thorez: A Biography* (London, 2018), p. 25, p. 34.

⁷⁹ SFIO membership figures from Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labour and Politics in France, 1830–1981* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 129–130.

⁸⁰ John Bulaitis, *Maurice Thorez: A Biography*, p. 34; Annie Kriegel, *Le pain et les roses: jalons pour une histoire des socialismes* (Paris, 1968), p. 299.

shift to ‘class-against-class’, which again caused Communist membership numbers to fall back, the party’s membership held relatively steady at around 50,000, putting it well behind its Socialist rival.⁸¹ At its nadir in 1933, official international sources suggested a Communist membership in France of just 30,000.⁸² Even prior to the ‘class-against-class’ period, Communist Party membership had fallen significantly from its initial strength. Anti-communist repression certainly played a role, but so too did the infighting between internal factions that marked the party’s early years. The party also underwent major organisational restructuring during this period in the form of bolshevisation as the new party sought to break from the inherited legacies of the SFIO and to assert its credentials as a revolutionary force within French society.

As the Communist Party struggled to maintain a foothold through the 1920s and into the 1930s, so too did the CGTU quickly lose ground among French workers. Divisions between syndicalists and communists drove out many who remained in the confederation after its creation in 1921. Determined employer resistance and a fragmented, unstable labour force, made for challenging terrain for trade union organisation during the 1920s and early 1930s. From a total union membership of 2 million in 1920, combined membership of the CGT and CGTU had fallen to less than half this number by 1921. By 1926 the CGT had firmly established itself as the dominant national union confederation, outnumbering the unitaires by 534,000 to 431,000, a position that had been further reinforced by 1934 as CGTU strength continued to ebb away. By the time of the reunification, the unitaire confederation boasted just 290,000 members.⁸³ Gérard Noiriel has underlined the profound destabilisation of the lives of workers in France during the 1920s. The populations of the Paris suburbs and those of other large cities like Lyon grew markedly as workers were drawn into these urban areas by the promise of work in the expanding industrial sectors. The population of industrial centres like Lorraine also increased substantially in this period.⁸⁴ While the PCF would in time set down powerful roots in these working-class commuter suburbs, notably in the Paris Red Belt, initially these population movements undermined the traditional local networks and traditions that nourished political activity.⁸⁵ Significant, too, was the high

⁸¹ See the discussion of Communist membership in Annie Kriegel, *Le pain et les roses: jalons pour une histoire des socialismes*, pp. 299–302.

⁸² Annie Kriegel, *Le pain et les roses: jalons pour une histoire des socialismes*, p. 308.

⁸³ Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, vol. 2, *Workers and the Bourgeois Republic, 1871–1939*, p. 247.

⁸⁴ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xixe–xxe siècle*, pp. 145–147.

⁸⁵ On the Red Belt, see Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt*.

turnover that characterised work in French industry in this period. This mobility flowed from the ongoing labour shortages in France during the 1920s which in turn gave rise to significant levels of immigration into France as employers looked to foreign workforces to fill gaps in the labour force. This in turn fragmented the labour force in many areas; Noiriel has argued that 'French workers and foreign workers lived in separate worlds'.⁸⁶ These factors, together with the sharp impediments to union organisation posed by the interwar factory, as outlined by Herrick Chapman, rendered union organisation in these milieus particularly challenging.⁸⁷ The outcome of all this was that the centre of gravity within the French trade union movement moved further and further towards public sector workers, and towards the cheminots, during the 1920s.⁸⁸

The particular form that the stabilisation of the railway industry took after 1920, and the relative stability in cheminot employment that went with this, both discussed in the next chapter, helped to provide an environment in which trade union organisation on the railways could continue to develop during the 1920s. In his statistical study of the French trade unions undertaken during the 1960s, Antoine Prost underlined the continued significance of trade unions, both CGT and CGTU among railway workers through the 1920s and 1930s. While the average rate of union density for French workers in this period oscillated between 7% and 9%, on the railways this figure after the crisis of 1921 was in excess of 30%, reaching more than 39% in 1930.⁸⁹ Within the CGTU, the FNCU, according to Prost, boasted membership numbers in excess of 100,000 in 1926, 1928, and 1930. Numbers, however, fell back between 1932 and 1934, though they still remained at historically high levels.⁹⁰ According to these figures, the FNCU accounted for roughly between a quarter and a third of total CGTU membership through the years down to reunification of the CGTU and CGT in 1936.

By contrast, Prost's figures suggest a more limited, though still in wider French terms significant, level of support for the CGT on the railways, at least until the 1930s. Figures for 1924, 1926, 1928 and 1930 show FNCC membership well behind that of the unitaires. The situation changed in 1932, however, when the CGT established a slight advantage with 85,605 members, less than 6,000 ahead of the FNCU. By 1934 the FNCC had fallen

⁸⁶ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xixe–xxe siècle*, p. 122.

⁸⁷ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, pp. 54–61.

⁸⁸ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xixe–xxe siècle*, p. 160.

⁸⁹ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'époque du front populaire*, p. 207.

⁹⁰ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'époque du front populaire*, p. 202. These figures are: 1926 – 114,145, 1928 – 109,745, 1930 – 107,440, 1932 – 79,980, 1934 – 78,605.

behind their unitaire counterparts once more, but the gap was only narrow with the CGT claiming 77,340 members.⁹¹

Prost's figures, drawn from calculations based upon published figures, can be tested against police reports from the period. Detailed surveys of union membership on the railways were carried out for the Ministry of the Interior in 1926 and 1927. These figures are not infallible. Local police investigators sometimes simply reported membership details from union sources. Generally, there is little evidence of how the police arrived at their figures. However, these surveys provide a snapshot of union membership and organisation in this period. First, they suggest both an overestimation of unitaire strength by Prost, and an underestimation of the membership of the FNCC. According to calculations based upon the police reports to the minister of the interior, the CGT numbered 64,650 members in 1927 against a total CGTU strength of 69,276. Some networks reflected this close division between CGT and CGTU. The Nord, for instance, split almost 50/50 (12,086 confédérés as against 10,106 unitaires.) The Midi, too, also carried a narrow majority for the CGT, as did the Paris-Orléans. Other unions witnessed a more pronounced split. The Est was a strong source of support for the CGT with 8,638 confédérés against 4,829 unitaires. CGTU support was to be found on the PLM and Etat networks. Here they outnumbered the CGT 17,152 to 12,765 and 17,500 to 13,500 respectively.⁹² Also striking is the number of smaller unions that existed on the railways. While the CGT and CGTU were by far the most powerful numerically, the catholic CFTC and a range of smaller 'professional' or 'independent' unions also maintained a presence. The CFTC nationally numbered 14,658 members, with the Alsace-Lorraine network representing a particular source of strength (4206). Alsace-Lorraine was also a significant centre for independent trade unions. Taken as a whole the memberships of these diverse unions accounted for the majority of union membership on the A-L with 8,678, albeit divided among 14 separate unions. For the police observers, such enthusiasm for independent professional unions was evidence of the lack of interest among railway workers in the recovered provinces for political or trade-union questions.⁹³ This was only a partial truth, however. The difficult legacies of the region's reintegration into France were also a key factor. The ongoing significance of tensions among the region's railway workers over issues of language and the strength of autonomous political currents made the area difficult

⁹¹ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'époque du front populaire*, p. 201. The FNCC figures are: 1924 – 66,037, 1926 – 46,842, 1928 – 70,507, 1930 – 83,045, 1932 – 85,605, 1934 – 77,340.

⁹² AN F/7/13669, 'Reponses à la Circulaire du 18/8/1927'.

⁹³ AN F/7/13669, 'Alsace Lorraine', p. 2.

terrain for the Paris-centric CGT and CGTU. Importantly, support for the independent footplatemen's union, the Fédération des Mécaniciens et Chauffeurs, was by this stage weak everywhere. Such weakness suggests that by this point engine drivers and firemen had in large part thrown their support behind the CGT and CGTU Federations.

By and large, the FNCU gained its greatest levels of support where two key factors converged. First, unitaire membership was consistently highest in areas where cheminots were most densely concentrated. This almost always centred around a major railway company atelier (or group of workshops), or a major depot. The second key factor was the close proximity of an urban centre with a developed communist presence. Given these key conditions, it is unsurprising that the Paris region – in the interwar period, the departments of the Seine and Seine-et-Oise – was an important centre for FNCU support. The unitaires' Etat Federation, for instance, relied strongly upon its powerful Parisian base for a core of its membership and as one of the principal sources of activism. On an otherwise highly rural network serving the west of France and Normandy, the Etat's Parisian depots, mainline stations and the massive workshop at Batignolles provided over a third of the FNCU membership on this network.⁹⁴ A similar situation existed on the Nord. Here, major concentrations of railwaymen at Landy, Saint-Denis and La Chapelle nurtured a powerful FNCU presence.

The most famous example of a concentrated, communist-supporting cheminot centre focussed upon the massive railway centres of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, on the PLM network, and nearby Juvisy, on the PO. Villeneuve-Saint-Georges and Juvisy developed as major railway centres during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The PLM and PO had initially operated 'gares de triage', essentially distribution centres for goods wagons heading into and out of Paris, within Paris itself, at Bercy (PLM) and Tolbiac (PO). However, these centres quickly proved insufficient to deal with the ever-expanding volume of goods heading into the French capital and so, from 1876 to 1887, the two railway companies moved their operations outside of Paris into the countryside south of the capital. By 1939, some 2,500 wagons per day were passing through the two stations.⁹⁵ The scale of operations at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges was increased by the establishment of carriage and wagon maintenance workshops at the site. By 1926, nearly 4,000 workers were employed by the PLM at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. A further 1,430 worked at nearby Juvisy. The FNCU numbered roughly 880 members in the former, and 340 at the latter site. As in Paris, it was the ateliers that

⁹⁴ AN F/7/13669, 'Etat' p. 3.

⁹⁵ G. Mathieu and D. Lefevre, 'Deux gares de triage de la région parisienne: Juvisy et Villeneuve-Saint-Georges', *L'Information géographique*, 23, 1 (1959), 26–39 (27).

particularly drew the attention of police surveillance. A 1926 report noted that in the workshops, Communist activity among the rank and file was particularly apparent.⁹⁶ Cheminot support for the Communist Party in this area led to Communist control of the municipality at Athis-Mons. As the 1927 PO report made clear to the minister of the interior, these 'revolutionary centres' were to be closely observed.⁹⁷

Outside of Paris, CGTU support among the railway workers was often strongest where large concentrations of *atelier* or depot employees lived and worked in proximity to a large town or city with its own working-class political culture and communist presence. On the Etat, for instance, the cheminots at Le Havre and Rouen were significant areas of unitaire membership. Le Havre was a lively centre of communist cheminot activity, with 50 railway workers active in one PCF cell, out of a total FNCU membership in the town of 952. The cell produced its own monthly newspaper, *Le Rail Rouge*, as well as more general pieces of PCF propaganda. The Communist Party cheminot cell at Dieppe was also noted as being particularly active with 20 railway workers playing a regular role.⁹⁸ In rural Calvados, political activism was maintained by railwaymen based in Caen and Lisieux, while on the Est a similar role was played in the Champagne region by railway workers based in Reims.⁹⁹ In Indre-et-Loire, the mixed political environment of Tours, with its Socialist municipality in the town and Communist municipality in the suburb of Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, was home to both strong local CGT and CGTU organisations.¹⁰⁰

As Jean-Paul Molinari has emphasised, the significance of the cheminots within local Communist Party organisations was reinforced as the party went through significant upheavals during the process of bolshevisation.¹⁰¹ This represented a major break with the traditions of French Socialism. Up to this point, the PCF had mirrored SFIO organisational structures, with party branches based upon French administrative units of towns and communes. In an effort to assert its working-class credentials, and to circumvent what was seen as the middle-class influx into the party in the immediate post-Tours period, the PCF, following instructions from the Comintern, reorganised its local structures. Factory cells were created, the aim being to organise members in their workplaces rather than based upon where they lived. In

⁹⁶ AN F/7/13672, 'Juvisy', 19/4/1926, p. 5.

⁹⁷ AN F/7/13669, 'PO', p. 13.

⁹⁸ AN F/7/13669, 'Etat', p. 13.

⁹⁹ AN F/7/13669, 'Est', p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ AN F/7/13669, 'PO', p. 8.

¹⁰¹ Jean-Paul Molinari, *Les ouvriers communistes: sociologie de l'adhésion ouvrière au PCF* (Paris, 1991), pp. 21–24.

August 1924 the PCF adopted the thesis of the 5th Comintern congress, which called for the institution of factory cells. PCF leader Albert Treint was tasked with the implementation of this measure, a process which recent historians of the Communist Party have described as ‘disrupting the totality of the party’.¹⁰² Bolshevisation had a profound effect upon the character of the PCF. In the first instance, it transformed its leadership, with ‘middle-class’ leaders being displaced by ‘proletarian’ figures such as Pierre Semard. The process saw ‘factional’ elements forced out of the party, including Alfred Rosmer, Pierre Monatte, and, most famously, Boris Souvarine, who had defended Trotsky in Moscow.¹⁰³ Organisationally, the workplace factory cells provided challenges to militants, particularly in rural areas.¹⁰⁴ During these difficult years, the stability represented by the cheminots’ ‘station cells’ (*cellules de gare*), provided very significant ballast to a communist organisation facing real difficulties. In rural departments active cheminot membership was in many respects the lifeblood of local communist organisation. In the Orne department, for instance, the cheminot cells represented some 40% of total PCF membership in the period 1925 to 1928.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere, Roger Magraw has also emphasised how in many rural areas cheminots dominated PCF electoral candidatures.¹⁰⁶

The bolshevisation process was also felt within the communist-led trade union, the CGTU. In November 1925, a plan was announced for the reorganisation of the CGTU to more closely echo what the PCF identified as France’s industrial rather than administrative regions. There were to be twenty-eight of these groups centred upon key economic areas. For example, Region One, the ‘Lille Region’ encompassed Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Somme; or, Region Six, the ‘Lyon Region’ took in a very large geographical area of Ain, Rhône, Loire, Haute Loire, Ardèche and parts of Vienne and Isère.¹⁰⁷ In a circular issued in March 1926, the Commission Syndical of the PCF analysed the organisational structures of the FNCU. Democratic centralism was, it noted, non-existent within the union. The Conseil fédéral elected to lead the union between congresses had only a weak link with the regional federations and could not impose its authority upon them.

¹⁰² Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, p. 89.

¹⁰³ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁰⁴ Julian Mishi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: sociabilités militantes au PCF* (Rennes, 2010), pp. 85–87.

¹⁰⁵ Jean-Paul Molinari, *Les ouvriers communistes: sociologie de l’adhésion ouvrière au PCF*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁶ Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, vol. 2, *Workers and the Bourgeois Republic, 1871–1939*, p. 244.

¹⁰⁷ ADSSD, PCF, 3 MI 6/13, séquence 109, circulaire no 20, 30/II/1925. See also 3 MI 6/23, séquence 160, Plan de la réorganisation de la CGTU (1926).

Midol's plans, which were presented at the March meeting of the Federal Council, aimed to ensure greater unity between centre and periphery, and, by extension, a far greater degree of communist control over the amorphous FNCU organisation. The plan ran into immediate difficulties, however, as a majority of the council refused to endorse the project without authorisation from congress. Midol was thus forced to circulate the plan across the FNCU well ahead of a specially convened congress while, in the meantime, opponents devoted their energies to attacking it.¹⁰⁸

The centralisation plan was finally accepted in January 1927.¹⁰⁹ The PCF noted, however, that for the moment the FNCU remained a federal body with a 'tendency toward autonomy' among its regions.¹¹⁰ Despite the reorganisation, this situation was to endure. As late as 1933, a report authored by the FNCU leadership noted that, although links with the Federal Sections had 'improved' with the moving of the regional headquarters to the main union base in Paris, there continued to be serious problems regarding those unions that had elected not to make the move to the capital: the Midi, Alsace-Lorraine and Algeria sections. The state of inter-union relations is revealed by the observation that, 'we are insufficiently aware of their practical work, often they do not even provide us with the material they edit and distribute to their members.' There continued to exist, noted the FNCU leadership, 'gaps which must be filled'.¹¹¹ Despite the limitations on its impact, the reorganisation of the FNCU reignited tensions between syndicalist and communist supporters within the Federation. In particular, Antoine Rambaud, one of the leading figures within the unitaire Federation, and a prominent syndicalist, objected strongly to what he viewed as the intrusion of the PCF into union affairs. The controversy rumbled on for a number of years with heightening antagonisms on both sides until Rambaud left the FNCU in 1932, rejoining the CGT along with a large part of his local union organisation in the west of Paris.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ ADSSD, PCF, 3 MI 6/24, séquence 170, CSC Circulaires 1926, CSC Circulaire No. 7, 30/3/1926, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁹ ADSSD, PCF, 3 MI 6/35, séquence 239, CSC rapport No 9, 20/1/1927, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ ADSSD, PCF, 3 MI 6/35, séquence 239, CSC rapport No 9, 20/1/1927, p. 11.

¹¹¹ Confédération Générale du Travail, Institut d'Histoire Social, Fédération Cheminot (Herafter CGTIHS): Fédération CGT/CGTU 1922–1935, Fédération Unitaire cheminot, Conseil Fédéral Rapport 11/8/1933, Rapport destiné à faciliter la discussion au cours de Conseil Fédéral de 29–30/8/1933, pp. 3–4.

¹¹² AN: F/7/13671, Rapport, 15/12/1931; AN: F/7/13671, Rapport, 29/3/1932; Entry for 'Antoine Rambaud' by Georges Ribeill in *Cheminots et Militantes* CD-ROM.

Conclusion

For the overwhelming majority within the FNCU, the defeat of May 1920 signalled a need for new methods. Some, like Emile Leymaire at Périgueux, believed that the workers needed to embrace an even more violent approach to the traditional revolutionary general strike, to push French syndicalist approaches further than had been attempted in the May strike. Others, such as Pierre Besnard, wished to turn back the clock on the whole experiment with mass unionism, and above all rejected any subordination of the labour movement to the Communist Party, or the Communist International in Moscow. Such views did not, however, chime with the majority within the FNCU. The majority within the FNCU voted overwhelmingly to support adherence to the new Communist International, and to working with the newly formed Communist Party. Yet, as we shall see, this commitment did not translate into a willingness to participate in communist campaigns or other open displays of political militancy in the workplace. In the next chapter we shall explore how the new communist-led union sought to navigate the tensions that this new post-May environment occasioned.

4

Stabilisation

The defeat of May 1920 had profound and long-lasting consequences. Though the cheminots continued to adhere to railway trade unions in large numbers, including the communist-led FNCU, the wave of industrial action had well and truly been broken. On the railways there was to be no return to the rank and file militancy of the period 1917–1920. For the remainder of the period, up to and including the Popular Front, railway workers were not to participate in any further significant strike action. Nor did the vast majority of cheminots demonstrate any inclination to participate in political demonstrations organised by the Communist Party. For Communist leaders, this new reality proved highly frustrating. Writing on the tenth anniversary of the May 1920 defeat, the leader of the communist railway Federation, Lucien Midol, complained of the impact of ‘ten years of passivity’ among the railway workers.¹ Others were even more damning.

This chapter examines the new realities in cheminot trade union activity in the period after the general strike in May 1920 down to the mid-to-late 1920s. In particular, it sets the cheminots’ trade union activity firmly within the contexts of industrial relations in the railway sector. With the power of the labour movement seemingly broken, railway managers successfully saw off the threat of nationalisation and set about undoing the wartime gains that workers had made. Alongside this, a new generation of railway managers sought to develop a harmonious vision of railway work, based upon principles of shared professional competence and collective endeavour in the national interest as a means of depoliticising the railway workplace. In the face of these developments, and in the context of an ongoing struggle with the CGT for the overall support of the cheminots, the FNCU struggled to maintain a militant voice among France’s railway workers.

¹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/5/1928.

Cheminot Unionism after 1921

A marked feature of cheminot trade unionism throughout the 1920s is the relative stability in levels of cheminot trade union membership, which remained high by French standards throughout the decade. Across France, and despite the defeats of May 1920, railway workers continued to hold union membership cards and pay their union dues. Union density remained high compared to other French industries, as we have seen. For all the instability and uncertainty of the period prior to 1920, the financial and administrative stabilisation of the railway companies in 1920/21 ensured that railway employees enjoyed more stable prospects than many workers in other sectors of the economy. Railway employment was considered to offer a stable career and good prospects. Staff turnover was relatively low compared to industries such as metalworking, for instance. The homogeneity of the railway workforce is also noteworthy. The reassertion of the railway workplace as one defined as male and 'French' in the years following the First World War reinforced the bonds of solidarity which in turn fed into a highly developed trade union culture.

While the railways continued by and large to be a stable occupation during the interwar period, the legacies of the May defeat nevertheless continued to cast a long shadow over the cheminots for much of the remainder of the period covered by this book. The impact of the defeat and the victimisation that followed was such that political activism and industrial militancy were pursued in a very different key through the 1920s and 1930s to that which had prevailed during the years immediately prior to 1920. While the organisational strength of the cheminot trade unions remained impressive, albeit divided between two rival factions, the vast majority of the cheminot rank-and-file appeared to have drawn the conclusion that the risks of openly confronting railway management were too great. For almost the entirety of the rest of the period under discussion there were almost no further strikes involving the cheminots. Nor were railway workers for the most part inclined to take part in political demonstrations organised by the PCF. Communist calls for the railway workers to join May Day demonstrations were rejected by the cheminot rank-and-file until 1936.²

Unsurprisingly, this much-altered outlook on the part of the cheminots proved problematic for the communist leadership on the railways who had risen to prominence upon the wave of post-war cheminot radicalism. Now

² The rank and file pointedly refused any participation in PCF plans for a May Day strike on 1 May 1930, earning themselves the rebuke of the Communist Party leadership, see AN: F/7/13671, Préparation 1^{er} Mai, 26/4/1930; AN: F/7/159851/1, Fonds Panthéon, Gaston Monmousseau, rapport, 10/5/1930.

confronted with a membership who appeared to have withdrawn into their corporatist shell, the unitaire leadership struggled to adapt to the new realities of railway industrial relations post-May 1920. Through the early to mid 1920s, communist leaders continued to affirm the FNCU's commitment to industrial militancy and the final goal of revolution. This ideological approach was firmly restated by Pierre Sémard in a piece written for the *Tribune des cheminots* in 1925. Rejecting the 'collaborationism' of the reformist unions, Sémard positioned the FNCU as a fighting union within railway industrial relations, one that rejected all official contacts between workers and managers. It was to be through strikes and demonstrations, announced Sémard, that the FNCU would make the voices of cheminots heard, not through delegations to managers and state officials.³ Following this logic, and rejecting anything that echoed the class collaboration of the Union Sacrée, the FNCU chose to boycott the industry-wide personnel elections – a position which was widely endorsed by the cheminot rank-and-file.⁴ Though their rejection of direct collaboration with management and state received popular support a problem remained: although the cheminots were willing to endorse a boycott of the railway 'High Council' (see below), they remained unwilling to follow the FNCU in their calls to participate in more robust, militant action.

If the CGTU-affiliated railway Federation experienced difficulties adjusting to the new realities of the 1920s, things were not much easier for the CGT. May 1920 had not just been a defeat for revolutionary trade unionism on the railways, but equally had signalled the end of the road for the CGT's ambitions for a genuinely collaborative industrial relations ethos between management and workers. In the immediate aftermath of May 1920, the railway companies moved to decisively reassert managerial authority in the workplace, including overturning the eight-hour day, the keystone of labour's wartime advances. CGT influence went all but ignored within the corridors of power.

Stabilising the Railway Industry

In retrospect, the 1920s represented the tail end of the 'golden age' of railway history, a period lasting roughly from the final quarter of the nineteenth century through to the Depression of the 1930s. These were the last years of the railway's virtual monopoly over passenger and freight transport. On the eve of the First World War there were only 107,000 automobiles in France. Nor did road haulage present a significant challenge to the railway's

³ *La Tribune des cheminots* 'Les pensées des autres', 1/2/1924, p. 1.

⁴ See the discussion in chapter six, below.

dominant position. In the years following the war this situation changed dramatically as private car ownership mushroomed and bus routes and road haulage began to bite into the railway monopoly. In the period covered by this chapter, the major victim of these developments were the smaller local routes operated by Departmental railways. It was not until the mid to late 1920s that road competition began to make serious inroads into the position of the Grands Réseaux, and not until the effects of the economic Depression of the 1930s were felt in France that the financial position of the railways slipped into a precipitous freefall as a result of the rise of the motor car.⁵

From the perspective of the early 1920s, France's railway industry appeared to have been successfully stabilised following the challenges of the war years and the post-war labour militancy. State intervention steadied the financial position of the railway companies while leaving the industry almost wholly in private hands. Only the Etat, nationalised following the collapse of the Western railway company in 1909, and the newly acquired Alsace-Lorraine network, were in state hands. The railway industry emerged from the turmoil of the 'après guerre' in a robust position. Parliament had rejected the idea of nationalisation and, in passing the 1921 Railway Act, had significantly buttressed the financial position of the private railway companies. The railway convention, agreed between the French government and the railways on 28 June 1921, and voted into law on 29 October of that year, represented the 'liquidation of the past', as far as rail company finances were concerned.⁶ Retrospectively introduced, beginning from 1 January 1921 the French state assumed liability for all debts incurred by the railway industry, a sum of 5 billion francs.⁷ The convention also established a common sinking fund into which net railway profits were paid, and then pooled between all the networks. These measures stabilised the highly precarious financial situation which had threatened the railway industry following the First World War. The 1921 statute brought a significant new measure of centralisation into the railway industry. Seeking to build upon the organisational lessons learned from the war years, a single Committee of Directors was created to oversee the running of the Grands Réseaux, and a new advisory Conseil supérieur (High Council) was formed to act as a quasi-regulator for the industry. The latter, composed of representatives of the state, big business and industrialists, general interest groups, and elected members of the railway workforce, met monthly to discuss policy decisions affecting the railways. Overall responsibility for the railways was now held by the Ministry of Public

⁵ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, pp. 22–28.

⁶ Kimon A. Doukas, *The French Railroad and the State* (New York, 1945), p. 131.

⁷ Kimon A. Doukas, *The French Railroad and the State*, p. 131.

Works. Despite these centralising measures the principle of private property was left untouched by parliament and state. Despite the projects advanced by the Socialist party and independent-minded Radicals in parliament such as Louis Loucheur, arguments in favour of full nationalisation of the railway network received short shrift as the Bloc National's Minister for Public Works, Yves Le Trocquer, made clear the government's intention to maintain the principle of company autonomy.⁸ The convention thus represented an exceptionally positive outcome for the railway companies, one which they could perhaps only have dared to hope for during the crisis years after 1918. It was the moment at which, according to one early historian of the railways, the industry had 'rounded the stormy cape' and headed for calmer, more prosperous waters.⁹

Having ridden out the waves of post-war labour militancy and defeated the railway strike of May 1920, railway companies now set their sights upon turning back the modest wartime gains obtained by their workforce. Foremost in their sights was the eight-hour day legislation. Viewed as ruinously expensive by the railway managers, for leading industry observers the introduction of the eight-hour working day stood as evidence of the dangers that state interference posed to the smooth operation of the network. 'The eight-hour day legislation', argued the editor of the industry's journal, 'which must have been an instrument of peace in the minds of its founders', commenced, as a result of the lack of wisdom with which its' introduction was managed, to engender grave social trouble.¹⁰ Through a series of decrees issued in October 1922 by the government Minister of Public Works, Yves Le Trocquer, the eight-hour day was effectively repealed on the railways. For many grades of worker, such as office staff, female kitchen staff, and nurses, the working day was extended to twelve hours. For male workers employed on passenger trains, not including footplate men, the working day was extended to twelve hours and to ten hours for women. The most significant increases were those faced by signalmen and level crossing attendants. For these workers, whose working rhythms involved periods of high activity interspersed with less busy periods, the working day was extended to fifteen hours. These interpretations remained in force until the application of the 40-hour week in 1937.¹¹ Drivers and firemen were still in theory covered by

⁸ AN: C//14712, PV. 1/07/1920, p. 117.

⁹ M. R. Godfernaux, 'Le Cinquantenaire de la *Revue Générale des Chemins de Fer*. Apperçu de l'Evolution des Chemins de Fer Français de 1878 à 1928', *Révue Historique des Chemins de Fer* (Juillet, 1928), p. 30.

¹⁰ M. R. Godfernaux, 'Le Cinquantenaire de la *Revue Générale des Chemins de Fer*. Apperçu de l'Evolution des Chemins de Fer Français de 1878 à 1928', *Revue Générale des Chemins de Fer* (juillet, 1928), p. 28.

¹¹ AN: F/14/14956, Note de Ministère de Travaux Publics, 20/12/1932, pp. 1-3.

eight-hour day legislation, but this was to be calculated as an average of the number of hours worked between two designated rest periods.¹²

The union response to these measures was furious, but ultimately impotent. Reacting to the most tangible remaining symbol of labour's wartime gains being swept aside by ministerial fiat, the CGT Cheminot Federation's leader Marcel Bidegaray attacked what he termed the 'illegal' and 'fraudulent' manoeuvrings of both the government and the rail industry.¹³ Despite the recent schism in the Cheminot Federation, unitaires and confédérés shared platforms to condemn the decree. Five hundred cheminots of all political shades marched through Valenciennes to protest the government's action. In front of the assembled crowd a unitaire delegate read out a letter addressed to the sous-prefet. The local cheminot challenged the legitimacy of the Le Trocquer decree. 'A single man,' argued the delegate, 'even if he is a minister, he does not have the right to modify a law voted by parliament, that is to say by the people'. The cheminots would resist, he announced, 'in order to ensure the respect of our legislation'.¹⁴

Local workers expressed their sense of betrayal at the hands of the government and the rail companies. At Laon in the Nord, the local CGT cheminot branch protested that having demonstrated their devotion to the national cause during the war, they were now being sacrificed to serve the interests of private capital. The cheminots declared they could not consent to a situation in which 'under the pretext of assuring the prosperity of the companies, the social conditions of railway workers be worsened'.¹⁵ Both Pierre Semard at the head of the Unitaires and Marcel Bidegaray for the Confédérés called upon railway workers to adopt a campaign of passive resistance against the measure. Railway workers were urged to 'work to rule', that is to strictly adhere to all aspects of railway regulations and procedures, no matter how arcane or contradictory, in order to disrupt rail transport. Workers at Tergnier in the Nord were recorded as having caused some disruption to rail services in this manner.¹⁶ At nearby Somain, cheminots refusing to work beyond the end of their eight-hour shifts had created a bottleneck in the busy freight station.¹⁷ However, such isolated activities could not halt the application of the new working regimes.

The arbitrary abolition of the eight-hour working day revealed the weakness of cheminot unions in this period. CGT leaders and militants

¹² AN: F/14/14956, Note de Ministère de Travaux Publics, 20/12/1932, p. 1.

¹³ AN: F/7/13678, Préfet du Tarn à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 27/11/1922, p. 2.

¹⁴ AN: F/7/13680, Commissaire spécial de Valenciennes à Préfet du Nord, 16/10/1922, p. 2.

¹⁵ AN: F/7/13680, Préfet de l'Aisne à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 9/11/1922.

¹⁶ AN: F/7/13680, Préfet de l'Aisne à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 14/10/1922, pp. 1-2.

¹⁷ *La Vie ouvrière*, 'Chez les cheminots', 6/7/1923.

erupted with angry denunciations of government action and claims of betrayal but were powerless to impose themselves on the calculations of the government and railway companies. The response of rank-and-file railway workers, however, also raised doubts regarding the FNCU's revolutionary strategy. Though low-level resistance to the measures had taken place in some areas, the overall cheminot response had proved disappointing. 'We do not dissimulate', wrote one leading Unitaire following the defeat of the eight-hour day, railway workers were faced by 'an increased force, an arrogance and a methodical offensive of the forces of reaction against the working class'. In the face of this 'offensive' the editorialist regretted that the cheminot resistance had not measured up to the leadership's expectations.¹⁸ The outlook among railway workers was captured by one perceptive police observer at Jeumont. Surveying worker morale in his district, the local commissaire noted how the combativeness of the railway workforce had been replaced by a more subdued outlook. Above all, he wrote to his superiors, cheminots now sought to avoid direct confrontation with managers and state at all costs as 'on each occasion, [it] creates victims among the cheminots'.¹⁹ For the FNCU this new more cautious attitude among the cheminots raised profound questions as to how a revolutionary communist trade union was to function if its members and supporters now simply refused to follow directives to strike or even to demonstrate in defence of their interests.

The Amnesty Campaign

Demands for an amnesty and the reintegration of workers sacked after May 1920 had followed immediately in the wake of the strike defeat in May. Speaking at the CGT annual congress held at Orléans in September 1920, Marcel Bidegaray pledged to do everything in his power to secure the return of the révoqués to the railway industry. While he admitted that not all would want to go back to the railways, there were those, he argued, whose whole working lives had been devoted to the industry and who knew no other working environment. For these individuals, Bidegaray announced that he was 'ready to undertake steps, no matter what they may be, I will seek out the President of the Republic if I must. I am ready to search out any and all influential figures in order to save the situation facing our sacked comrades and their families'.²⁰

¹⁸ *La Tribune des cheminots*, '1922–1923', 1/1/1923.

¹⁹ AN: F/7/13680, Commissaire Spécial de Jeumont à Préfet du Nord, 15/10/1922, in Préfet du Nord à Ministre de L'Intérieur 17/10/1922.

²⁰ CGT, *XXIe congrès national corporatif (xve de la CGT)*. Tenu à Orléans du 27 septembre au 2 octobre 1920. *Compte rendu*, p. 128.

Little progress could be made, however, while the conservative Bloc national government held power. The creation in 1923 of the Cartel de Gauche, a left-wing alliance between Edouard Herriot's Radicals and the Socialist party led by Léon Blum, opened the door to a potential amnesty for the railway workers sacked as a result of the strikes of 1920. Following negotiations between the CGT, the Socialists, and Herriot, the Cartel placed the demand for an amnesty at the heart of their campaign ahead of the May 1924 elections. Herriot's victory at the polls raised cheminot hopes that parliament would now vote a full amnesty. The amnesty bill passed the Chamber but ran into determined opposition in the Senate. Nor was it supported by the railway companies, who objected to the return of those whom they saw as revolutionary agitators. Supporters of the amnesty pressed their case both in parliament and in the country. Responding to the rail companies' cries of unwarranted state interference in their affairs, the Radical Minister of Public Works, Peytral, suggested an element of hypocrisy in the industry's position. The rail companies, he argued, had been quick to turn to the state to help them restore order and to assert their control over the rail network during the strike of 1920 arguing that this was in the national interest. Now, when the government judged it necessary in the same national interest to allow experienced workers to retake their positions, the companies cried foul.²¹ Speaking on behalf of the CGT, Marcel Bidegaray was even more forthright. The amnesty had been a central part of the election campaign and the government had a mandate to carry out their programme. Furthermore, argued Bidegaray, the companies' case that the government was meddling in their private affairs did not correspond with reality. The companies, he pointed out, operated the railways under a state concession, the government therefore had every right to take action as it saw fit.²²

Despite assurances that the companies would have control over which workers were rehired to avoid the return of 'agitators' and a provision that the *ateliers* turned over to private contractors (and their employees) fell outside the remit of the bill, the Cartel failed to persuade either the rail companies or their supporters in the Senate of the case for an amnesty. As a result, the full amnesty demanded by the railway workers failed to materialise. It was only on the state-run Etat network that sacked workers were rehired, though only on a case-by-case basis. For their part, the communist-led railway union had observed the CGT's campaign and their close involvement with the government attempts to pass the amnesty with a derisory eye. Communist leaders opposed the CGT's attempts to negotiate an amnesty and attacked

²¹ Remarks made in the Chamber, 24 July 1924. Cited by the *Tribune* 1/3/1925.

²² Cited in the *Tribune*, 1/12/1924.

the ‘shipwreck’ of the CGT strategy as discussions between the CGT, government and railway companies failed to bear fruit. The solution, argued leading Cheminot Unitaire, Antoine Demusois, was not to engage in appeals to bourgeois political parties or governments but to encourage direct action on the part of the cheminots themselves.²³ Confrontation not collaboration was the unitaire response.

The PCF’s more confrontational approach to the amnesty campaign took shape around the figure of Lucien Midol. As we have seen, Midol had played a pivotal role during the confrontations of 1920, at the head of the February 1920 strike and in preparations for that of May. Sacked from the PLM after this strike, Midol was also the subject of an arrest warrant following his leading role in the May strike. Rather than face prison, Midol fled France, drawing upon a network of sympathisers among railway workers and in the Communist Party to escape through France and into Switzerland. Here he found work and forged contacts with the Swiss Communist Party and with the international Communist agent Jules Humbert-Droz. He lived openly in Switzerland, claiming to be a political refugee and giving interviews to Swiss newspapers, in defiance of the French authorities.²⁴

Three years into his exile, Midol had built a relatively stable life in Switzerland. His wife had joined him, and their children attended the local school. In October 1923, this new life was interrupted by the decision taken by the French Communist Party to enter Midol as a candidate in the forthcoming local elections back in France. The timing was significant. By the autumn of 1923 the CGT amnesty campaign was in full swing. In contrast to the parliamentary route favoured by the CGT and their Socialist allies, the PCF and the CGTU planned a more militant approach. Ahead of the local elections a number of imprisoned – or in Midol’s case, exiled – communist militants were put forward as candidates. The most famous of these individuals was André Marty, the leader of the Black Sea mutiny who had been court-martialed by the French navy and imprisoned. Throughout the election campaign the PCF thus emphasised its militant credentials, holding mass meetings in support of these figures across France. The Communist Party made much of Midol’s victimisation at the hands of the railway companies. Writing in *L’Humanité* in October 1923, Pierre Monatte compared Midol’s plight to the 1917 mutineers in the French army and to the sailors who had mutinied in the French Black Sea fleet.²⁵ Entered as a candidate in several constituencies, Midol, against expectations including

²³ *La Tribune des cheminots*, ‘Les Naufrages de l’Amnistie et des Réintégrations’, 15/1/1925.

²⁴ AN F/7/14795, Dossier Lucien Midol; Lucien Midol, *La voie que j’ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, pp. 107–115.

²⁵ *L’Humanité*, ‘Midol Exilé’, 13/10/1923, p. 1.

his own, won the highly symbolic Parisian seat of La Santé, site of the prison by the same name and home to a sizeable working-class population.

As far as Midol was concerned this was the end of the matter. As he reflected in his autobiography, with an arrest warrant issued against him and facing a heavy prison sentence should he return to France, he was resigned to his new life in exile. The PCF, however, had other plans and instructed Midol to return to France to take up his place on Paris's municipal council. Unconvinced of the plan, Midol nevertheless returned to France – 'I did what the Party asked of me,' he later wrote.²⁶ Pursued by police, arrested, and then placed on trial, Midol was the focus of a noisy campaign waged in the communist press and in the courts by the Communist deputy and lawyer Maître André Berthon. Eventually, the state prosecutors relented. Midol was allowed to take up his seat and charges against him were dropped. The PCF were jubilant at the result. Writing in the party newspaper *Ce Soir*, leading Communist militant Vaillant-Couturier emphasised that the Communist Party had succeeded not only in returning an exiled worker from abroad, but had forced the authorities to recognise him as a municipal councillor.²⁷ The communist campaign contrasted markedly with that pursued by the CGT and the Socialist Party. While the latter had been punctilioously legal and advanced through the parliamentary sphere, the communists had pursued a militant campaign combining street demonstrations with press reports designed to antagonise official France. Neither approach, however, secured an amnesty for French railway workers. As long as the railway companies retained their authority and their powerful connections within the French political and business communities there would be no hope of an amnesty for those dismissed in May 1920. Leading industry figures were in no hurry to allow 'dangerous' workers back into the industry to foment discord and to put at risk the hard-won stability that the railways enjoyed during the 1920s. A final amnesty for those dismissed in May 1920 was not achieved until the arrival in power of the Popular Front government in May 1936.

Red for Danger: Surveillance on the Railways

Having demonstrated their willingness to act against militant workers in 1920, the railway companies maintained strict surveillance over its workforce through the rest of the decade. The rail industry was closely supported

²⁶ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, p. 117.

²⁷ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, p. 120.

in these efforts by the French state. At the local level the authorities and company inspectors collaborated closely to effect tight surveillance over key railway centres and infrastructure. At Hellemmes, for instance, site of a major workshop operated by the Compagnie du Nord employing 2,000 workers, local police ensured that all the principal militants among the workers were entered upon the Carnet B. Managers passed all propaganda that appeared on the premises on to the police. Finally, in the case of a serious threat to railway traffic at Lille or anywhere else on the Northern network, a protection plan had been developed between the Compagnie du Nord, the First Corps of the Army and the Prefecture.²⁸ The significance of the railway network to the economic life of the nation, and its centrality to national defence meant that railway workers came under very tight surveillance. The significant communist presence among the railway workforce added to official concerns.

Driven by popular anti-communist sentiment, French elites viewed the spectre of communist militants on the railways with alarm. Mobile and with unfettered access to the entire French railway network, official French sources produced in the mid-1920s repeatedly expressed worry about the potential threat to the security of the nation. Fears of violent revolutionaries roaming the rail network were augmented by concerns of espionage as state officials and ministers observed the links between the CGTU, the PCF, and Moscow. Reports into communist activity on the railways were often alarmist and highly fanciful. The national rail network was reconfigured in such reports into a vast conspiratorial web, with railway stations the 'listening posts' of the Communist Party, and depots serving as arms stores ready for a revolutionary seizure of power.²⁹ The railway companies did, however, allow trade union activity, even when led by communists, to exist within the industry. This differentiates the experience of the cheminots from workers in other sectors of the French economy. In the aircraft industry, for instance, workers could easily face the sack for raising issues in the workplace.³⁰ Even in the more tolerant atmosphere of the railways, there were limits placed on the behaviour that was permitted, however. While raising workplace concerns might be allowed, even in an extremely robust

²⁸ Archives Départementales, Nord (Hereafter AD N): M595/90, Généralités 1906–1927, Arrondissement de Lille; cheminots enquête 1925, Commissaire spéciale de Lille à M. le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 17/7/1925, p. 3.

²⁹ See for instance AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174; AN: F/7/13675, 'Note sur l'organisation prévue par les communistes en cas de révolution (chemins de fer) Très Secret. s.d. (1923), pp. 1–2; AN: F/7/13688, 'Parti Communiste Français: Plan d'Occupation Communiste des Chemins de Fer (d'un Correspondent)', 14/11/1925.

³⁰ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p. 55.

fashion, communist militants engaged in political activity often found themselves in trouble. Sanctions did not always result in sackings, however. At Juvisy, for instance, seven members of the communist cheminot cell were relocated to other less sensitive sectors of the rail network ‘where they will no longer be able to exercise their demoralising actions’.³¹

The Railway Companies and the Professional World of the Cheminots

A common theme in representations of railway work throughout the 1920s and 1930s – and indeed down to the present day – is one of professionalism and an often-heroic commitment to duty. As Ludivine Broch has emphasised, the frequently powerful sense of professional connection between the cheminots and the tools of their work – notably the steam locomotive – and the sense of belonging to a national community of railway workers played an important role in shaping cheminots’ ‘political behaviour’.³² Heroic views of the cheminots at work were celebrated in the national press during the interwar period. In October 1926, for instance, the conservative-leaning newspaper, the *Petit Journal Illustré*, carried the arresting image on its front cover of a locomotive driver clinging to the side of his speeding engine. Further details were provided on page two. Passing through Chessy station at a speed of 80km/h, the locomotive pulling the 7am express train from Paray-le-Monial suffered a potentially catastrophic mechanical failure. At high speed, the locomotive’s funnel exploded, engulfing the engine in smoke and jets of steam. On the footplate, the fireman lost consciousness, but the locomotive’s driver, ‘attentive only to his duty’, took action. Risking his life, and suffering severe burns in the process, he climbed along the outside of the stricken, speeding train to reach a valve located on the exterior of the front of the engine which he succeeded in closing, thus bringing the train to a safe halt. The newspaper lauded his actions – without his bravery a major accident might have occurred. But, noted the piece, such courage was what the public had come to expect of the cheminots. ‘Every day’ noted the writer, ‘such acts of devotion occur on the railways.’³³ Selfless devotion to duty and the abandonment of everything by cheminots, including their own personal safety, to the faithful execution of their work in the service

³¹ AN: F/7/13692, Directeur de la Sûreté Générale à M. le Directeur de la Compagnie de Chemins de Fer P-O. 26/1/1929.

³² See Ludivine Broch, ‘Professionalism in the Final Solution: French Railway Workers and the Jewish Deportations, 1942–4’, *Contemporary European History*, 23, 3 (2014), 359–380 (365–368).

³³ *Petit Journal Illustré*, 17/10/1926, pp. 1–2.

of the railways was a theme which the *Petit Journal Illustré* took up again four years later in the spring of 1930. Again, a dramatic front cover pictured a clearly badly injured locomotive driver who nevertheless remained at his post, attentive above all to his duty and to the safety of his train and its passengers. 'We cannot too often draw the public's attention to the acts of devotion and obedience to duty carried out, often in peril of their lives, by the *grande famille cheminote*', wrote the paper.³⁴

The railway companies were keen to foster and reward such behaviour among their employees. A sense of corporate identity based upon the idea of service to the nation and to the company was promoted through official rail company newspapers and publications. In addition to this, the PLM was among those that rewarded workers with medals for length of service and for metorious comportment in the workplace.³⁵ Many equated such ideas of professionalism and sense of service among railway employees with political moderation, even a conservative attitude. For the conservative politician André Tardieu, this professional devotion made the cheminots in his eyes a bulwark of the existing order, a point he underlined in a speech made in Belfort in 1928.³⁶ Such praise, together with the Communist Party's own misgivings regarding the political reliability of highly skilled workers, rendered the cheminots particularly suspicious in the eyes both of the PCF and of the revolutionary left more broadly. Communist cheminot leaders also leant their voices to the chorus condemning the political outlook of the railway workers. On several occasions during the 1920s and early 1930s, Lucien Midol criticised the cheminots' ostensible lack of militancy, and their commitment to the professional ethos of railway work. Such professional devotion, argued Midol, threatened to transform cheminots into agents of capitalism and imperialism. He remonstrated with his cheminot audience in the pages of the *Tribune*, calling upon them to cease to be the 'auxiliaries of the bourgeoisie'.³⁷

During the 1920s, railway company managers mobilised the idea of the cheminots as an apolitical professional community in an attempt to attenuate class divisions in the industry and to foster a more collaborative industrial relations ethos. The post-war period witnessed a new generation of railway engineers rise to positions of authority within the industry. These men, of whom Raoul Dautry is the most famous example, brought with them a genuine concern for the railway workforce and a commitment to social

³⁴ *Petit Journal Illustré*, 27/4/1930, pp. 1–2.

³⁵ Georges Ribeill, *PLM-City* (Paris, 1999).

³⁶ AN: 324AP/54, Fonds André Tardieu, 'discours à l'occasion de la fondation de l'Union des Républicains de Gauche du Territoire de Belfort', s.d. 1927 ou 1928, pp. 7–8.

³⁷ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'Ne soyez pas les auxiliers de la bourgeoisie', 1/5/1930.

welfare. Inspired by the social philosophy of Hubert Lyautey, a generation of young railway managers were committed to realising the ‘social role of the engineer’.³⁸ The recurrent labour militancy upon the railways convinced these figures that a change of approach was required. Such sentiments were widely shared. Speaking in parliament in favour of railway nationalisation, the prominent Radical and wartime Armaments Minister Louis Loucheur argued that labour militancy flowed from workers’ lack of identification with the rail companies. Loucheur believed that nationalisation was the best means to reconnect workers with their employers.³⁹ For Dautry and his fellow railway elites the answer was not state ownership but rather a new managerial ethos. For his part, Dautry was convinced of the need to break with the past and to win the workforce over with carrots rather than sticks.⁴⁰

The centrepiece of Dautry’s approach as an engineer on the Nord was a celebrated programme of *cheminot cités*, with new housing for railway workers built across the devastated Northern region. In common with other major industrial employers in France in the 1920s and 1930s, the railway industry developed significant welfare programmes for its staff. The twin effects of the post-strike repression and the enlightened managerial strategy quickly bore fruit, as far as railway managers were concerned. A 1924 census commissioned by the Compagnie du Nord was fulsome in its praise of railway welfare programmes and management practices. The workforce had been transformed, argued the authors of the report. The cheminots were disciplined and productive in the workplace, but also demonstrated the signs of being stable and contented in their family lives.⁴¹

Central to management’s vision of industrial relations on the railways was a sense of the rail company as a single, organic unit, reflecting what Jackie Clarke has termed an ‘organic productive community’ in which wasteful, sectional class conflicts were subsumed into a shared collective interest.⁴² Family metaphors abounded, with railway managers referred to as ‘bons pères d’enfant’, and the company referred to as a ‘home’ for its employees. At the heart of this sense of collective purpose, the companies emphasised the professional esprit de corps which, for them, characterised the world of railway work. Despite their status as well-paid white-collar workers,

³⁸ On the influence of Lyautey’s work on Dautry in particular, see Michel Avril, *Raoul Dautry, la passion de servir* (Paris, 1993), p. 39.

³⁹ For Loucheur’s views see AN: C//14712, PV. 21/7/20, p. 87.

⁴⁰ John M. Sherwood, ‘Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France. Raoul Dautry and *Les Chemins de fer de l’Etat* 1928–1937’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15, 3 (1980), 443–474.

⁴¹ Joseph Girard, ‘Une Enquête Démographique sur le personnel de la compagnie du chemin de fer du nord’, *Revue Historique des Chemins de Fer* (Juin, 1926), pp. 427–452.

⁴² Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization: Factory Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy* (New York, 2011), pp. 28–29.

railway managers were often highly qualified engineers. While most were, like Dautry, products of elite technical schools, a number had risen through the ranks of the company hierarchy. As the former cheminot André Fonnet noted in his autobiography, relations between blue-collar employees and their immediate superiors in the workplace were deeply coloured by the fact that a large number of such individuals had ‘undertaken a period of training on the footplate, they had experienced the *métier*. They had moistened their collars and blackened their faces.’⁴³ In the depots above all, noted Fonnet, where engine drivers rubbed shoulders with local managers and company inspectors, the informal ‘tu’ form of address was commonly used between individuals, irrespective of their place in the complex railway hierarchy. The same was not true, he went on, among white collar office staff, where managers and staff invariably used the formal ‘vous’ form of address.⁴⁴

Yet, as historians of labour generally, and historians of railway labour in particular, have emphasised, a sense of pride and dignity in the workplace did not necessarily translate into an identification with the interests of management or an acceptance of the priorities of company bosses. Indeed, a strong sense of professional competence among blue-collar workers could, and did, provide a powerful working-class esprit de corps that challenged the ‘classless’ narratives of railway community promoted by railway managers. The pages of the *unitaire* cheminot newspaper, the *Tribune des cheminots* provides an invaluable window into this contested world of the railway workplace.

Contesting Managerial Authority: Cheminots Rabkory

Company appeals to a classless railway family were powerfully challenged by an alternative view of railway work and of social relations within the railway industry which emanated from the pens of the cheminot rank-and-file themselves. To the company-fostered esprit de corps was juxtaposed a view of the railway workplace as shot through with class politics and the arbitrary, often bullying, but certainly unfair practices of local and national management. While these images of railway employment often emphasised the professionalism and skill of railway workers, a common theme is one of exploitation with the railway company cast as a prison, or ‘bagne’.

While the FNCU played a vital role in providing a mouthpiece for such views, what is significant is that they emerged not primarily from the union leadership, but from grassroots workers. Such views are often difficult to detect. They can be gauged through police reports of union meetings, from

⁴³ André Fonnet, *Ne touche pas à ma locomotive* (Paris, 1989), p. 51.

⁴⁴ André Fonnet, *Ne touche pas à ma locomotive*, p. 51.

votes and conference proceedings. However, in the case of the cheminots a privileged source exists in the form of the twice-monthly FNCU union newspaper, the *Tribune des cheminots*, and in particular its local news section, 'À travers les réseaux', to which grassroots railway workers and union branches contributed items of their own news. In the initial years after the First World War, these pages (the last one or two pages of the newspaper) for the most part contained reports of local meetings, announcements of forthcoming events, and brief memorial pieces for deceased cheminots. Following the schism, however, and the creation of rival *Tribune* newspapers (one for the CGT, one for the CGTU), the local news section of the FNCU's publication was transformed. While accounts of meetings still featured, a new, or rather a resurrected, style of item began to feature in increasingly large numbers. These were denunciations of thinly anonymised local railway managers by those who worked for them. Published anonymously, these sources provide a fascinating insight into everyday social relations within the railway workplace of the 1920s.

Typical of the genre was the following piece, published by workers from Chateauroux in July 1923:

At Chateauroux, the *agents de service* have had it with being ordered around like convicts by a M. D..., lost in pride at his galloons since he obtained, by his platitude, the grade of *surveillant principal*; he takes his subordinates for beasts of burden. For the moment, we will content ourselves with warning this sad individual that we wish to be commanded more politely and reasonably, but if he persists, we can bring him to better behaviour by recalling certain things which certainly will not honour his dignity.⁴⁵

The piece was signed 'Section technique Voie'.

The theme of the bullying local official who abused his position was also taken up by other cheminots publishing denunciations throughout the decade. Through such pieces, company discourses of collective endeavour and a shared professional competence were challenged and inverted by anonymous rank-and-file cheminot authors. Company paternalism and family metaphors were also a target of such writers. Attacking their local chef de gare, the cheminots at Auch complained of his bullying demeanour and authoritarian attitude towards station staff. 'After this', noted the worker correspondent, 'he finds it odd that, rather than consider him a good "father", the workers take him for a bad boss.'⁴⁶ Workers at Nanterre took to poetry in November 1925 to draw attention to the attitudes of one such chef de magasin. Through the course of the poem, the writer emphasised the

⁴⁵ *Tribune des cheminots*, 'Chateauroux', 1/7/1923.

⁴⁶ *Le Cheminot Unitaire du Midi*, 10/28, p. 3.

authoritarian power which the local chief exerts over his workforce, punning on the name of the Railway network – the Etat – to portray the manager as a figure comparable to Louis XIV in his approach to railway management, echoing the latter's famous phrase (later to serve as a definition of royal absolutism), 'L'état, c'est moi.'⁴⁷

The editorial offices of the *Tribune* were soon overwhelmed by the volume of letters from cheminot correspondents, keen to see their reports on the iniquities of working life on the railways published. By February 1927 there was a three-month waiting list for items to appear.⁴⁸ On several occasions through the mid-1920s the newspaper's fraught editor, FNCU General Secretary Lucien Midol, protested in print against the impatience and lack of discipline of his cheminot writers who, he complained, not only demanded that their work be published immediately but often threatened to resign from the union if they felt their items were being ignored.⁴⁹ Midol reassured his readers that all work would be published eventually and pleaded for patience. He also emphasised the importance of brevity in the writing of the local news items, noting that there were hundreds of FNCU branches across the country and that the *Tribune* had only limited space.⁵⁰

While the existence and practices of working-class correspondence has been well studied in the Soviet context, historians of the interwar French labour movement have not yet devoted significant attention to the phenomenon.⁵¹ In the Soviet context, historians such as Sheila Fitzpatrick and Matthew Lenoe have emphasised the centrality of such letter-writing practices to the Soviet experiment in the 1920s and 1930s. In the newly created Soviet state, as Lenoe underlines, newspapers played a signal role as a means of providing information and propaganda to readers across the Soviet Union. Newspapers could also function as a means of fashioning and maintaining an imagined community of readers across the vast Soviet territories. Of considerable significance to Soviet newspapers, however, was the phenomena of worker correspondents (*rakbory*). Drawing heavily upon articles and letters from readers across Russia for content, Soviet newspapers were viewed as vital organs of political education for the masses. 'Correspondence with the newspapers', argues Lenoe, 'like face-to-face study circles was expected to be a school for revolutionaries'.⁵²

⁴⁷ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'La Garenne: Au Parc de Nanterre', 1/II/1925.

⁴⁸ 'Notre Tribune', *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/2/1927, p. 4.

⁴⁹ 'Mes impressions de Russie', *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/4/1925, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/2/1927.

⁵¹ Depretto and Schweitzer also briefly explore the *rakbory* phenomenon in the opening chapter of their work on Renault's Boulogne-Billancourt factory, see Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schweitzer, *Communisme à l'usine* (Roubaix, 1984).

⁵² Matthew Lenoe, 'Letter Writing and the State: Reader correspondance with

The practice of rabbkory was one that the Bolsheviks were keen to export and the Comintern regularly took the French Communist Party daily newspaper *L'Humanité* to task on its failure to effectively integrate worker correspondents into their content.⁵³ Worker correspondence, noted a 1924 report, was 'an excellent means of connecting with the sympathetic working masses'. Responses to such letters, however, needed to be taken more seriously by the French party. In particular, the newspaper's editors needed to grasp more effectively the opportunities which such letters offered to correct ideological errors.⁵⁴ The significance of worker correspondents was raised again by the Comintern in December 1926. Once more *L'Humanité* was taken to task for its lack of engagement, and the examples of *Iskra* and *Pravda* were once more held up as models to be followed.⁵⁵

As in other areas, the Bolsheviks were keen to demonstrate the practical workings of Soviet newspapers to foreign communist visitors. On a tour through the Soviet Union in early 1925, FNCU leader Lucien Midol visited the editorial offices of the Soviet railway workers' newspaper *Gudok*. In his autobiography, Midol recalls this visit to the Soviet state as a profoundly emotional and inspiring time as he witnessed the building of a workers' state in the period after the Bolshevik victory in civil war. Though he recalls visits to locomotive workshops and railway depots, his trip to see the offices of *Gudok* is not mentioned. At the time, however, it was this visit that seems to have left the deepest impression upon Midol in his role as editor of a national communist trade union newspaper. Upon his return to France he dedicated an entire column on his 'impressions of Russia' not to the Soviet state or to the communist society in the making, but rather to *Gudok* and the letter-writing practices of Soviet railway workers.⁵⁶

Midol was deeply impressed by *Gudok*'s highly developed network of 'worker correspondents', or rabbkory. Every day the editorial offices at *Gudok* were deluged by letters addressed to them by railway workers from across the Soviet Union, receiving between 500 and 550 such letters daily by 1929.⁵⁷ This correspondence touched upon a wide variety of themes: from workers denouncing the failings or the brutality of local managers and supervisors, to those who sought to provide the newspaper with details of everyday life and work in the new Soviet state. Such pieces would often be used as the

newspapers as a source for early Soviet history', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 40, 1–2 (Jan.–Jun., 1999), 139–170 (141).

⁵³ RGASPI, f504, op1, d321, p. 402.

⁵⁴ RGASPI, f504, op1, d321, p. 414.

⁵⁵ RGASPI, f495, op55, d6, p. 10.

⁵⁶ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 'Mes impressions de Russie', 15/4/1925, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Matthew Lenoë, 'Letter-Writing and the State', p. 160.

raw materials for short stories that would be written by *Gudok*'s team of in-house writers and then published in the newspaper. Among the writing staff at *Gudok* at the time of Midol's visit would have been the novelist Mikhail Bulgakov, who from 1923 worked for the railway newspaper first as a 'corrector' of rabkor articles, and then as a feuilleton, or short story, writer. Though Bulgakov later looked back on this period of his life and work as a 'torrent of hopeless gray boredom, uninterrupted and inexorable', Bulgakov scholar Edythe Haber has described these pieces as a priceless resource, a 'comédie humaine of the New Economic Policy period'.⁵⁸ Midol for his part was equally affected by what he saw and read, and resolved to bring the discipline of the Soviet rabkory back with him to France.

The link with *Gudok* became a significant one for the *Tribune* following Midol's visit. The French newspaper published the address for *Gudok*'s head office in Moscow and encouraged cheminots to write to their Soviet comrades. Return letters from Soviet railwaymen were also occasionally published in the *Tribune* and in the PCF's daily newspaper, *L'Humanité*. While leading members of the PCF and the FNCU took note of the Bolshevik prescriptions and sought to emulate Soviet practices, the popularity of letter writing among the cheminot grassroots cannot be explained by the Russian influence alone. Significantly, the practice of using union newspapers as an outlet for the anonymous denunciation of local managers was already well established among the pre-war railway workforce.⁵⁹ The practice of cheminot 'rabkory', therefore, was as much a legacy of pre-1914 syndicalism as a 'Bolshevik' import – if not more so, for a striking fact about these letters is the absence of any obvious 'communist' language or imagery. Even during the sectarian era of 'class-against-class' during which time historians have noted the integration of phrases such as 'social fascism' into the daily lexicon of communist activists, the cheminot denunciations remain entirely jargon free. Nor does the union leadership appear to have played an active role in shaping the content or form of these letters, beyond insisting on the need for brevity, or insisting that the target of the denunciations remained anonymous – an important consideration as the *Tribune* was twice successfully sued for liability by local managers named by their angry subordinates in pieces published in the paper.

Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s the *Tribune* thus emerged as a significant space in which grassroots union activism could continue to flourish in an era when state surveillance and strict company discipline had severely restricted the avenues open to cheminot militants. During

⁵⁸ Edythe C. Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Early Years* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

⁵⁹ For instance, the pre-war issues of *La Tribune de la voie ferrée*, for example, 31/7/1914, 'PLM, Paris – La voie hierarchique à la Traction.'

this decade the FNCU's privileging of rank and file activism ensured that these letter-writing practices were encouraged, even when they led to tensions between the union leadership and the grassroots when the volume of correspondence led to delays in publication. The accent placed upon such activism by the FNCU contrasted with the approach favoured by the CGT railway Federation in this period. While the FNCC's publications have not survived in the numbers of the FNCU's *Tribune*, extant publications do not demonstrate the same use of rabbkory and anonymous denunciations. The reasons for this can be inferred from the differing approaches to industrial politics on the part of the two unions. While the FNCU sought to emphasise its revolutionary, fighting credentials, the FNCC sought to adopt a more conciliatory approach, one which emphasised engagement with management rather than denunciation. A further factor can be deduced from the CGT's attitude to the practice of anonymous denunciation during the war and in the years prior to the union schism of 1921. In this period, the Cheminot Federation, led by Marcel Bidegaray, and committed to the wider CGT 'politics of presence', refused to publish such pieces from rank-and-file workers and dissuaded cheminots from submitting them to the newspaper. The reasoning, outlined in a number of editorials, was that such complaints should be channelled through official union delegates, who in turn would air them at management committees. The FNCC's continued commitment to participating in the official structures of railway industrial relations during the 1920s appears to have ensured that the 'rabbkory' remained absent from the CGT's repertoire. For the FNCU, on the other hand, the cheminot 'rabbkory' were proof of the union's opposition to such 'bureaucratism'.

Conclusion

From the early 1930s the anonymous denunciations disappear from the pages of the FNCU's *Tribune*. By this stage, the union was actively, if far from comfortably, participating in the same industrial relations structures as the CGT, standing candidates in personnel elections, sending delegates to consult with managers and playing a full role in the worker safety delegations that were created in 1931. This change of heart (discussed in the next chapter) opened up new avenues for the airing of worker grievances, but also led to the growing bureaucratisation of the communist-led union as it became ever-more enmeshed in the day-to-day business of railway industrial relations. In these circumstances the grassroots activism of the rabbkory was gradually edged out. Nevertheless, in the decade or so between the creation of the FNCU in 1922 and the early part of the 1930s, the grassroots practice of cheminots anonymously denouncing their immediate superiors in the workplace played an important (and very popular) role in

maintaining working-class militancy in highly challenging times. They also played a vital role in challenging the railway companies' classless rhetoric of shared endeavour and common sacrifice for the good of all. By emphasising instead the everyday insults and abuses of power faced by employees in the railway workplace, rank-and-file cheminots traced an alternative vision of the railway community, one centred upon the workers whose labour in fact kept the trains running.

5

International Connections

Cheminot internationalism during the 1920s proved to be highly problematic for those who still looked to the railway workers as a source of political militancy within the French working-class movement. While on the one hand railway workers enjoyed a reputation for their international links and the sense of a global railway community, on the other hand the political and social climate of the 1920s in reality often worked against such international solidarities, placing cheminots at odds with workers internationally, and with the leadership of the PCF. This was most notably the case during the Ruhr occupation during which some 20,000 French and Belgian railway workers operated as strike breakers during the German workers' campaign of passive resistance. In this, as in the communist campaign against the Rif War, the legacies of the 1920 defeat were still in evidence, casting a shadow across the cheminot community. Nevertheless, in their day-to-day working environment numerous workers demonstrated their commitment to the internationalist cause, and nurtured communist political campaigns, often against the odds.

Cheminot Internationalism

From the earliest days of modern train travel, the railways have always occupied a complex political space; deeply entwined with the nation state they were also from the outset profoundly international endeavours. While the relationship between individual nation states and the railway industry developed in differing fashions through the nineteenth century, from the wholly private financing of British laissez-faire liberalism on one extreme to the fully state-owned Belgian system on the other, the railways quickly became enmeshed with ideas of nationhood and discourses of national prestige.¹ Yet, the railways were also a major global industry. Alongside

¹ Frank Dobbin, *Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain and France in the Railway Age* (New York, 1994).

the global spread of the railways emerged an international labour force of engineering experts, highly skilled locomotive footplatemen and railway navvies, a cosmopolitan, mobile workforce which proved crucial to the industry's development. International connections and cooperation continued to be vital to the industry throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. French railway companies maintained close links with foreign railway operators. This was particularly marked in the borderlands, of course, where trains crossed back and forth between national jurisdictions. In the north of the country, the Compagnie du Nord sustained important connections with the Belgian railway network, for instance. Leading French railway engineers also played a significant role in developing railway networks in the French empire but also in Europe. Gustav Noblemaire, for example, one of the early directors of the PLM railway company, was at the forefront of overseeing the building and initial operation of the Spanish railways.²

The planning of international services and connections made international cooperation vital even after the initial 'railway mania' of the nineteenth century had passed. Yet, as stressed above, the railways remained above all national industrial assets, even where operated, as in France, predominantly by private companies. Railways have long been closely connected to the idea of the nation, and have often been viewed as a barometer of national prestige and the overall 'health' of the nation. In 1932 a series of celebratory articles appeared in the industry's trade journal, the *Revue Générale de Chemins de Fer*, celebrating the centenary of the railways in France, and lauding the ongoing achievements of France's privately owned railways. The French railways, Léon Pondeveaux had argued in an article analysing the speeds and journey times of rail connections worldwide, were 'one of the most certain aspects of France's industrial prestige'. Among its international competitors, France's railway industry stood apart, he argued, for the 'the strength of its industry, the science of its engineers, the courage and dedication of its personnel'.³ Such symbolic links between the rail industry and national prestige made major railway catastrophes such as those of Saint-Elier and Lagny-Pomponne in 1933 all the more significant. The accidents were remarkable not just for the tremendous loss of life (33 killed at Saint-Elier and 200 killed at Lagny), but for the manner in which they were viewed by the French media. The Lagny disaster in particular could be taken as a metaphor for the wider perceived cultural malaise in which France was mired in the depression era.

² 'Nécrologie, Gustave Noblemaire', *Revue Générale des Chemins de Fer* (Fev., 1925), pp. 93–99, p. 94.

³ Léon Pondeveaux, 'L'État des Relations Ferroviaires dans le Monde', *Revue Générale de Chemin de Fer* (May, 1932), p. 391.

Certain cheminot careers reflect the interconnectedness of the railway landscape, balanced between the national and international spheres. We last encountered Marcel Péroche as an apprentice working at the Saintes workshops at the time of the 1920 general strike. While the entire workshop staff were sacked by their employer, the Etat, and contracted out to a private firm, Péroche was allowed to remain with the Etat and to attend their driver training programme. Having graduated, Péroche rose quickly through the ranks on the footplate, from fireman to apprentice driver, though his elevation to full 'passed' driver was delayed by the freeze on promotions instituted on the railways during the depths of the depression. When this freeze was reversed by the Popular Front, Péroche's stalled career leapt forward. He soon reached the position of 'railway senator', a mainline express train driver – the most prestigious and coveted of blue-collar railway jobs.

During his career on the railways, Péroche, like many railway drivers, lived a highly mobile life. In addition to long-distance journeys, often occasioning overnight stays away from home, the need to move to different sections of the line according to the demands of the railway management led to several upheavals in the life of Péroche and his wife. Throughout his time on the railways, Péroche, a keen rugby player, also played for the company team. This brought him into wider contact with other similarly sporting railwaymen in France, but also internationally. Péroche was one of a group of French cheminots selected to represent the French rail industry on a rugby tour of Germany where they played – and lost – against German railway workers. International connections between railway workers did not just take place on the sports field, of course. For Péroche, his working horizons were broadened significantly during the 1930s when he began working on the Orient Express, driving the famous train across the European continent. In 1939 his experience was broadened further still when, mobilised into the army as a locomotive driver, he was dispatched to Syria, where he drove locomotives alongside his Syrian co-workers.⁴

Péroche's autobiography has little to say regarding political or trade union affairs. Others, however, were more ready to use the mobility offered to them by railway employment for political ends. Lucien Midol, for instance, made full use of the travel opportunities he enjoyed to act as a courier for the Communist International in the period after the First World War, especially in making journeys between Paris and Switzerland.⁵ The connections that he forged in the execution of his courier duties proved vital when the time came for him to flee France in 1920. With

⁴ Marcel Péroche, *Pacific Senator: A Train Driver's Life*. Trans. Roland Wilson.

⁵ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie*, p. 84.

the French police seeking to arrest him for his role in fomenting the 1920 general strike, Midol called upon his network of contacts to head into exile in Switzerland. French police archives contain similar examples of French railwaymen exploiting the mobility of railway work (or the free travel enjoyed by cheminots as a benefit of their employment) to spread communist materials. Writing in 1934 in the *Cabiers du bolchévisme*, the PCF's theoretical journal, Midol further emphasised the significance of the cheminots' role in maintaining the links between communists in France, and between those in France and their comrades internationally, through their couriering of Comintern materials.⁶

Inspired by such stories, and by deeper anxieties of the role that the railways might play in plugging potential revolutionary working-class centres into the wider national community, and into the international communist movement, French elites maintained a close surveillance over the railways and railway workers. Such scrutiny was particularly intense during the 1920s, before the rise of the far right during the 1930s to some extent usurped the attentions of the authorities.⁷ The significance of the railways as a key national security concern had long led to particular legal restrictions on who could, and could not, be employed by the railway companies. Most importantly in the analysis of the international outlook of France's railway workers, foreign workers themselves were banned from direct employment on the railways.

This was in marked contrast to the wider experience of workers elsewhere in the French economy during the 1920s. The terrible loss of life suffered as a result of the First World War together with the demands of reconstruction and an expanding economy through the 1920s combined to make France the world's foremost destination for migrant workers, ahead even of the United States of America. With high demand for workers in the mines, agriculture, and heavy industry, significant numbers of immigrant workers arrived to take up places in French firms. By 1931 such workers accounted for 7% of the total population in the country, some 2.1 million people.⁸ The position of these workers in France was precarious. In theory, foreign workers could only work legally in France as part of the official guest workers programme. This allowed workers from countries with which France had reciprocal treaties to enter the country to take up specific contracts with employers. Once these contracts expired the workers were

⁶ *Cabiers du bolchévisme*, 'Les Cheminots et la Lutte', 1934, p. 663.

⁷ Frédéric Monier, *Le complot dans la république: Stratégies du secret du Boulanger à la cagoule* (Paris, 1998).

⁸ Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942* (Stanford, CA., 1999), p. 43.

expected to return home. As Mary Dewhurst Lewis has emphasised, however, in practice such immigration controls functioned only imperfectly, and thousands of foreign workers laboured in France without regularised status, subject to the frequent attention of the police and state officials. Hanging over the heads of all such workers was the threat of deportation.⁹ In the workplace, migrant workers regularly filled the most unpleasant or difficult of occupations. French workers increasingly turned their back on such employment in favour of more lucrative, less physically demanding work. The poor working conditions and pitiable treatment of foreign workers by French employers generated concern in the migrants' home countries. In 1930 the poor treatment of Poles employed on the land in northern France, for instance, led to official diplomatic protests from the Polish government.¹⁰

As historians have noted, the response of French trade unions to the presence of migrant workers in France was decidedly mixed. In response to the large numbers of foreign workers in mines and factories across France the CGTU created a special section, the Main d'Oeuvre Etrangère (MOE) in 1923, followed two years later by the creation of a similar section by the PCF. Communist internationalism in this regard was tempered, however, by on the one hand protectionist concerns that foreign workers were replacing French labour in the workplace and, one the other hand, that such workers would form a ready supply of alternative labour for employers to draw upon to undermine potential strikes. Tensions between the avowed internationalism of the communist movement and the nativist demands of some French workers remained acute throughout the period.¹¹

France's railway workers were to some extent removed from these debates. Following laws passed in the nineteenth century, railway employment was restricted to those who had been either born in France or else had been naturalised French. As we have seen, the relaxation of these regulations during the First World War in response to the labour crisis on the railways provoked concerns from the CGT as well as opposition from the rank and file. With the armistice the longstanding exclusion of foreign labour on the railways was reimposed and the Belgian railwaymen, prisoners of war, and colonial workers who had done so much to supplement the national railway

⁹ Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918–1940* (Stanford, 2007).

¹⁰ John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front*, p. 74.

¹¹ Thomas Beaumont, 'International Communism in interwar France, 1919–1936', in Ludivine Broch and Alison Carrol (eds), *France in an Era of Global War: Occupation, Politics, Empire and Entanglements* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 92–110 (98–101). See also Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens*, pp. 148–150.

workforce were removed from their positions.¹² Drawing their membership from the railway industry's statutory workforce, railway trade unions were thus almost entirely composed of French, or naturalised French workers.

Though statutory employment with the railway companies was restricted to those of French nationality, foreign workers were far from wholly absent from the industry. Migrant workers were to be found in construction and maintenance work both on the railway tracks and in the workshops where these activities had been contracted out to private concerns. Casual labour was also an area in which migrant workers found employment on the railways. This non-statutory workforce was an integral part of the railway industry despite the lack of job security and low pay that these workers enjoyed. For instance, during the summer months the Paris-Orléans railway company hired seasonal labourers at the Gare d'Austerlitz in order to help handle the large amount of goods arriving into Paris from the south-west. Recruited daily between 10pm and 11.30pm, this casual workforce gathering each evening in the station's vicinity was a cause of concern for the local police. When these employees went on strike in May 1924, the Commissaire Spéciale at the station took the opportunity to inform his superiors in the Interior Ministry of his anxieties. Emphasising the night-time recruiting practices and the casual nature of the work, the officer voiced his concerns about the 'morality' of the workers, noting that he had consistently had to intervene to deal with criminals hired by the company.¹³ The strikers' demand for a small 25 centime increase in the hourly wage was eventually agreed to by the company, although the casual workers appear to have received little encouragement from the station's permanent workforce, who are recorded as having stepped in to shift goods in the absence of the striking workers.

As in the period 1917–1920, however, it was those employed in the vast maintenance workshops who continued to provide the biggest headache for the authorities and railway company managers. As we have seen, in the aftermath of the strike of May 1920, several of these maintenance workshops had been turned over to private contractors to operate on behalf of the railway companies. Freed from the statutory obligations that bound the railway companies, the contractors were able to set their own rates of pay and were not required to offer the benefits that came with railway company employment. They were also free to employ foreign labour. In his

¹² On the exclusion of colonial workers after the First World War, see Tyler Stovall, 'National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor After World War I', *Representations*, 84, 1 (November 2003), 52–72.

¹³ AN: F/13925, Gare d'Austerlitz, 30/5/1924–1/6/1924, Commissaire Spéciale des gares d'Orléans à Paris au M. le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 1/6/1924.

early ethnographic study of the workshops at Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, for instance, the commentator Jacques Valdour estimated there to be around 300 immigrant workers among the 2,500 employees.¹⁴

It was among such non-statutory workers that the recorded instances of strikes on the railway industry took place during the 1920s. In these instances, the authorities were quick to underline what they considered a troubling mix of labour militancy, communist agitation, and the presence of a significant migrant workforce which appeared to lie behind the unrest. This was the case, for instance, at the Ateliers de wagons de Brignoud, a major railway maintenance workshop located just to the north-east of Grenoble. The strike which broke out in April 1929 over a wage dispute at the wagon repair centre was, for the Sûreté, an extremely concerning development on two accounts. First was the industrial region in which the workshop was located, situated in an area which saw some 6,000 workers employed in an area of only a few kilometres. Such a high concentration, it was feared, would raise the threat of contagion across the working population. Second, as reflected in the Sûreté report, was the view that the 'cosmopolitan element which comprises the working population of the region' added to the potential for trouble. It was estimated that roughly 70% of the local workers were of non-French origins.¹⁵ Following the termination of the 1929 strike, the prefect of Isère was sanguine about the political implications of the strike. Investigations had failed to identify any links between extremist political movements and the action, which was considered to be purely a 'question de salaires', in the context of the rising cost of living.¹⁶ Following the outbreak of the 1930 strike, the prefect was less persuaded by his initial analysis.

From the outbreak of the 1930 confrontation at the Brignoud workshop, the local CGTU and PCF had, according to the prefect's report, 'put everything to work in an attempt to aggravate and extend the action to the surrounding factories'.¹⁷ The communist leader of the strikers, an Italian, was being given generous space in the local communist press and was speaking to workers from several other industries, calling upon them to join the strike. From the outset local law enforcement had been mobilised, with a heavy police presence in the commune during the day. By night,

¹⁴ Jacques Valdour, *La Menace Rouge, ouvriers d'après-guerre en Touraine* (Paris, 1926), p. 13.

¹⁵ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 22–25/4/1929, Préfet Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 24/4/1929, p. 2. The 6,000 figure regarding the concentration of workers is quoted from the report of the 1930 strike: Isère 26/5/1930–5/6/1930, Préfet d'Isère au Ministre de l'Intérieur, 5/6/1930, p. 1.

¹⁶ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 22–25/4/1929, Préfet Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 24/4/1929, p. 2.

¹⁷ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930–5/6/1930, Préfet d'Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 5/6/1930, p. 1.

patrols were undertaken by the gendarmerie aimed at ‘curbing and stifling this agitation’. This presence, the prefect claimed, enjoyed the support of the local population who wished to see the maintenance of public order.¹⁸ The active role played by the prefect of Isère is of considerable interest. The close co-operation between the state and the employer affected by strike movements is a notable feature of labour relations during the Third Republic and characteristic of the 1920s and 1930s, as it would be during the General Strike of 30 November 1938. In the Nord, for instance, following the voting of a strike at the Compagnie des Mines d’Ostricourt in April 1933, the employer arranged for two gendarmerie platoons to be lodged at the pit.¹⁹ Back in Isère, the prefect announced that he had been highly active in establishing ‘detailed inquiries among the foreign population with the aim of discovering those whom, in the course of the conflict, have not conformed to the laws of French hospitality’.²⁰ This action was to be pursued despite the fact that of the eight-man strike committee at the Ateliers Brignoud, five were known to the prefect to be French nationals.²¹

The fears regarding the political reliability of those foreign workers employed in railway-related occupations extended to those engaged in the area of track maintenance, or employed in occupations which necessitated them having access to the railway line. Here, fears of sabotage were a source of angst for the authorities and for railway-company management. These anxieties appeared to be made manifest in June 1930 following the derailment of a train at Montereau, near Melun, some 50km south-east of Paris. The accident led to the deaths of seven passengers and injured another 15. Following leaks from a PLM railway company source, the newspapers immediately reported sabotage as the cause of the catastrophe. Police suspicion fell immediately, and with little apparent evidence, upon an Italian man who had been working with a contractor in that area of the line, and upon known local communist activists who were similarly employed by the Drouard contractor.²² Fervent speculation filled the press, which reported that the Italian worker, one Bruno G. had been pursued by police to the Swiss border, while the communist daily *L'Humanité* denounced

¹⁸ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930–5/6/1930, Préfet d’Isère à Ministre de l’Intérieur, 5/6/1930, p. 2; Isère 26/5/1930–5/6/1930, Préfet d’Isère à Ministre de l’Intérieur, 3/6/1930, p. 1.

¹⁹ Service Historique de la Gendarmerie, Vincennes (Hereafter SHG): 59E461, Brigade Territoriale d’Ostricourt, pp. 41–42.

²⁰ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930–5/6/1930, Préfet d’Isère à Ministre de l’Intérieur, 3/6/1930, p. 1.

²¹ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930–5/6/1930, Préfet d’Isère à Ministre de l’Intérieur, 27/5/1930, p. 1.

²² AN: F/7/13688, Commissaire Spécial de Melun à M. le Préfet de Seine et Marne, 5/6/1930, pp. 1–2 (2).

the pantomime that was unfolding in the police investigation.²³ The *Petit Parisien* reported that an Italian and a Spaniard had been detained at Melun in connection with the crash.²⁴

Quickly, however, the official line on the crash began to unravel. Writing in the anarchist newspaper *Libertaire*, a prominent Parisian activist Louis Raffin noted the convenience of the PLM's story – both for the company, who were thus exonerated from blame, and for the authorities who were offered an excuse to pursue their campaign against perceived 'extremists'.²⁵ Local railway workers, for their part, incensed by the company's insinuation that railway employees of whatever stripe could have been responsible, openly challenged the company's version of events and called upon them and their supporters in the press to supply evidence of sabotage. Five hundred and fifty local cheminots of all political colours gathered on 11 June to hear speeches from local and national railway leaders. The secretary of the local FNCU syndicat defended his union and its members from accusations of sabotage and declared solidarity with the foreign workers who had also been implicated. He underlined how 'in the Montereau unitaire cheminot union, as in the national Federation, as in the CGTU and the PCF, we have but one programme, to fight for better wages'. He also denounced the suspicions raised concerning foreign workers on the railways: 'they have also tried to implicate our foreign comrades. Be they foreign or French, they have only one aim, to defend their salaries and to defend themselves against the boss who exploits them. We have only one country, that of Labour.'²⁶ Further doubts were raised regarding the PLM version of events at the meeting when it emerged that the company had insisted upon raising the speed limit on the section of track just the day prior to the accident from 30kph to 90kph. This decision had been taken against the warnings of local workers, among whom the stretch of track in question was notorious as an accident blackpot.²⁷

Internationalism: The Soviet Union

At the heart of communist internationalism on the railways, as elsewhere in the French and international communist movements, was the Soviet Union. As Eric Weitz emphasises, the significance of the Soviet Union was as much its influence within the 'mental maps' of communist members

²³ *L'Humanité*, 7/6/1930.

²⁴ *Le Petit Parisien*, 7/6/1930.

²⁵ AN: F/7/13688, rapport, 7/6/1930.

²⁶ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, pp. 3–4.

²⁷ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p. 9.

as in its organisational role within the Comintern. Weitz notes that, in Weimar Germany, ‘the Bolshevik model won increasing resonance among German communists, as a form of political and psychological compensation for their own failed efforts to overthrow communism.’²⁸ Much the same point can be made about French communists during the interwar period. For France’s communist railway workers, the fact of the existence of the Soviet workers’ republic was of considerable significance. The Soviet state and the communist society that was being built there symbolised freedom. This vision helped to sustain communist militants on the railways. Through the press and in union meetings, the leadership of the FNCU sought to use the image of the workers’ state to nourish rank-and-file cheminot political militancy through the difficult years of the 1920s, and beyond.

Pierre Semard’s visits to Moscow in the mid-1920s were significant moments in his early formation as a communist adherent and leader. Semard wrote a two-part summary of his first visit to Russia, which took place around the fifth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The pieces were published in the *Tribune des cheminots* on his return to France, the first on 1 January the second a month later on 1 February 1923. The first part constitutes a brief travelogue of Semard’s journey to Moscow, beginning with his departure from Paris’s Gare du Nord on 31 October, and progressing via Berlin and Riga before arriving in Moscow on 7 November, the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. Semard lingers on the details of his journey, informing his readers of the geography of Riga, and his group’s reception there at the Soviet embassy. Semard does not neglect the particular interests of his intended readership, his account is probably one of the only communist travelogues to include details of the locomotive at the head of the train to Russia. Central to Semard’s narrative, however, is his arrival in Russia. This moment is powerfully conveyed in Semard’s narrative. As the group sing a multi-lingual rendition of the Internationale, Semard reflects upon his emotions upon entering the workers’ republic: ‘we one and another each felt an indefinable sensation. A crowd of ideas clashed in my mind, images filed past my eyes; the memory of things read about the Russian revolution tormented my thoughts and those of my comrades, who seemed just as preoccupied as myself.’²⁹

Arriving in Moscow, Semard and his companions were taken aback by the hustle and bustle of the metropolis. Having heard tales in the press of the hardships facing the Russians following the Revolution and Civil War, Semard wrote that he had been expecting to find a ghost town. Instead he was confronted with ‘a town as alive as the working-class districts of Paris,

²⁸ Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism: From Popular Protests to Socialist State*, p. 236.

²⁹ Pierre Semard, ‘Voyage en Russie: De Paris à Moscou’, *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/1/1923.

with busy shop windows, resplendent with light'. His senses were assaulted by the sights and sounds of the capital, 'a crowd, circulating and overflowing the pavements, on the streets vehicles of all sorts criss-cross, and in their midst motorcars, with headlights blinding and horns sounding, go flying past at full speed'.³⁰ The sensory affront continued throughout the evening as no sooner installed in their hotels, Semard and his companions were whisked off to a communist youth event to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution, where singing in multiple languages and traditional dances from across the world continued into the early morning. The international flavour continued into the next day when the party were taken to the headquarters of the RILU, 'a veritable tower of Babel', according to Semard. Having marvelled at the work undertaken in spreading the Bolshevik message around the globe, Semard then made his way to the Kremlin to attend the opening of the Comintern Congress. Here he was struck by the opulence of the 'city within a city', and drew inspiration from the representatives of the global proletariat meeting in the halls of the Tsars.³¹

Semard's account charts the manner in which his encounter with 'Moscou le rouge' captured his imagination. The centrality to his account of themes of internationalism and liberation highlight important factors in his understanding of the meaning of the Bolshevik revolution and its appeal. Significant, too, is the image of Moscow as a modern, thriving metropolis, a centre of carousing and conviviality as well as the hub of revolutionary activity. This animated view of Moscow is one that is missing from many accounts from the period which discuss the revolutionary and civil-war city in more sober tones. Lucien Midol, for instance, leader of the FNCU following Semard's elevation to head the PCF, paints a very different portrait of Moscow in this period in the pages of his autobiography. Visiting Moscow for the first time in March 1925 in the midst of a bitter winter, Midol recalls being struck by the difficulties facing the city, from empty shops to a poor transport system and a lack of materials necessary to effect the planned reconstruction of the city.³² Revisiting Russia in 1928, Midol continued to be struck by the material shortages and 'backwardness' of the Soviet homeland. Though improvements had taken place during his three-year absence, he still viewed Moscow as 'un grand village', rather than the modern metropolis that had so impressed Pierre Semard. A

³⁰ Pierre Semard, 'Voyage en Russie: De Paris à Moscou', *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/2/1923.

³¹ Pierre Semard, 'Voyage en Russie: De Paris à Moscou', *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/2/1923.

³² Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, pp. 138–144.

holiday to the Black Sea in the company of Semard and his wife did little to change Midol's view of the Soviet Union. The railway line they travelled upon was uncomfortable and operated using relatively ancient technologies and outdated engineering principles. Outside of Moscow, signals had to be manouvered by hand, something that astonished Midol.³³ For all his disappointments with the realities of Soviet rule, leaving the struggling communist society nevertheless had a profound emotional impact upon Midol. Upon crossing the border into Poland, Midol noted that he was back in the world of capitalism, 'with its heavily burdened peasants, wading barefoot through the marshland'.³⁴

The FNCU sought to communicate information about life in the Soviet Union and the experiences of Soviet railway workers widely among the cheminots in France. We have already seen the special role that the Soviet railway workers' newspaper *Gudok* played as a form of tutor to the French railway workers through the pages of the the FNCU's *Tribune des cheminots*. In May 1928 an issue of the paper carried front-page greetings from Russian railway workers to their comrades in France. Archived by the Sûreté and still extant, this publication provides a lens through which to view the means by which communists presented the Soviet Union to a cheminot audience. Four brief paragraphs, authored by Russian railway workers, provided details of the experience of work on the Soviet rail network. One of the letters referred directly to the position of women in society. Cheminots were invited to reflect on the political rights and freedoms of women in France. 'Tell us how the women of your country live', began the piece, 'do they take part in the work of organisation? Do they take part in elections and if so, can women be elected as they are in our country of Soviets?' Having made the contrast between France and the Soviet Union, the author concluded by imploring the women of France 'to enter the ranks of the Communist Party to overthrow capitalism'.³⁵ The central message of the piece was thus the need to overthrow capitalism as a prelude to the emancipation of women. With women's subordinate role deemed to be inherent within the logic of capitalism, only through a general commitment to the class struggle as waged by the Communist Party and the eventual establishment of a workers' Republic could true equality be achieved.

The emphasis upon proletarian identity over a more specific identification of gender interests is highlighted in the other three contributions.

³³ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, pp. 145–152.

³⁴ Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales, 1900–1970*, p. 152.

³⁵ *La Tribune de cheminots*, 15/5/1928 in AN: F/7/13670.

The grammar employed demonstrates that all three were written by male workers. Each engaged with important themes then current in debates about the Soviet Union in France. These being the effort at reconstruction; the place of those who were not members of the Communist Party within Soviet society; and, finally, the organisation of society and the place of workers within it. They each emphasised wider FNCU and communist policy objectives that, it suggested, were already attained in the Soviet Union, particularly the eight-hour day which it was claimed Soviet cheminots worked. One contributor, 'Koulchikov' provided an image of railway work with which French workers, accustomed to the hierarchies of the sector, would have been familiar. Despite the equality between workforce and the chefs under the Soviet regime, he noted how the two continued to 'boitons un peu', although relations were constantly improving. Finally, the *Tribune* piece appealed to the aspirations of workers, both regarding their own prospects and those of their children. 'Soutrahil' wrote how his working an eight-hour day allowed him time in the evenings to spend at classes. Studying four hours a day he had been taught to read, aged forty-two. His fifteen-year-old son was in school and would go to university. 'All this' he wrote, 'would have been impossible before. I'm telling you of this to give an example of the change which we have made.'³⁶

These exhortations for the cheminots to embrace an internationalist working-class identity, however, followed hard on the heels of a period in working-class history during which the railway workers (and the French left more broadly) appeared disinclined to participate in major international political campaigns. Most notably during the Ruhr campaign and again in the PCF's anti-war campaign during the Rif War, the cheminots demonstrated, for the communist leadership in France, a troubling lack of international solidarity. Once more, one can see the lingering effects of the May 1920 defeat casting a deep shadow over railway worker militancy.

The Ruhr

Nothing better exemplified the extent of the symbolic defeat of cheminot militancy in the aftermath of the 1920 strike than the role played by thousands of cheminots in support of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. While German railway workers maintained a campaign of passive resistance against the French military occupation, some 20,000 French and Belgian railway workers decamped to the region to act as strike breakers, working the Ruhr's railway network in place of striking German workers. This little-known episode runs in stark contrast to the heroic narrative

³⁶ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/5/1928 in AN: F/7/13670.

of cheminot political activism in modern France. It also raises difficult questions regarding the easy assumptions that are often made regarding the strength of international solidarities among railway employees. For left-wing political activists at the time, the role played by French workers in the Ruhr was deeply problematic. Many historians point to the PCF's campaign against the Ruhr occupation as a major success for the Party; the moment in which it 'won its spurs', according to one major historian.³⁷ However, the presence of thousands of French workers, including an unknown number of communist activists, acting against what many considered a revolutionary workers' movement raised significant questions regarding the party's influence among French workers.

Through 1923, roughly 20,000 French and Belgian railway employees worked on behalf of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr. They were there to replace striking German railway workers who, following the German government's call for a campaign of passive resistance against the occupation, had ceased work en masse. Between 26 January and the end of passive resistance in September, the occupation forces relied heavily upon the efforts of ordinary French and Belgian workers drawn from civilian railways, to keep the vital railway network functioning. Working for the Franco-Belgian railway company, the Régie, created in March 1923 in an attempt to circumvent Berlin's influence over the Ruhr railway workers, the cheminots of France and Belgium constituted a significant proportion of the overall occupation presence in the region. This significant working-class presence in the Ruhr has not received significant historical attention. Both Stanislas Jeannesson and Conan Fischer in their works on the Ruhr crisis do provide some useful information, but do not interrogate the experiences of this group of workers in detail. Nor do they examine their complex interactions with the German workers whom they were in the region to replace.³⁸ Interestingly, historians of communism have seemingly written these workers and their experiences entirely out of the history of the international campaign that the Ruhr crisis occasioned. Numerous historians, most notably perhaps Philippe Robrieux, have examined communist subversion in the French army, a key element in communist mythology of this period.³⁹ However, not a word is raised regarding the presence of thousands of working-class men (and some women), among them an unknown number of Communist Party members and communist trade union activists.

³⁷ Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914–1924* (Stanford, CA., 1966), p. 316.

³⁸ Stanislas Jeannesson, *Poincaré, la France et la Ruhr* (Strasbourg, 1998); Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis 1923–1924* (Oxford, 2003).

³⁹ Philippe Robrieux, *Histoire intérieur du parti communiste, 1920–45*, pp. 152–154.

French troops entered the Ruhr on 11 January 1923. After years of growing frustration with German recalcitrance on the issue of reparations, French Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré announced that the French forces were moving into the region to secure deliveries of coal and other goods as part of the outstanding reparation payments. The move was widely supported in France, with several notable exceptions, as we shall see. In response to the occupation, on 13 January, the German government announced the campaign of passive resistance in the Ruhr. The campaign was strongly supported by workers in the Ruhr, not least the railway workers who from 26 January launched a general strike that brought the entire railway network in the region to a halt. In addition to the refusal to work, German railway workers removed locomotives and specialist wagons from the region to the safety of unoccupied Germany, denying them to the allied occupiers.

The French response was brutal. Beginning first with railway managers and then spreading down through the German railway hierarchy, the French occupation authorities began first to evict striking railway workers and their families from their homes, and then to expel them from the region. The process accelerated with the creation of the Franco-Belgian railway company, the Régie in March 1923, formed to operate the railways in the occupied territories. Recalcitrant German workers were given one final verbal warning, presumably by armed French soldiers standing at their doorsteps. If they continued to refuse to work they were then evicted and expelled, along with family members.⁴⁰ Even in the midst of this repression, there is evidence that French administrators continued to cling to the view that they had intervened in the Ruhr, in part at least, on the side of the ordinary inhabitants of the region. As the French occupiers identified German workers for expulsion, they were under orders to prioritise 'outsiders' among the workers, presumably in an effort to separate the inhabitants of the Ruhr from wider German influences.⁴¹

The impact of such measures upon the German railway workers in the Ruhr can be judged from evidence gleaned by the French from a Reichsbahn employee interviewed in April 1923. The report of this conversation noted approvingly the 'terror' that the expulsions were striking in the railway population. Support for the railway workers among the local population was also reported to be dying away, as inhabitants suffered the consequences of the paralysed railway system and the economic dislocation of the passive resistance campaign. Shopkeepers were also reportedly losing patience with railway families whose increasing destitution was having a significant impact upon their own businesses. The strike, noted the report's

⁴⁰ Stanislas Jeannesson, *Poincaré, la France et la Ruhr*, pp. 201–205.

⁴¹ SHD Vincennes, GR₇ NN₄ 814, 27/3/1923.

author, could not last more than another three weeks at most.⁴² It continued in fact until September.

The German railway company, the Reichsbahn, along with the German transport ministry, were among the most steadfast resisters to the occupation forces. Upon the creation of the Régie, the Reichsbahn issued a set of guidelines to its employees instructing them how to behave towards the French and Belgians in the Ruhr. Railway workers were ordered to speak only German in any dealings with representatives of the occupying powers, ensuing the maintenance of linguistic barriers between occupier and occupied. Workers were also ordered to refuse to move any locomotive or to obey any order not transmitted by a Reichsbahn official. Indeed, collaboration with French or Belgian railway personnel was strictly forbidden.⁴³ Taken as a whole, the instructions sought to defend continued German sovereignty over the railway network. While inciting its employees to passively resist the French and Belgians, the Reichsbahn also envisaged more active forms of resistance. The instructions also gave official sanction to certain sabotage efforts. Workers were ordered to seek to immobilise locomotives operated by foreign railway personnel ‘by all regular means’.⁴⁴

Support from the national German railway network played a role in maintaining the resolve of railway workers in the Ruhr. International aid also played its part, notably from the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ Railway workers from Sweden also contributed to an international effort aimed at supporting striking German railway workers.⁴⁶ We should not, however, overlook the significance of local pressures, notably the role of public denunciations in setting the acceptable limits on German interactions with the occupier. In Kaiserslautern, for instance, the names and addresses of 13 Germans working for the Régie were posted on walls throughout the town. These posters denounced the workers as ‘traitors to the German working class’, and called upon the inhabitants of the town to ‘remember the names of these individuals’. Tensions ran particularly high in Kaiserslautern as the French had first expelled the town’s mayor and then his replacement for their refusal to cooperate with the occupation.⁴⁷ The Reichsbahn itself kept records of individuals who worked for the occupation, drawing up lists based on information supplied by local populations. Once the passive resistance

⁴² AN AJ/9/5259, Dossier 3, 27/4/1923.

⁴³ AN AJ/9/5259, Dossier 3, 28/3/1923.

⁴⁴ AN AJ/9/5259, Dossier 3, 28/3/1923.

⁴⁵ Gleb Albert, ‘German October is Approaching: Internationalism, Activists and the Soviet State in 1923’, *Revolutionary Russia*, 24, 2 (2011), 111–142.

⁴⁶ AN AJ/9/5259, Dossier 3, 14/3/1923.

⁴⁷ AN AJ/9/5259, Dossier 3, 23/4/23.

campaign ended the Reichsbahn wrote to these workers, issuing them with severance orders from the German state railways. Workers were informed of their loss of pension rights together with all other entitlements, notably their health and other insurance provisions.⁴⁸

It was into this highly tense situation that thousands of French railway workers arrived from February 1923 onwards. The workers arrived in the Ruhr from across France. The communist *cheminot* newspaper, the *Tribune des cheminots*, kept a running commentary on the departures of these workers for the occupied territories. The edition of 15 March 1923 recorded 700 railway workers having departed Amiens on specially organised trains, and a further 235 from Strasbourg. These joined the 120 who had left Toulon in late February. On occasions a snapshot is provided of the atmosphere in which the *cheminots* departed. In Metz the 450 departing railway workers enjoyed a civic reception, with speakers exhorting them to do their duty, as they had during the war. This call to patriotism, delivered by a colonel in the French army, must have conveyed a decidedly mixed message to the local railwaymen who, as inhabitant of Lorraine would have been German subjects during the war years, most likely many of them working for the Reichsbahn whose employees they were now setting out to replace.⁴⁹

In a meeting in Moscow in March, prior to his return to France to lead the Young Communist campaign against the Ruhr occupation, Jacques Doriot regretted the attitudes of French workers towards their comrades in the Ruhr.⁵⁰ In a letter from Paris, the Communist Alfred Rosmer emphasised the 'passivity' of French workers with regard to the occupation.⁵¹ While neither directly singled out the railway workers for criticism the Communist Party newspaper, *L'Humanité* did not hold back. The paper reproduced without comment an anarchist article denouncing the railway workers in the Ruhr as 'prostitutes' who had sold themselves to Poincaré for a little extra on their wage.⁵²

As the French authorities sought to evoke the memory of the sacrifice and duty of railway workers during the war years, communist counter-propaganda also took up such themes. The communist leadership of the *cheminots*, however, sought to question how previous devotion to the nation in its hour of need had been rewarded in the years since the armistice. Railway workers, argued the paper on 1 March 1923, had time and again proved themselves in the service of the nation. Yet, the paper asked curtly, how had these sacrifices

⁴⁸ AN AJ/9/5259, Dossier 3, 22/9/23.

⁴⁹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/2/1923.

⁵⁰ RGASPI, f.495, op.1, d.68, p. 39.

⁵¹ RGASPI, f.495, op.1, d.68, p. 41.

⁵² *L'Humanité*, 7/3/1923.

been repaid? The eight-hour day granted in 1919 had been rescinded. Worse, 25,000 railway workers (argued the *Tribune*) had been sacked following the 1920 general strike, and a further 50,000 laid off in subsequent cost cutting measures. Those who remained employed had seen their salaries cut.⁵³ In counterpoint to the calls to national duty in the press, the *Tribune* appealed to proletarian internationalism and, in particular, the imagined international community of railway workers. On 1 April, the *Tribune* called upon French railway workers to 'do your duty to your class; these unfortunates are your brothers and not your enemies! Be good comrades to them and, if they hate the France of capitalism and imperialism, teach them to love the France of workers and revolutionaries'⁵⁴ Calls for fraternisation between occupiers and occupied were also a key theme in communist propaganda distributed among soldiers and cheminots in the Ruhr itself. Here too official themes of duty and national service that evoked the memory of the Great War were challenged by the Party. Extracts of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu*, for instance, were distributed among the soldiers. Copies of the communist press were distributed through the occupied zone as a significant propaganda war developed between the various participants.

While the *Tribune* called upon French railway workers to act in the Ruhr in effect as ambassadors for the France of 'workers and revolutionaries', confrontations between French and German workers were commonplace. Fights broke out, often fuelled by alcohol. French administrators in the Ruhr reported an excess of zeal among ordinary railwaymen arriving in the region. These employees of the Régie, 'seem ignorant of the aims we are pursuing in these regions. For them the occupants of the Rhineland are the "Bosch" and one treats them as one would a vanquished foe.'⁵⁵ Reports were passed to Paris of French railway workers seeking to turn Germans out of their homes as they sought better lodgings for themselves. They installed themselves in the homes of expelled Germans, and forced the French authorities to rubber stamp such moves. One homme d'équipe together with his station master attempted to get two female hoteliers expelled from the region after they refused to open their establishment to railway workers stationed in a barracks nearby. Such incidents, underlined the French representative, were 'hardly favourable to French prestige'.⁵⁶

In part, these and comparable incidents were put down to tensions caused by young workers attracted to the Ruhr by the promise of high wages and the chance to 'faire la fête'. It was also alleged, this time by the FNCU, that

⁵³ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/3/1923.

⁵⁴ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/4/1923.

⁵⁵ AN AJ/9/5262/2, report in 2/10/1923.

⁵⁶ AN AJ/9/5262/2, report in 2/10/1923.

the volunteers were in large part drawn from the ranks of the révoqués who, they argued, had been promised reintegration into the railway companies if they provided this service to the state. This was pointedly denied by the minister of public works in the National Assembly. While the promise of adventure clearly appealed to some, it is clear that others had been drawn by promises of the French governments and railway companies of a lucrative but also stable period of service in the Ruhr. A number of workers reported that they had been promised that their wives and families would be able to join them in the occupied territories, a promise that the authorities quickly tried to row back from once the realities of the occupation became clear. Insufficient and insalubrious lodgings quickly took a toll on morale. Railway workers were indignant when, on their arrival at Fort Alexander in Coblenz, they discovered the barracks completely unprepared to receive them.⁵⁷

The presence of French railway workers in the Ruhr was not well received by their fellow workers and communists back in France. While French workers conscripted into the army were seen as an opportunity for French communist propaganda, and the creation of communist cells among French soldiers garrisoned in the Ruhr quickly became the stuff of Communist Party mythology, railway workers were not viewed in the same fashion. Demonstrations of communist railway workers in France condemned both the occupation and those who had departed for the Ruhr. In February 1923, railway workers in Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, a major communist stronghold on the outskirts of Tours, held a demonstration attended by 3,000 to protest the occupation. They announced that they would not 'sell their consciences'. Railway workers, argued the speaker addressing the crowd, should never place themselves in the service of their class enemies.⁵⁸ In Alsace, railway workers demonstrated in support of the German inhabitants of the Ruhr, marching behind portraits of Marx, Jaurès, and Liebknecht while a choir of railwaymen sang a German socialist anthem. The workers announced that, for their part, they would continue the struggle against the occupation.⁵⁹ From across France, communist railway union branches wrote to the *Tribune des cheminots* announcing they had unilaterally expelled members who had volunteered for the Ruhr. For their part, the editorial staff of the *Tribune* sought to remain in contact with cheminots in the occupied territories. They attempted to have the *Tribune* distributed among these workers, and encouraged them to write to their offices with stories of their experiences and treatment. And, apparently, some workers did reply. One such testimony

⁵⁷ AN AJ/9/5262/2, 6/4/1923.

⁵⁸ *L'Avant Garde*, 16/2/1923, cited in Fédération d'Indre-et-Loire du Parti communiste français (ed.), *Communistes en Touraine: 80 ans de témoignages et de récits* (Tours, 2000), p. 54.

⁵⁹ AN F/7/13403, 16/5/1923.

was prominently published in *L'Humanité* in mid-March from a worker who had chosen to return to France, exiting the ‘nightmare’, as the paper put it.⁶⁰

The tale told by the returned cheminot was of the rapid disillusion faced by the volunteers in the Ruhr. This is also a theme which emerges from the official French reports. Railway workers complained of their poor lodgings, as we have seen, but also chafed against the rigours of military discipline under which they fell. For their part, the military commanders were contemptuous of the ‘shabby’ appearance of railway workers and complained of their lack of discipline. Most significantly, the difficult working conditions faced by the railwaymen was a major source of complaint. Almost immediately, the Franco-Belgian operated railways became a focus of German sabotage and the site of violent encounters between occupation forces and German armed resistance. Official reports, cited by Cohen, noted 86 sabotage incidents against the railways in March, 55 in May, and 62 in June of 1923. As Cohen emphasised, French officials tended to lump various incidents together under the umbrella term of ‘sabotage’ including rail accidents caused by inexperienced crews operating locomotives. Yet, violence was an ever-present danger for railway workers as they sought to keep the major arteries of the Ruhr functioning. French reprisals against German saboteurs became increasingly brutal as the occupation wore on, with looters and saboteurs shot on sight.⁶¹ High-profile civilian and military hostages were placed on military trains by the Franco-German forces in an attempt to discourage sabotage efforts.⁶² The general scenes of chaos in the Ruhr were vividly captured by a cheminot correspondent who wrote to *L'Humanité* in early March 1923, ‘we creep from station to station. A station does not dispatch a train until the next station up the line has telephoned to say that the previous train has arrived. As far as the points go, we are obliged to descend from the train each time to change them manually. It's a prehistoric system.’⁶³

As worker morale fell away, fraternisation between French and German workers became a growing concern for the authorities. The worry now was less violent confrontation but French workers communicating their disillusion to the striking German workers. Such contacts, it was observed, ‘encourages these latter to resistance’.⁶⁴ Both Jeanneson and Fischer in their studies emphasise the role played by Alsatians in the army and among the railway workers in facilitating such contacts. German speaking, and not long incorporated into the French nation, reports circulated of Alsatian soldiers

⁶⁰ *L'Humanité*, 12/3/1923.

⁶¹ Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis 1923–1924*, p. 175.

⁶² Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis 1923–1924*, p. 176.

⁶³ *L'Humanité*, 4/3/1923.

⁶⁴ AN AJ/9/5262/2, 6/4/1923.

deserting the occupying army, using contacts among the Ruhr population to procure civilian clothes and ‘saying they are very sorry about the whole business’. Alsatian railway workers in Bochum were evidently only being kept at their posts by the threat of punitive measures, notably the menace of being transferred to ‘remote corners of France’ should they abandon the Ruhr.⁶⁵

The German railway workers returned to work with the end of the passive resistance campaign in September 1923. This was not the end of the occupation, but it did signal the winding down of the cheminot presence in the Ruhr. In November 1923 the director of the Régie warmly congratulated the French workers on their efforts. The German resistance, he noted, had collapsed in the face of ‘the patriotism and the professional abilities of the French railwaymen’.⁶⁶ This was an episode in the history of France, he went on, that ‘deserves to pass into popular imagery’.⁶⁷ For the railway workers in the Ruhr, the promises made by the French state quickly ran hollow. The patriotism and nationalist sentiments, together with a desire to ‘faire payer le boche’ quickly evaporated. After a few weeks in the Ruhr, many were reportedly disillusioned by their experiences. Far from the heroic image painted above, such workers were reported by observers as ‘counting the days that separate them from their Liberation’.⁶⁸

The mobility of the railway workers, their purported sense of international solidarity, and their position at the heart of a key strategic national asset were among the key elements that appealed to revolutionaries within the international communist movement. The Ruhr crisis had turned these considerations on their head. On the one hand, cheminots in France had participated in demonstrations against the Ruhr occupation, and the leadership of the FNCU had vehemently protested the actions of the state and companies in sending French workers into the region. Pierre Semard himself emerged from the crisis with his reputation enhanced as a result of his propagandising on behalf of the PCF. However, on the other hand, thousands of railway workers had ignored the calls of the Communist International and had instead sought to play their part in the Ruhr. The failure of the German revolution to materialise was a crucial turning point for the Comintern and for the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, as the expectation of the imminent spread of revolution beyond Russia’s borders fell away.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis 1923–1924*, p. 138.

⁶⁶ SHD GR7 NN4 814, 21/11/1923, p. 2.

⁶⁷ SHD GR7 NN4 814, 21/11/1923, p. 2.

⁶⁸ AN AJ/9/5262/2, 6/4/1923.

⁶⁹ See the argument in Gleb Albert, ‘German October is Approaching: Internationalism, Activists and the Soviet State in 1923’, *Revolutionary Russia*, 24, 2 (2011), 111–142.

The Rif War

Divisions among French workers and concerns over the reliability of cheminot internationalism resurfaced just a few years later as the communist movement organised nationwide protests against the French imperial war in Morocco against the forces led by Abd-el Krim. PCF opposition to the Rif War was spearheaded by Jacques Doriot and the Jeunesse Communiste organisation he led. But overall, as David Slavin has noted, the communist campaign against the war, together with that of the French left, failed to make much of a mark. Indeed, the Communist Party at the time shared much of the colonialist thinking that characterised France's governing elites.⁷⁰

While Doriot's activities in opposition to the Rif War are rightly the focus of a good deal of historical attention, Pierre Semard, too, was highly active throughout the Rif campaign. A steadfast internationalist, Semard led an energetic campaign against French actions in North Africa, and was imprisoned for his activism in 1927. Spearheaded by Semard and Monmousseau, the campaign waged by *La Vie ouvrière* gained significant ground through the course of 1925, culminating in a major 24-hour strike on 12 October 1925.

The Sûreté maintained a close watch upon preparations for this October strike. Their particular attention, as ever, was drawn to the railway network, alert for any efforts to impede the transport of troops and materiel to Morocco. The Interior Ministry and the railway companies maintained close contact through the months leading up to the strike. In July 1925, the minister of the interior forwarded reports of discussions of the PCF's Comité Centrale d'Action which identified disruption of the railways as a key objective during a general strike against the Rif War. One member of the committee was reported to have mooted mobilising women and children to obstruct the railway.⁷¹ In November 1925, a report 'from a correspondent' outlined plans for a communist occupation of the railways. In the first hours of a general insurrection, the communists, it was alleged, would seek to seize control of the railway network in the Paris region, paralysing all traffic in an attempt to impede military communications with the capital. An arms and munitions depot was reported to have been created in the Paris area.⁷² In the summer of 1925 there were also, for the PCF, encouraging signs of

⁷⁰ David H. Slavin, 'The French Left and the Rif War, 1924–25: Racism and the Limits of Internationalism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26, 1 (Jan., 1991), 5–32.

⁷¹ AN: F/7/13961, Directeur de la Sûreté Générale à M. le Directeur de la Compagnie de chemins de Fer Paris-Orléans, 28/7/1925.

⁷² AN: F/7/13688, 'Parti Communiste Français: Plan d'Occupation Communiste des Chemins de Fer (d'un Correspondent)', 14/11/1925, p. 1.

bellicosity among France's cheminots. Cheminots at Mézidon published a protest against the conflict, those at Dreux and Gisors called upon their fellow workers to prepare for a 'veritable lutte' against the war.⁷³ Perhaps buoyed by such instances, when the instructions for the mass strike were published in the pages of *La Vie ouvrière* the boycott of the fabrication and transportation of materials destined for the war were prominent objectives.⁷⁴

The general strike of October 1925 was a massive show of strength by parts of the French trade union movement. One hundred thousand were reported to have ceased work for the full twenty-four hours of the strike within the northern textile industry alone. Large numbers of miners were also reported to have participated in the strike.⁷⁵ As the national press gleefully noted, however, the national railway network had continued to function throughout the day without disruption. Official sources reported that the cheminots, as well as post and telegraph workers, had failed to respond to the CGTU's call for action. Monmousseau attacked such claims denouncing those who made them as 'farceurs'. He argued that the PCF had never sought to mobilise the cheminots. This was clearly false, of course, as the PCF and CGTU's focus prior to the strike had clearly been transport workers. Tellingly, however, Monmousseau noted how the cheminots were still in a state of 'convalescence' following the 1920 strike. In this revealing phrase, he made clear how, five years on from the events of May 1920, the CGTU and the wider PCF had little faith in the militancy of those French railway workers, who nonetheless continued to make up a massive proportion of communist strength in France.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The patterns of cheminot internationalism during the 1920s underline the continued impact of the 1920 defeat upon the railway workforce. The rupture with the militancy of the period prior to 1920 is particularly marked in the Ruhr episode during which workers were, for the most part, more concerned with fulfilling their professional duty than with the wider political implications of their actions. The cheminots' absence from the campaign against the Rif war was equally concerning for the PCF's political hierarchy who complained aloud at the lack of political commitment among the cheminots. For the communist leadership of the FNCU, the question posed during the 1920s remained how best to engage the railway workers

⁷³ *La Vie ouvrière*, 3/7/1925; 21/8/1925.

⁷⁴ *La Vie ouvrière*, 25/8/1925.

⁷⁵ See the report in *La Vie ouvrière*, 30/10/1925.

⁷⁶ *La Vie ouvrière*, 16/10/1925.

in political activism, particularly as the cheminots remained unprepared to participate in political campaigns waged by the PCF. The response, buoyed by the advent of the Comintern's 'class-against-class' strategy introduced from 1927 onwards, was a marked turn towards the workplace undertaken by communist activists, and a renewed engagement with the everyday concerns of railway workers. This shift in the communist's focus is the subject of the next chapter.

6

'Hostile Participants': Communists and Railway Industrial Relations in the 'Class-against-Class' Era, 1928–1934¹

Between 1928 and 1934 communist strategy on the railways underwent a series of major upheavals. Chief among these was a startling about-face on the issue of participation in railway industrial relations. Previously, the communist-led FNCU, following the revolutionary logic of communists as an oppositional force on the railways, had refused to endorse any activity reminiscent of wartime collaboration and the 'reformism' pursued by their rivals in the CGT union federation. From 1928, however, this approach changed as the communist-led union began a process of engagement with consultative managerial committees and, after 1931, played a leading role in railway safety delegations. Undertaken during the period in international communist history known as 'class-against-class', this strategy served to cement the communists' position among the railway workforce as communist activists undertook an ever-greater engagement with the everyday realities, and concerns, of the cheminot workforce. In a period of deepening financial crisis on the railways, a product of the effects of the depression in France, such a strategy met with the support of significant numbers of railway workers who looked to the communist union to defend their working conditions against managerial attempts to enforce cost cutting measures. As such, rather than serving to weaken communist trade union organisation, the period known as 'class-against-class' in fact saw a significant extension of communist support on the railways. What is more, the practices learnt and experience gained from this 'hostile participation' in railway industrial relations would stand the FNCU in good stead when, in June 1936, the Popular Front government brought a greater degree of democracy into French industrial relations and instituted elected worker representation in

¹ The term 'hostile participants' is adapted from the article by Patricia R. Turner, 'Hostile Participants? Working-Class Militancy, Associational Life, and the "Distinctiveness" of the Prewar French Labor Movement', *Journal of Modern History*, 71, 1 (1998), 28–55.

workplaces across the French economy. Drawing upon the lessons of this earlier period, railway union militants would be ready to exert their authority in the new industrial relations landscape of the Popular Front.

Workers and the Depression

The French economy seemed at first to be insulated from the impact of the economic crisis that was sweeping through the industrial nations. While American and German economic performance declined precipitously from June 1929, it was another 12 months before the depression began to be felt in France. Even then the impact of the global economic crisis was shallow compared to the damage wrought in other western nations. While industrial output in Britain, America and Germany declined by more than 25% in 1931, France registered only a corresponding 10% drop in output.² The extent of the crisis intensified after 1931, however. As Julian Jackson notes, ‘industrial production in the first quarter of 1932 was 25% down on the first quarter of 1931’.³ This figure masked significant disparities between differing sectors of the economy. While certain industries escaped the crisis relatively unaffected, others, notably France’s major export industries, suffered significant declines. Leather goods, the car industry, and above all French textiles producers were deeply hit by the effects of the depression.⁴ The unequal impact of the depression upon differing sectors of the economy was not unique to France. What set the French experience apart from that of the other nations was the duration of the crisis. Though French output fell less than that of Germany or America, its impact lasted much longer. While Britain and Germany, for instance, were showing signs of recovery by the mid-1930s, the French economy remained well below its 1929 levels for the rest of the decade. ‘By the outbreak of war’, writes Kenneth Mouré, the French economy ‘was still operating 12% below its 1929 peak’.⁵ As Richard Kuisel notes, ‘it was the persistence of the depression that wreaked havoc in France’.⁶ The French economy throughout the 1930s appeared ‘immune to recovery’.⁷

French workers’ experiences of the depression years were far from uniform. Unemployment or severely reduced working hours and pay were the reality

² Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, pp. 23–24.

³ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, p. 24.

⁴ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, pp. 24–25.

⁵ Kenneth Mouré, *Managing the Franc Poincaré: Economic Understanding and Political Constraint in French Monetary Policy, 1928–1936* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 13.

⁶ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 93.

⁷ Kenneth Mouré, *The Gold Standard Illusion: France, the Bank of France, and the International Gold Standard, 1914–1939* (Oxford, 2002), p. 1.

for many. Though official statistics suggest that France suffered lower levels of unemployment in comparison to other nations in this period, the broad national picture conceals significant divergences between regions and between different economic sectors. As Matt Perry has emphasised, in the early 1930s 90% of all France's unemployed resided in just 17 departments, notably concentrated in the major industrial regions, of which Paris was by far the largest both in terms of population and in terms of the numbers of unemployed.⁸ The textile industry, where production had already been in decline from the latter part of the 1920s, was one of the most profoundly hit of France's industries. Workers suffered layoffs, reduced hours, and pay cuts as employers sought to stabilise their companies, wage cuts were estimated by some workers in Troyes to be as much as 40%.⁹ By December 1934, 70% of French textile workers were employed on reduced hours, leaving household budgets extremely stretched.¹⁰

France's privately operated railway network was one of the principle victims of the depression decade. With the health of the railways intimately tied to the performance of the national economy, the drawn out 'slow paralysis' of French industrial output devastated railway company finances. Combined with the unstoppable growth of motor transport which ended the railways' transport monopoly the crisis led inexorably to nationalisation of the industry in 1937.

With the onset of the depression, the 'golden age' of the railway companies came to an abrupt end. From 1929 – 'the last of the good years', according to one Compagnie du Nord observer – the volumes of freight traffic carried by the French railways fell back slightly, and then collapsed after 1931.¹¹ Passenger numbers also declined precipitously. Tourism, which had been worth six billion francs to the French economy in 1931 had dropped to 750 million francs by 1935¹² – 'tourists chose to visit less expensive countries and to spend less when they came to France'.¹³ Between 1930 and 1936 passenger numbers fell by 27%. Though the position recovered somewhat in 1937, increasing by 6% on 1936 levels, numbers fell back again by 12% in 1938.¹⁴ The

⁸ Matt Perry, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921–1945* (Aldershot, 2007), p. 25.

⁹ Helen Harden Chenut *The Fabric of Gender: Working Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park, Pa., 2005), p. 350.

¹⁰ Helen Harden Chenut, *The Fabric of Gender: Working Class Culture in Third Republic France*, p. 343. On the decline in income, see *ibid*, p. 352.

¹¹ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 36.

¹² Serge Bernstein, *La France des années trente* (Paris, 1988), p. 33.

¹³ Kenneth Mouré, *Managing the Franc Poincaré: Economic Understanding and Political Constraint in French Monetary Policy, 1928–1936*, p. 24.

¹⁴ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France, tome 2*, pp. 791–792.

1936 figure of 23,714 million passenger-kilometres represented an all-time low.¹⁵ In both cases, the poor economic conditions were exacerbated by the growth in popularity and affordability of road transport.

The combined impact of the decline in passenger numbers and freight volumes proved catastrophic for the financial position of the railway companies. According to the industry's own figures the relatively healthy position of 1930 had been severely degraded by a one billion (*milliard*) franc drop in receipts over the subsequent years to 1935.¹⁶ The deficit had ballooned from 293 million francs in 1931 to 580 million by 1935.¹⁷ Official French government statistics estimated the losses higher still. Appearing before a specially convened session of the parliamentary Public Works Commission in November 1931, the then Prime Minister Pierre Laval announced that the railway industry's deficit was increasing at the rate of eight million francs per day. With liability for this deficit ultimately falling on the French state as a result of the 1921 Railway Act, the financial position of the railways was a matter of national concern. As Laval made clear before the parliamentary committee, 'the unhealthy situation of the railways tends towards the destruction of budgetary equilibrium, the base of the country's financial strength.'¹⁸

In an effort to respond to the crisis, railway employers embarked upon a twin approach of cost cutting and modernisation in an effort to return the railways to profitability. They also sought to either restrict or eliminate competition from road transport demanding the 'coordination' of transports, a demand which was principally intended to uphold the railway companies' monopoly in this area. The issues faced by company managers were far from straightforward. High fixed costs and the relative inconvenience of transporting goods to the railways meant that for short journeys, under 70km, rail travel was becoming increasingly unattractive for small businesses and commercial bodies.¹⁹ Where the railways were governed by a raft of regulations and parliamentary and government oversight, automobile traffic remained relatively free from official scrutiny at this time. One element of the problem, passenger services, was in part met by the operation of bus services run by the rail companies themselves.²⁰ During the 1920s rail companies attempted to meet the challenge of road haulage through

¹⁵ Kimon A. Doukas, *The French Railroad and the State*, p. 183.

¹⁶ Centre des Archives du Monde de Travail, Roubaix (hereafter CAMT): 202AQ₅, Effort du réseau devant la crise, *Le Réseau du Nord devant la Crise* (1936), p. 17.

¹⁷ CAMT: 202AQ₅, Effort du réseau devant la crise, *Le Réseau du Nord devant la Crise* (1936), p. 16.

¹⁸ AN: C//14913, Tome 1, PV. 25/II/1931, p. 10.

¹⁹ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 29.

²⁰ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 33.

competitive tariff reductions. By 1928 it had become clear that this strategy was wholly ineffective. Cutting fares competitively in one area simply moved the problem elsewhere, requiring a coordinated and massive national fare reduction programme considered to be unaffordable by the railway companies; all this during a period (the 1920s) when railway finances were at their most secure.²¹ The coming of the depression and the precipitous drop in industrial output significantly aggravated the problem.

The search for solutions led railway managers to consider radical restructurings of the railway network. Making the claim that the railways ought to be limited to just a quarter of their then size so that they might compete more effectively with road transport, the Director of the Nord Paul-Emile Javary proposed a massive series of cuts in routes as well as station closures. Arguing that railway traffic be confined to main lines only, Javary proposed closing the vast majority of the Nord's 700 stations, leaving only a core of between 70 and 80 open to the public. The gaps in service would be filled by a new fleet of railway-owned buses.²² Above all railway industry leaders sought to limit the impact of road competition upon railway finances. Managers and state officials spoke of the need for the 'coordination of transports', a phrase which carried a variety of different meanings. Speaking before the Conseil National Economique in February 1934, one M. Josse explained that transport policy ought to be based upon a fairer competition between road and rail. Josse argued that free competition was not ultimately in the interest of consumers. Though in the short term lower prices might be attractive, damage to the roads by mounting automobile traffic and an ever-increasing public debt as railway deficits mounted would deeply hurt the national economy. In these circumstances, consumers, as taxpayers, would have to meet the bill.²³ Josse's report also highlights the divisions which the competition question was opening up within French society. Plans for the railways to close unprofitable lines were strongly condemned by agricultural interest groups, among others, who called for the maintenance of a service 'even at a deficit, even at weak profit levels'. Josse's preferred solution was for an increase in automobile regulation to be met by a corresponding loosening in railway regulation. This, he argued, would lead to fairer competition between the two.²⁴

This position was not supported by rail industry spokesmen. At the same meeting Raoul Dautry, then head of the Etat network, argued against the whole principle of competition. Dautry summed up the industry's position,

²¹ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 32.

²² SHD, 2N148, Conseil National Economique, compte rendu 16/2/1934.

²³ SHD, 2N148, Conseil National Economique, Compte Rendu (CR.) 16/2/1934, pp. 10–11.

²⁴ SHD, 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p. 15.

noting ‘the problem is not that of a greater or lesser degree of liberty, it consists in putting an end to a situation of anarchy. It is not a question of organising insufficient or overly numerous and influential transports [...] it is a question of removing a deficit, that of the railway industry, which weighs on the national economy and profits no-one.’²⁵ The concern of railway managers such as Dautry was first and foremost the stabilisation of the finances of the private railway industry. This did not mean establishing ‘fair’ competition, but rather eliminating competition entirely, replacing the ‘anarchy’ of competing interests with the order of a ‘stable’ and secure transport system centred upon the railways. As Dautry went on to conclude, ‘no country is today supporting liberalism in the railway industry and all are taking measures to prevent anarchy in transport. We are not asking for liberty, because we do not believe in it, but simply order.’²⁶

The results of such deliberations led to the issuing of a decree law by the government in April 1934 on the coordination of transport in France. While ostensibly aimed at moving France towards a genuinely coordinated transport policy, the implicit aim, as one transport historian has noted, was to insulate the railways from the effects of road competition under the guise of realising a negotiated coordination of transports.²⁷ It was not a strategy which would succeed.

While the railway companies sought to curtail the impact of competition upon their business, managers also took steps to radically reduce costs, most notably those associated with personnel. Few railway managers were more associated with this ‘rationalisation’ drive than the Etat Director Raoul Dautry. Eight years into his tenure at the head of the Etat railway, and just prior to his resignation from the railways in reaction to the nationalisation of the industry, Dautry updated parliament on the policy of budget cuts he had overseen while at the helm of the Etat network. Dautry had concentrated particularly upon reducing personnel costs on the Etat – he claimed to have reduced the levels of permanent staff by 15,000 from 1928 levels. He had also overseen a significant overhaul of the network’s rolling stock, reducing the number of expensive steam locomotives and replacing them with autorails for shorter journeys.²⁸ The main driving force for the Etat’s embrace of technological change and retrenchment was in large part stark economic reality. Serving the west and south-west of France, the Etat was largely dependent on agriculture and tourism for its revenues. The Etat was thus

²⁵ SHD, 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p. 37.

²⁶ SHD, 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p. 43.

²⁷ Nicolas Neiertz, ‘La coordination des transports des années trente’, *Revue d’histoire des chemins de fer*, 9 (automne, 1993), 130–143 (135).

²⁸ AN, C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, pp. 2–11.

without the income which heavy industry or mining provided the wealthier networks such as the Nord, Est, or Alsace-Lorraine. It was also one of the major operators of commuter services in Paris, the revenues from which had been markedly affected by the rise of competitor road services.

It was not just the Etat which was adapting to alternative technologies and reducing staff, however. The Nord too were seeking to achieve significant cuts to their budget notably through reductions in staffing costs – two-thirds of the 500 million franc cuts identified as necessary by the company's Special Commission on Reform and Reorganisation in March 1935 were to be found from personnel costs.²⁹ While initial savings were reported to have been made by dramatically reducing the numbers of casual staff (*journaliers*, paid by the day), in the longer term the Commission recommended swinging job cuts among 'commissioned' employees. Arguing that a reduction in the workforce of 20,000 *cheminots* would save the industry 150m francs annually, the commission argued for the progressive replacement of permanent staff with cheaper, casualised workers.³⁰

Such radical schemes of effecting major cuts in personnel were never successfully achieved by the railway companies. Though overall staffing levels did decline through this period, this was largely the result of natural wastage as retiring workers were left unreplaced. The early years of the depression could be profoundly destabilising for certain groups among the *cheminots*, casual workers, for instance, or those steam locomotive drivers and engineers whose routes were replaced by diesel, electric, or road transport. Yet, for the most part French railway workers were largely insulated from the major upheavals faced by workers in other sectors of the economy. This was for two principal reasons. First, the more ambitious structural changes by which the companies sought to alleviate the crisis were made impossible to realise by the broad opposition they faced from powerful local interest groups. Agricultural lobby groups and local chambers of commerce in particular were incensed by plans to scale back rural railway services. With French deputies' political antennae closely attuned to any discontent emanating from their rural and small-town heartlands such reforms were essentially dead in the water. The second point which tended to insulate railway workers from the harsher experiences suffered by other workers, those in textiles for instance, was their status as statutory employees. The existence of a legally recognised, national collective contract effectively constrained the employers' room for manoeuvre, making any large-scale layoffs difficult to implement.

²⁹ CAMT 202AQ_4, A0041, Commission Spécial, Réformes et Organisation, 8/3/1935, p. 7.

³⁰ CAMT 202AQ_4, A0041, Commission Spécial, Réformes et Organisation, 8/3/1935, p. 8.

The continued scale of union membership within the industry also would have given employers pause.

The early years of the depression thus saw little marked shift in political militancy on the railways. Though a brief strike among workers at the La Garenne railway workshops in the west of Paris in January 1930 in protest against the introduction of Bedaux inspectors briefly suggested to some that the cheminots had awoken from their slumbers, such optimism was not to last.³¹ The strike was quickly terminated through the actions of Dautry, who formed a consultative committee of workers to oversee the introduction of the Bedaux system in the workshops.³² By May of 1930 normal service had seemingly resumed as the cheminot rank-and-file refused to endorse the national leadership's calls for a 24-hour May Day strike, earning the cheminots and the FNCU leadership a rebuke from the PCF.³³ From the spring of 1934, however, this established situation showed signs of change. Having been largely insulated from the harsher effects of the crisis, railway workers, alongside workers in the public sector, suffered significant pay cuts as part of government austerity measures aimed at reducing government expenditure and eliminating the deficit in the public finances. As historians have noted, through their deflationary measures the Laval and Doumergue governments chose to sacrifice the economy in favour of maintaining the value of the Franc, a policy which locked France into ongoing economic stagnation.³⁴

From April 1934, cheminot pay and working benefits began to be cut. Cheminots earning under 20,000 francs received a 5% pay cut. This rose to 10% for senior management earning over 100,000. Bonuses and other remunerations were cut by at least 5%. Though the money available for family allocations was not cut, the rules governing eligibility were tightened. The housing indemnity was cut by 10% across the board.³⁵ The Laval decree laws of 16 July 1935 resulted in further cuts in cheminot remuneration. Most significantly Decree Eleven reduced all net incomes over 10,000 francs by

³¹ A. Milu, 'Le Réveil des Cheminots', *Cahiers du bolchévisme* (Mar., 1930), 261–266.

³² John M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France. Raoul Dautry and *Les Chemins de fer de l'Etat 1928–1937*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15, 3 (1980), 443–474 (455–456).

³³ AN: F/7/13671, Préparation 1^{er} Mai, 26/4/1930; AN: F/7/159851/1, Fonds Panthéon, Gaston Monmousseau, rapport, 10/5/1930.

³⁴ The key work here is that of Kenneth Mouré, *The Gold Standard Illusion: France, the Bank of France, and the International Gold Standard, 1914–1939*.

³⁵ Société Nationale de Chemins de Fer de France, Le Mans (Herafter SNCF): 25LM636, Décrets Doumergue et Laval, Conditions de Rémunération, 'Modifications successives apportées aux conditions de rémunération du personnel depuis l'application du statut', pp. 14–15.

10%. Family allocations were further tightened and couples who were both employed by the railway companies could no longer apply independently for housing allowances. All promotions were suspended for the period of one year.³⁶ In the face of trade union and political opposition, the 10% cut in salaries was somewhat lessened by decrees of 31 December 1935 and 11 January 1936, which raised to 12,000 francs the level at which the 10% cut would be introduced. While those earning between 10,000 and 12,000 francs benefitted, the decree also introduced new cuts to salaries below 10,000 francs. The revised threshold for cuts was reduced to 8,000 francs per year. Workers in this pay grade would see a 2% cut in their salaries, on top of reductions in housing allowances and other benefits, which they had not previously faced. Those on between 9,000 and 10,000 francs would see a 4% pay cut.³⁷ These measures led to an outburst of rank and file anger, as we shall see. The difference between the militancy caused by the decrees and previous iterations of cheminot activism during the 1920s and early 1930s was that this time the cheminot political activity melded with wider working-class militancy. Partly as a result of the growing sense of solidarity after 6 February 1934, and partly as a result of connections being forged between cheminots and workers in the public sector protesting against the common impact of the decree laws, cheminot militancy developed a wider dimension after 1934.

Responding to the Crisis: The SFIO and the CGT

The collapse in the railway industry's finances weighed directly upon the French national budget. Under the terms of the 1921 Railway Act, railway companies were expected to pay their profits into a common fund from which all companies then had access, the idea being that the more profitable companies would thereby support those networks with weaker income sources. The expectation was that this measure would stabilise the financial health of the railway industry by providing a secure source of funds for investment across the industry. The expectation in 1921 was that the fund should be kept in surplus by the profits of the larger companies. Should it dip into deficit, however, the balance could be met either by a rise in fares (subject to government approval) or else the state would step in to make up

³⁶ SNCF: 25LM636, Décrets Doumergue et Laval, Conditions de Rémunération, 'Modifications successives apportées aux conditions de rémunération du personnel depuis l'application du statut', pp. 15–17.

³⁷ SNCF: 25LM636, Décrets Doumergue et Laval, Conditions de Rémunération, 'Modifications successives apportées aux conditions de rémunération du personnel depuis l'application du statut', p. 17.

the difference. The system ran into difficulties even during the prosperous years of the 1920s as the larger companies such as the Nord and the PLM looked to invest their profits directly into their own networks rather than to contribute to the common fund. With the arrival of the depression, the system failed entirely. As profits shrank so the deficit in the common fund grew significantly. Raising fares to the level necessary to cover this deficit in an era of national financial crisis was both politically and economically unacceptable and so failed to win parliamentary support. Nor was the Treasury willing to forgo the significant income that taxes paid by the industry contributed to the national coffers. As in so many other aspects of policy in this period, French railway policy was in a stalemate. In the meantime, the state's liabilities continued to deepen.³⁸

Successive governments prior to the Popular Front attempted and failed to grasp the nettle of the railway deficit. None proved successful. The boldest attempt was made by the Radical government under Edouard Herriot in 1932. In an effort spearheaded by the then Minister for Public Works Edouard Daladier, the government attempted to reorganise the whole industry into a single national society, increasing state oversight while maintaining the principle of private investment and shareholder dividends. Such plans ran into the sands of company hostility, the industry's spokesman Margot attacking the scheme as a 'leap into the unknown'.³⁹ Daladier's more ambitious plan fell victim to the ministerial instability of the Third Republic as he was replaced at the Ministry of Public Works by the more conciliatory Joseph Paganon in 1933. Plans for fusion and increased centralisation and state oversight were effectively dropped and an 'inglorious compromise' was reached which more or less maintained the status quo unchecked.⁴⁰

The most forceful and committed voice for fundamental reform in parliament at this time came from the Socialists and more specifically from the SFIO's de facto transport spokesman Jules Moch. A graduate of the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique and an engineer by training, Moch was elected to parliament in 1928 and almost immediately began work drafting a bill aimed at the nationalisation of the French railway network. Moch worked in close collaboration with the CGT's railway federation in the research for and preparation of the bill which he presented before parliament in November 1931. Moch launched a stinging criticism of the railway companies whom, adopting the revolutionary language and imagery of 1789, he attacked as the 'Farmers-General' of the rails. Equating the

³⁸ See the discussion in Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, pp. 37–39.

³⁹ For details of the discussions see AN C//15045, Tome 1, PV 26/10/1932, pp. 15–22.

⁴⁰ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, pp. 44–45 quote at 45.

whole edifice of private finance in the industry with the symbol of ancien régime venality and corruption, Moch called for the abolition of the railway companies and with them ‘the destruction of the numerous links which today permit the exploitation of a public service with a view to private interests and, consequently, the exploitation of the masses for the profit of a privileged group’. Labelling the railway companies as the ‘most solid bastion of capitalism’ with ‘interests opposed to the collective’, Moch called upon the French parliament to strike a blow against the narrow concerns of a small elite.⁴¹ Moch was a committed disciple of Socialist leader Léon Blum and admitted in his autobiography that his views on railway nationalisation had been shaped by Blum’s insistence that public services should be run in the public interest, not exploited as a vehicle for creating profits and shareholder dividends. For the CGT Cheminot Federation, nationalisation was fundamental for the rail industry’s future. The strongest statement of union policy on the issue was made by the union in the wake of the Lagny disaster of December 1933. Shortly after the catastrophe the FNCC published a short brochure entitled *La Vérité de la Catastrophe de Lagny-Pomponne: L’Incurie Scandaleuse de la Compagnie de l’Est*. Though Moch managed to gain some broad-based support for his nationalisation bill, the path to railway reform remained blocked until the arrival in power of the Popular Front in May 1936.

Responding to the Crisis: The Communists

‘Class-against-Class’

The response of the communist-led FNCU to the crisis in the railway industry was shaped by two key factors. On the one hand the wider international Comintern strategy of ‘class-against-class’ played a vital role providing the communist leadership and grassroots activists on the railways with an ideological underpinning for their analysis of the crisis and a language through which to shape their response. On the other hand, communist practice in this period continued to be deeply marked by the specific environment of railway industrial relations.

The political line known as ‘class-against-class’ or the ‘Third Period’ was officially announced by Nikolai Bukharin at the Comintern’s sixth congress in August 1928. Following the congress, national Communist parties and communist-led labour movements around the world adopted the Comintern leadership’s view that capitalism was entering a new era of crisis. This would in turn lead to a sharpening of class antagonisms

⁴¹ Jules Moch, *Le Rail et la nation, pour la prospérité collective par la déchéance des grands réseaux déficitaires* (Paris, 1931), p. 17.

and with it renewed prospects for revolutionary activity. For Communist parties the new line imposed a more rigorous political outlook. In a marked shift away from the policies of the united front under which communists had been instructed to build connections with socialist parties and reformist unions, these latter groups were now condemned as ‘social fascists’. Considered by the Comintern to be a tool of the capitalist class, the ‘treachery’ of social democratic leaders was to be exposed at every opportunity.⁴² The new revolutionary conjuncture also demanded greater efforts from industrial militants. Under the new line, noted Kozlov and Weitz, ‘all forms of working-class struggle had to be elevated into assaults on the existing system, and all forms of collaboration with the organs of the capitalist system had to be opposed.’⁴³

The results of ‘class-against-class’ have long been seen as profoundly negative, destabilising national Communist parties who suffered falling membership levels and collapsing support at the polls. In France, the PCF’s refusal at the 1929 general election to stand aside in three-way contests in favour of a better-placed Socialist candidate resulted in splits in the left-wing vote and the election of several right-wing Deputies. The PCF’s own electoral performance at these elections was dismal, with significant falls in their percentage of the vote and in the greatly reduced number of Communist Deputies in the National Assembly.

Within both the political and industrial wings of the communist movement in France, historians have sought to underline the isolation and irrelevance to which communist militants confined themselves during this period. In his biography of Maurice Thorez, Philippe Robrieux underlined the disaster which the new sectarianism represented for the French party. The tactics resulted in ‘the turn to the street, to agitation, direct action and mass political strikes’. Yet, Robrieux notes, ‘the more the Party developed the policies of the “Third Period”, the more it cut itself off from the workers.’ Through the course of these years, he argues, the communist leadership and the party militants increasingly isolated themselves from reality.⁴⁴ In the most recent study of Thorez and his wife, the Communist Party activist Jeannette Vermeersch, the ‘Third Period’ tactics are similarly discussed in terms of the effect they had in isolating the PCF from the concerns of the

⁴² Matthew Worley, ‘Courting Disaster? The Communist International in the Third Period’, in Matthew Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, pp. 1–17.

⁴³ Nicholas N. Kozlov and Eric D. Weitz, ‘Reflections on the Origins of the “Third Period”: Bukharin, the Comintern and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24, 3 (Jul., 1989), 387–410 (387).

⁴⁴ Philippe Robrieux, *Thorez: vie secrète et vie publique* (Paris, 1975), p. 127.

workforce. The party found itself in a ‘double bind’, aiming to win over the masses but forced to do so through the narrow language of the sect.⁴⁵ This sense of isolation and irrelevance extended into certain sectors of communist trade union activity. In his study of French aircraft workers, Herrick Chapman has emphasised the profound disconnect that occurred between communist militants and the workers on the shop floor in this period as communists pursued political campaigns which had little direct bearing upon the working lives of those they sought to mobilise.⁴⁶ Such a view echoes that expressed by the soon-to-be leader of the PCF Maurice Thorez who, criticising the excesses of party militants in 1931, lamented that ‘our militants, tolerably qualified when it comes to discussing events in China or America, lose their footing when they have to discuss the demands of the factory or workforce.’⁴⁷

Yet, for all the criticisms, historians have nonetheless highlighted a more positive balance sheet for the ‘class-against-class’ period in recent years. In particular, historians of the French labour movement have emphasised how the ‘Third Period’ in fact helped to develop the communist presence in factories which would in time become bastions of communist support, notably the massive Renault works at Boulogne-Billancourt. Here the new emphasis upon a close engagement with the immediate demands of workers allowed communist activists to develop a growing foundation of support in an environment that had hitherto proved highly challenging.⁴⁸ In a different context, Julian Mischi has underlined how the revolutionary language of the new line allowed communist activists in Saint-Nazaire to differentiate themselves from their CGT rivals locally, an approach which significantly improved their position among workers in the dock town.⁴⁹ Such findings mirror other recent work that has sought to examine how the new Comintern line found a ready audience among communist activists in Europe. Tim Rees, for instance, argues that in the Spanish context, ‘the thinking behind the Third Period found a positive echo in Spain, which appealed to a deep sense of what it meant to be a Communist.’⁵⁰ Many were more comfortable with a renewed emphasis upon the revolutionary identity

⁴⁵ Annette Wieviorka, *Maurice et Jeannette: Biographie du couple Thorez* (Paris, 2010), p. 165.

⁴⁶ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Bernard Pudal, *Prendre Parti: Pour une sociologie historique du PCF* (Paris, 1989), p. 166.

⁴⁸ Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schweitzer, *Communisme à l’Usine*.

⁴⁹ Julian Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: sociabilités militantes au PCF*, p. 149.

⁵⁰ Tim Rees, ‘The “Good Bolsheviks”: The Spanish Communist Party and the Third Period’, in Matthew Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period* (London, 2004), 174–202 (178).

of the Third International, ‘the language and tactics of the Third Period’ thus represented ‘a return to fundamental principles rather than being simply knee-jerk “leftism” or Stalinist device’.⁵¹

For their part, railway communists, as well as other figures within the French Communist Party hierarchy, had chafed against the previous united front tactics. Gaston Monmousseau, former cheminot now head of the communist-led CGTU, was among those who strongly condemned the logic of pursuing unity with the CGT. Arguing in a 1925 report to the PCF’s Conseil syndical that such approaches would only lead to the marginalisation of the unitaires within the CGT bureaucracy, Monmousseau and his co-authors called for a more radical approach.⁵² Leaders of the CGTU’s Cheminot Federation also expressed discontent both at the time and subsequently concerning the Federation’s direction prior to 1928. Writing in the PCF’s theoretical journal, the *Cahiers du bolchévisme* in the spring of 1930, leading cheminot unitaire A. Milu gave voice to a well-established view that CGTU activity on the railways during the 1920s had become increasingly indistinguishable from that practiced by the CGT.⁵³ While cheminot union leaders welcomed the more confrontational rhetoric and muscular approach that ‘class-against-class’ offered, the establishment of the ‘Third Period’ in France was not without tensions. In particular, the shift to the new strategy spelt the end of Pierre Semard’s time as general secretary of the French Communist Party. Closely associated with the more ‘moderate’ united front strategy that followed Bolshevisation, Semard was first removed from his position as general secretary and then increasingly marginalised within the Communist Party leadership in France.⁵⁴

The Path to Participation

The creation of consultative committees across the railway industry uniting elected worker delegates with management were a key feature of the 1920 railway statute that had come into force following the May strike. Such worker representation in the industry was not entirely novel, worker delegates had been overseeing railway company mutual societies from the latter part of the nineteenth century. On the state-controlled Etat network official meetings between management and elected personnel delegates had been commonplace before the outbreak of war. The expansion of the elected

⁵¹ Tim Rees, ‘The Good Bolsheviks’, p. 183; Matthew Worley, ‘Courting Disaster?’, p. 3.

⁵² ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/13, séquence 104, Rapports entre la CGTU et le PCF, p. 16.

⁵³ A. Milu, ‘Le Réveil des Cheminots’, *Cahiers du bolchévisme* (Mar., 1930), pp. 261–266.

⁵⁴ See Serge Wolikow, ‘Unsecrétaire général oublié’, and David François, ‘La mise à l’écart (1929–1932)’, both in Serge Wolikow (ed.), *Pierre Semard* (Paris, 2007), pp. 159–196 and 209–222.

worker delegates across the railway industry, with committees existing from the local level right up to the national industry-wide railway High Council nevertheless drew considerable inspiration from the recent experience of wartime collaboration between management and the CGT. In the aftermath of the May strike, management and not a few workers, notably among those represented by the cadres union of higher-ranking railway employees, and some within the CGT, sought to regain the collaborative ethos that they felt had been at the centre of the wartime Union Sacré. The railways were thus one of the few French industries in which the principle of wartime collaboration between management and workforce continued into the peace, albeit purely on a consultative basis, workers having no direct say in how the industry was run.⁵⁵

From the moment of the armistice onwards, the minoritaire leaders within the Cheminot CGT Federation rejected any form of worker participation in the industry, condemning what they saw as reformist class collaboration. From its creation the FNCU boycotted the personnel elections, campaigning in 1922 and again in 1925 for cheminots to abstain from the vote, or else to spoil their ballot papers.⁵⁶ The outcome of this approach was that CGT delegates were returned unopposed. Interestingly, however, for a workforce that is commonly seen as broadly supportive of railway company management, the FNCU position of boycotting the ballot was in fact strongly endorsed by three-quarters of the total cheminot electorate in 1922.⁵⁷ A similar pattern reoccurred at the 1925 personnel elections. Once more CGT candidates were returned largely unopposed, yet their candidates had only received 110,208 votes out of a total cheminot workforce of over 400,000. While most rail companies withheld the numbers of spoiled ballot papers, the state-run Etat network did release full details. These allowed the FNCU to expose the hollowness of the CGT's 'successes'. Across the entire Etat network, just 21,284 cheminots had officially voted out of a total workforce of 78,099. Some local results demonstrated even greater rates of abstention. At Paris Gare Saint-Lazare, only 60 workers had voted out of 1,335 enrolled. In Tours, a mere 40 cheminots had turned out to vote out of a workforce of 560. The results also demonstrated how CGT votes were concentrated among certain specific sections of the railway workforce. Among 'agents de gares' for instance, the CGT won only 5,614 votes out of a total of 26,969. Among footplatemen the results were equally paltry: 727 out of the Etat's 5,917 drivers and firemen had voted for the CGT. The independent footplate men's union, the Fédération des Mécaniciens et Chauffeurs, gained just 556

⁵⁵ Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 1990), p. 229.

⁵⁶ *Tribune des Cheminots*, 1/4/1922.

⁵⁷ *Tribune des Cheminots*, 1/5/1922.

votes.⁵⁸ Such high rates of abstention suggest significant levels of approval, if not support, for the FNCU's position with regard to the personnel elections. It also speaks to the significant level of influence that the communist-led union exercised within the cheminot workforce, an influence that was by this stage particularly marked among locomotive drivers and train staff. Overall, such rates of abstention suggest a workforce much less in thrall to company discourses of community and shared endeavour than has previously been thought.

Having supported a boycott campaign for the first two industry-wide personnel elections, the FNCU made a dramatic about turn ahead of the elections of 1928. In the run up to the campaign the union suddenly announced that not only would it field candidates in the election but also that these candidates would take their places on the personnel committees if elected. The subsequent results of the 1928 personnel elections confirmed the level of communist influence among the cheminot workforce which the previous high levels of abstentions had suggested. The election saw a landslide victory for the FNCU. Out of the 196 delegates who formed the electoral college which voted for cheminot representatives on the High Council, the FNCU won 131.⁵⁹ Broken down by company the FNCU's success is starkly illustrated. Only on the Est and the relatively small Midi did the CGT outpoll their communist rival. Massive FNCU majorities were registered on all the other companies, with the PLM being the largest, 43,127 votes to the CGT's 15,213.⁶⁰ On the Etat the FNCU outpolled the CGT by 32,219 to 19,928.⁶¹ The communists remained the dominant force in railway industrial relations throughout the period prior to the reunification of the CGT and CGTU in 1935. FNCU support declined slightly to 97 members of the electoral college at the 1931 elections, the CGT gaining 75. At the 1934 elections the FNCU vote was only narrowly ahead of that of the CGT, the communist-led union outpolling the confédérés by 111,563 to 109,939.⁶² By this stage FNCU strength was particularly concentrated on the PLM railway company, where the union had achieved double the amount of votes of the CGT (35,595 to 16,251). Paris continued to provide a core area of support for the FNCU as recognised by the union's executive following the 1934 results.⁶³

The decision to participate ahead of the elections in January 1928 thus

⁵⁸ *Tribune des cheminots*, 1/4/1925.

⁵⁹ AN: F/7/13671, Rapport du 19/2/1931, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/2/1928.

⁶¹ John M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France. Raoul Dautry and *Les Chemins de fer de l'Etat* 1928–1937', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 15, 3 (1980), 443–474 (458).

⁶² *L'Humanité*, 9/3/1934.

⁶³ *L'Humanité*, 2/3/1934.

ushered in a period of FNCU ascendancy within railway industrial relations, though this ascendancy did decline somewhat as the period wore on and the CGT re-established its position as a competitor for the support of the railway workforce. The original decision to participate in personnel elections occurred as the result of two primary factors. First was the wider shift within the communist movement in France and internationally towards a more pragmatic, even conciliatory, position with regards to bourgeois politics. Secondly, and perhaps of greater significance was the particular context of railway industrial relations in the mid-1920s. The 1927 FNCU decision in favour of participation, a decision endorsed by the CGTU and the PCF, was taken in the context both of a determined wage campaign on the railways and during a period of strident anti-communist policies adopted by the right-wing Poincaré government, which sought to end official government recognition of public sector unions affiliated to the CGTU.

At the same time as the Cheminot Federation's about-turn on the issue of participation, the wider CGTU confederation was also rethinking its strategic purpose. At its September 1927 congress in Bordeaux, the CGTU announced that it was going to effectively scale back its revolutionary ethos by moving in the direction of mutualism, creating a *Caisse Nationale de Solidarité Ouvrière*. At Bordeaux, notes Michel Dreyfus, the CGTU was, for the first time in its history, envisaging a communist-organised mutualist politics, essentially helping workers to live better and to save under capitalism.⁶⁴ The results of the CGTU's Bordeaux congress were met with ironic taunts from the CGT, who welcomed the unitaires' conversion to reformism.⁶⁵ French officials, too, watched with interest the apparent moves by the CGTU onto 'reformist' territory.⁶⁶ Little came of this new policy, however. Any planned communist mutualism was soon killed off by the PCF as its leaders sought to instil a more revolutionary political orientation in accordance with the new 'Third Period' line emanating from the Comintern.

While the advent of 'class-against-class' ended the CGTU's experiment in mutualism, no effort appears to have been made by the PCF to remove railway communists from the railway High Council. Criticism was registered, as when in February 1928 an internal party report highlighted the many 'parliamentary illusions' of the cheminot community as a whole and warned strongly that participation on the High Council risked leading Federation delegates into compromises with management which would weaken their revolutionary resolve. Yet, the same report also highlighted one of the key tensions facing would-be revolutionaries on the railways, namely

⁶⁴ Michel Dreyfus, *Histoire de la CGT* (Brussels, 1995), p. 135.

⁶⁵ E. H. Carr, *The Foundations of a Planned Economy*, vol. 3, part 1 (London, 1976), p. 494.

⁶⁶ AN/F/7/13584, Dossier CGTU 1928, signale 3/1/28.

that failure to become involved would risk alienating the communists from their supporters and thus leave the field clear for the CGT.⁶⁷ The party, then, had little constructive guidance to offer in the new circumstances in which the unitaires found themselves. It would be up to the cheminots themselves to negotiate their way through the thorny dilemmas that participation entailed.

During the election campaign itself the FNCU leadership made clear that they had no illusions about committees such as the High Council, nor any false ideas over what could be achieved through them. Above all, FNCU leaders were clear in their public pronouncements that FNCU participation flowed from a very different logic to the collaborationism of the CGT. In the run up to the personnel elections in 1927, the Cheminot leadership underlined that their delegates would represent the interests of the 'despoiled' workers. In the face of 'the highest representatives of industrial and commercial capitalism', the FNCU would make the cheminots' demands heard.⁶⁸ Writing in the *Tribune des cheminots* in January 1928, FNCU leader Lucien Midol sought to draw a distinction between communist and 'reformist' participation. For the CGT, wrote Midol, the Conseil was a platform through which they 'place themselves at the disposition of the authorities'. While the CGT, argued Midol, placed themselves at the service of the bosses, the *unitaires* would be guided by an altogether different light. Through participation, the FNCU announced that its aims were to 'prepare the active resistance of workers' and to 'develop their class consciousness'.⁶⁹ By March the message was even clearer: 'Our presence on the High Council cannot ever be interpreted as a first act of class collaboration.' The FNCU would, announced the union leadership, 'carry the battle even into the heart of the bourgeois organisation itself'.⁷⁰

The accent was thus placed upon class struggle and the committees as confrontational spaces between management and workforce. As such the union leadership sought to build upon the results of the campaigns in favour of wage increases for railway workers and the campaign against government anti-communism, both of which had seen a marked increase in levels of cheminot militancy. The cheminot wage campaign in which the FNCU had held firmly to a 'maximalist' demand for an 8,000 franc basic annual salary (significantly higher than the 6,850 francs that the CGT with

⁶⁷ ADSSD: PCF 3 MI 6/43, séquence 294, Conseil Syndical 1928, Aux Secrétaires de secteurs, Membres du Parti 28/02/1928, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁸ AN F/7/13674, Commissaire Spécial de Briey à M. le contrôleur des services de police administrative, 23/11/1927, p. 2.

⁶⁹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/1/1928, p. 1.

⁷⁰ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/3/1928, p. 1.

government intervention had eventually managed to prise from the railway companies after negotiations lasting several years) had encouraged a marked rise in grassroots activism among the cheminots. Reports pointed to a level of discontent that was general and profound.⁷¹ Reports suggested that the CGT were considered by the cheminot rank-and-file to be too timid in their approach,⁷² a sentiment that the FNCU sought to exploit by attacking the ‘bankruptcy of class collaboration’ and called for a more aggressive, confident approach.⁷³ In reports from all over France the popularity of the unitaire position was highlighted. On the PLM line at Avignon, the FNCU action was reported as being ‘approved by the majority of agents, even non-union members’. In Annemasse, the unitaire position had seen important increases in their membership.⁷⁴ A similar situation was noted at Besançon and Cannes.⁷⁵ On the PO network, widespread discontent was reported;⁷⁶ the Midi reported an equivalent situation with widespread FNCU support.⁷⁷ Membership in Lyon had increased by 250 in a single week, with previously moribund local union branches finding a new lease of life and renewed appeal amongst local cheminots.⁷⁸

The attempt by the Poincaré government to de-recognise the CGTU, and in particular to instruct ministerial staff to refuse to meet with CGTU delegations, sharpened the sense of confrontation between elite France and the railway workers, upon which the FNCU sought to capitalise. Highlighting the decision of the Poincaré government to exclude them from ministerial delegations, leading FNCU member and PCF figure Jules Crapier pointed to the boycott of CGTU delegations to argue that cheminots could not count upon the good will of the authorities.⁷⁹ The

⁷¹ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, *Le Conflit des Cheminots*, 22/1/1928, pp. 3–4.

⁷² AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire Spécial de Toulouse à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 12/11/1928.

⁷³ AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire Spécial de Toulouse à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 8/12/1928, p. 1.

⁷⁴ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, *Estat d’Esprit des cheminots du Réseau PLM*, 2/3/1928, p. 2.

⁷⁵ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, *Estat d’Esprit des cheminots du Réseau PLM*, 2/3/1928, pp. 2–3.

⁷⁶ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, *Estat d’Esprit des cheminots du Réseau PO*, 1/5/1928.

⁷⁷ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, *Estat d’Esprit des cheminots du Réseau Midi*, 1/5/1928.

⁷⁸ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, *Le Conflit des Cheminots*, 22/1/1928, p. 5.

⁷⁹ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendu de Réunions Divers, Commission Spécial de Nîmes, 20/1/1928, pp. 2–3.

FNCU's manifesto ahead of the 1928 elections made the point all the more strongly. The union's very existence had been placed in jeopardy by the government campaign against it. As the manifesto emphasised, 'companies and government wish to eliminate trade unionism based upon class struggle, to abolish all opposition to their agenda of enslavement and to break with the *unitaire* organisations.' By taking their place on committees such as the railway High Council, the FNCU would be able to combat 'pied à pied' the combined powers of the railway companies and the French state.⁸⁰

The scale of the FNCU victory in January 1928 left the government with little option but to back down from their plan to de-recognise the CGTU. The communist union celebrated its successes and taunted the minister for public works, André Tardieu, who had figured prominently in the government's campaign against the CGTU. 'And now, Tardieu?' asked the FNCU's *Tribune des Cheminots* when the results were declared.⁸¹ For its part, official opinion regretted the outcome of the vote. Quoted by the *Avenir* newspaper in the wake of the communist success in the railway personnel elections, General Weygand was reported to have underlined that 'if many workers turn towards communism, the reason is that communism alone is actively taking an interest in them.'⁸² Following such a success and having staked out their position with regard to the personnel committees, however, the FNCU now needed to demonstrate what 'communist participation' amounted to in practice.

Beginning Participation

Perhaps surprisingly, the Comintern's shift to 'class-against-class' did nothing to change or even to modify the FNCU decision to participate within railway industrial relations. As we have seen, the PCF merely issued the cheminots with general guidelines, noting the need to avoid any compromises with management while also warning against doing anything that might alienate the rank and file. With little guidance from above, it would be left to the FNCU leadership on the railways to chart their own course regarding participation.

In their public pronouncements leading figures within the FNCU thus sought to portray management committees and the High Council in particular as a front line in the class war with the representatives of the workers confronting management and state representatives across the meeting-room table. This rhetorical coding was reinforced by unitaire practices during these committee meetings themselves. In the first High

⁸⁰ AN F/7/13670, Syndicat des Cheminots 1928, Election pamphlet.

⁸¹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/2/1928.

⁸² *L'Avenir*, 15/2/1928.

Council meetings after the 1928 elections, the recently victorious FNCU were represented by two high-profile union delegates, Raymond Tournemaine and Antoine Rambaud. Tournemaine had exemplary credentials as far as the FNCU were concerned. Born in 1893, Tournemaine already had long experience of railway employment in the Nord's *ateliers* at Landy in the Plaine Saint-Denis just to the north of Paris. Fulfilling his military service when war was declared, Tournemaine was involved in the fighting from the earliest days of the war. Taken prisoner on 7 September 1914, however, he served out the remainder of the war in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Repatriated in December 1918, he rejoined the Northern Railway Company in February 1919. Though a supporter of the minority within the CGT Cheminot Federation, Tournemaine kept his job with the Nord after 1920 as the company's workers largely remained outside of the strike movements of that year. He became head of the FNCU's northern region in 1923, a position he maintained through the rest of the interwar period. Tournemaine was also a committed Communist, a member of the PCF's 9ème Rayon in the Paris Region.⁸³

By contrast, Antoine Rambaud was a more complicated figure. Like Tournemaine, Rambaud was a working cheminot, in his case an employee of the state-operated Etat railway network. Originally an employee at the Batignolles workshops, Rambaud by this stage was an employee at the Gare Saint-Lazare. As a Parisian like Tournemaine, Rambaud was as such able to attend High Council meetings in Paris. Rambaud's militant career marked him out as a key figure in the CGTU. Close to Gaston Monmousseau, he had played a key role in the revolutionary activity among the Parisian cheminots. Sacked in 1920, he was among those reintegrated by the Etat after the partial amnesty in 1924. He continued to play a leading role in the CGTU, becoming the head of the FNCU's Etat region in 1921, holding this position until 1931. For all his militancy on the part of the CGTU, however, Rambaud was not a member of the Communist Party. Nor was he a party supporter. An anarchist politically, Rambaud had been a supporter of the CGT-SR during the internecine struggles that had marked the early years of the CGTU. However, for reasons that are unclear, he elected to remain within the CGTU rather than break away with Pierre Besnard and his followers. Possibly his closeness to Monmousseau, the head of the CGTU, persuaded him to stay within the unitaire fold. Or perhaps the lure of a paid role as an FNCU activist was important during this period prior to his reintegration with the Etat. In any case, Rambaud's anarcho-syndicalist views would become increasingly problematic within the

⁸³ Georges Ribeil, Entry for Raymond Tournemaine in Marie-Louise Goergen (ed.), *Cheminots Engagés: 9500 Biographies en mémoire. XIX–XX siècles* (Paris, 2007).

Cheminot Federation as the ‘class-against-class’ period wore on. He would finally be expelled from the CGTU in 1931. Rambaud, despite his hostility to the PCF, was a committed militant, deeply marked by syndicalist ideas of class struggle and workplace activism. He was comfortable, during the 1920s at least, to follow the practices pursued by the communist-led FNCU. His energy, and his popularity among the Parisian cheminots made him a key figure in the FNCU leadership in this period.⁸⁴

Despite the seniority of the FNCU’s representatives on the High Council, and the careful selection of candidates representing the union at the other levels, the leadership on the railways nevertheless viewed the delegates with some distrust.⁸⁵ From early on in the history of communist participation on the railways, the union leadership sought to ensure that union delegates were closely monitored and given as little latitude as possible on the committees. The leadership emphasised that it was necessary ‘to fix the role and the character of the delegations and mandate the Federal Bureau in order to establish the platform on which the delegates must work’.⁸⁶ One member of the FNCU leadership noted that, ‘it is necessary to give them directives and not let them act alone’.⁸⁷ The delegates themselves were regularly reminded of their role. The 1933 FNCU report into their activity underlined that, as far as the Third Degree Delegation (auprès du Directeur) was concerned, ‘this delegation is under the control of the federal sections and of the Federal Bureau; the establishment of the order of business is made in common with the bureau and the federal section; a member of the Federal Bureau meets with the delegates before the meeting’.⁸⁸ This was clearly the ideal as far as the FNCU was concerned, delegates would as far as possible be guided by the unitaire leadership.

In the first High Council meetings in which they participated, FNCU candidates read from a prepared text in which they emphasised their opposition to management and their understanding of the committee as a site of class conflict, ‘all forms of committees created were only a way of making the workers’ representatives swallow decisions taken exclusively in the interest

⁸⁴ Georges Ribeil, Entry for Antoine Rambaud in Marie-Louise Goergen (ed.), *Cheminots Engagés: 9500 Biographies en mémoire. XIX–XX siècles*.

⁸⁵ For additional information on the FNCU leadership and the railway industry High Council, see Thomas Beaumont, ‘Communists and French Railway Workers: The Parisian Leadership of the *Cheminots Unitaires*’, *Twentieth Century Communism*, 5 (2013), 65–84 (73–76).

⁸⁶ CGTIHS, FD CGT/CGTU 1922–1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 27/11/31, p. 2.

⁸⁷ CGTIHS, FD CGT/CGTU 1922–1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 20/5/32, p. 4.

⁸⁸ CGTIHS, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport 11/8/33, Rapport destiné à faciliter la discussion au cours du Conseil Fédéral, 29–30/8/1933, p. 5.

of capital... *mandataires* of the workers whose interests are opposed to those of the keepers of the modes of production and exchange, we will defend the first, we shall demand account with the second.⁸⁹ Following the statement the FNCU delegates then refused to say anything further for the rest of the meeting. This approach continued for a number of meetings, though quickly the delegates were drawn into debating the finer points of railway business which came before the High Council, almost universally concerned with setting the price of fares and charges for railway freight.

By 1930 concerns were strongly expressed from within the union regarding the nature of the FNCU's engagement with the railway committees. In an exposition on the subject, one A. Milu called for the union to break with their previous tactic of involvement. There had, he argued, been good reasons for participation in 1927. Crucially, at a time when the FNCU were encountering the boycott of their delegations by both government and company representatives following the actions of Poincaré and Tardieu, the elections had allowed the union to demonstrate its strength. It also ensured that neither the railway companies nor the governments could now ignore FNCU delegates.⁹⁰ Yet, FNCU activity on the Conseil had not, argued Milu, conformed to expectations. There existed, he argued, 'no place to defend cheminots interests' or other groups workers on the Conseil supérieur, a 'tactique de classe' was, moreover, impossible to realise in such an environment.⁹¹ Milu did not, however, call for a straightforward abandonment of FNCU participation on the Conseil. Such an approach would, he argued, prove extremely dangerous for the position of the Federation, offering the CGT the opportunity to gain influence among the cheminots. Instead, he called for a campaign of preparatory work and propaganda to educate the cheminot masses regarding the true nature of the Conseil supérieur ahead of any FNCU break with the council.⁹²

In response to Milu's call for a break with the previous tactic of engagement, Raymond Tournemaine argued strongly against such a move. Indeed, Tournemaine underlined the advantages which Conseil membership had brought to the union, first among which was the considerable weight of documentation to which the Federation now had access. Recalling the difficulties the FNCU had encountered in amassing reliable information on

⁸⁹ CGTIHS, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p. 7.

⁹⁰ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Délégations, Carton 5, Position sur l'élection des délégués au Conseil Supérieur, 'Notre sortie du Conseil Supérieur de chemins de fer', p. 1.

⁹¹ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Délégations, Carton 5, Position sur l'élection des délégués au Conseil Supérieur, 'Notre sortie du Conseil Supérieur de chemins de fer', p. 4.

⁹² CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Délégations, Carton 5, Position sur l'élection des délégués au Conseil Supérieur, 'Notre sortie du Conseil Supérieur de chemins de fer', p. 5.

railway capitalism prior to their membership of the Conseil, Tournemaine underlined the extent to which their propaganda had benefitted over the recent years. He particularly drew attention to the material the Federation had been able to provide to the PCF on the high levels of spending the state was undertaking building strategic railway lines. Tunnelling under the Vosges, for instance, was projected to cost some 600 million francs over the course of 1930.⁹³ The potential loss of membership and the risk of indiscipline were also major factors raised by Tournemaine against a withdrawal. In response to Milu's argument, Tournemaine emphasised the 'tactique de lutte' that the Federation had developed through the course of their participation on the Council. Adopting the rhetoric of 'class-against-class', Tournemaine emphasised how the pursuit of communist engagement would serve to highlight the nature of class power relations within the railway industry. At an unspecified future date, Tournemaine expected the FNCU delegates would be 'chased' from the High Council as a result of their oppositional stance. This, he argued, would be an inevitable consequence of heightened class tensions as economic difficulties became increasingly felt.⁹⁴ By 1931, however, Tournemaine was justifying participation in much more prosaic terms. The High Council was a 'sphere of corruption' yet, 'we must be involved in the delegations as the cheminots have great confidence in it'.⁹⁵ Rank and file pressure upon the leadership to participate was clearly a major factor in shaping the FNCU approach in this area.

In grappling with the realities of participation, the communist railway leadership were largely left to their own devices. Communist Party influence appears to have been entirely absent with little or no reference to the PCF in the minutes of the meetings of the union leadership. FNCU leaders were thus left to develop their own response and to forge their own path through the difficult questions that such participation posed of the communists' own sense of themselves as revolutionaries. In charting a path through these thorny problems, the cheminots were confronted with dilemmas that much of the wider labour movement would not encounter until the Popular Front and the creation of factory committees by the Blum government following the strike waves of May–June 1936. As a result of the muscular, confrontational approach to industrial relations pioneered by the FNCU in

⁹³ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Délégations, Carton 5, Position sur l'élection des délégués au Conseil Supérieur, 'Rapport sur le Conseil Supérieur', pp. 1–2.

⁹⁴ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Délégations, Carton 5, Position sur l'élection des délégués au Conseil Supérieur, 'Notre sortie du Conseil Supérieur de chemins de fer', p. 3.

⁹⁵ CGTIHS, FD CGT/CGTU 1922–1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Féderale, PV. de séance de Commission Exécutive Féderale, PV. 27/11/31, p. 2.

particular during this earlier period, railway workers would be well placed to make the maximum gains once the pendulum swung firmly in their favour in 1936.

Rationalisation and the Railways

The term ‘rationalisation’ carried a diverse set of meanings in France in the 1920s and 1930s. As Jackie Clarke notes, the word was used ‘to cover everything from Taylorist time and motion studies to increased industrial concentration and economic planning’.⁹⁶ Railway engineers were among the foremost advocates of the scientific organisation of work in the interwar period. This should come as no surprise. Railway engineers were highly qualified technical experts who gravitated to organisations such as X-Crise, a think-tank founded by Ecole Polytechnique graduates dedicated to the application of scientific organisation to a broad range of industrial, but also social, political, and economic questions.⁹⁷ As such they were significant figures in the broad ‘n  buleuse organisatrice’ within interwar French thought – a metaphor proposed by Jackie Clarke to capture a broad range of actors who, through a variety of differing approaches sought to draw upon the discourses of industrial reorganisation to formulate a vision of ‘a better social and economic order’.⁹⁸ The appeal that this broad technocratic ‘nebula’ held for railway engineers can be explained both by the background of many of these men, trained in the prestigious Ecole Polytechnique that played a key role in nurturing this intellectual climate, but also by the particular context of the post-war railway industry. As Fran  ois Caron emphasises, the multiple upheavals of the immediate post-war era led to a ‘vast rationalisation enterprise’ across ‘the whole of the railway network’.⁹⁹ The ‘scientific’ organisation of railway work, however, proved an extraordinarily challenging undertaking. As such it was the company workshops and the locomotive depots, the sectors of the railway where working practices most closely approximated those of industry, that were the principle targets of company rationalisation measures.¹⁰⁰

As we have seen, the massive company repair and maintenance workshops were a repeated source of concern for railway management in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Company management regretted the

⁹⁶ Jackie Clarke, ‘Imagined Productive Communities: Industrial Rationalisation and Cultural Crisis in 1930s France’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 8, 3 (2000), 345–357 (346).

⁹⁷ On X-Crise see Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organisation: Factory, Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy* (New York, 2011).

⁹⁸ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organisation: Factory, Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy*, p. 7.

⁹⁹ Fran  ois Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer*, tome 2, p. 946.

¹⁰⁰ Fran  ois Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer*, tome 2, p. 957.

collapse in productivity in these *ateliers*, a fact they explained via the need to hire a large and inexperienced workforce, together with the disruptive influence of political militants among the workers. The lack of investment in infrastructure and equipment during wartime was also emphasised by those who sought to remedy the crisis in the maintenance centres.¹⁰¹ We have seen how rail companies in part sought to reassert order in the workshops through the removal of the most ‘problematic’ elements of the workforce, sacking those who had been closely involved in the strikes of 1920 and divesting themselves of militant workers by handing several *ateliers* over to private contractors to operate. Where key workshops remained in company hands, managers operated hand-in-glove with local and national police to maintain tight surveillance over workers. The problem of low productivity continued to dominate managerial concerns. Engineers on the Etat network boasted of huge productivity increases among workers through the adoption of a Rowan system of bonus payments. Productivity had reportedly jumped by 35% after the system’s introduction in 1922.¹⁰²

Bonus payments played a role in one of the most comprehensive interwar rationalisation schemes introduced by Marcel Bloch, the Chief engineer on the Paris-Orléans network. Bloch’s aim, however, was a significantly more overarching reorganisation of the Paris-Orléans workshops. Aiming to transform productivity and to cut the time it took to overhaul a locomotive from 60 days to just 21 days, Bloch developed a detailed, wide-ranging restructuring of the work process. The changes reached from the complete reform of the administrative procedures that logged each step of the repair process to a re-orientation of space on the workshop floor. The central aim, Bloch maintained, was to ‘obtain the maximum profit from the capital invested in the principal workshops [*grands ateliers*]’.¹⁰³ Bloch’s approach to the problem he faced on the Paris-Orléans had been deeply influenced by visits to American railway company workshops prior to the First World War. However, as François Caron notes, Bloch’s foremost intellectual influences were from much closer to home, above all he drew upon the work-science approach pioneered in France by Henri Fayol and Henri Le Chatelier.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ François Caron, ‘A propos de la rationalisation du travail dans les ateliers des compagnies de chemins de fer’, *Revue historique des chemins de fer*, 28–29 (printemps-automne, 2003), 190–206 (201).

¹⁰² François Caron, ‘A propos de la rationalisation du travail dans les ateliers des compagnies de chemins de fer’, *Revue historique des chemins de fer*, 28–29 (printemps-automne, 2003), 190–206 (201).

¹⁰³ Marcel Bloch, ‘Notes sur l’organisation du travail dans les grands ateliers de locomotives de la compagnie du chemin de fer de Paris à Orléans’, *Revue Historique des chemins de fer* (April, 1924), p. 165.

¹⁰⁴ François Caron, ‘A propos de la rationalisation du travail dans les ateliers des compagnies

Criticising the ‘old methods’ which he claimed left workers ‘hypnotised by their multiple tasks, at the mercy of their work rather than being the master of it’, Bloch argued that the task before him was to introduce ‘a judicious specialisation and a well defined responsibility’.¹⁰⁵ Focussing upon the Périgueux and Tours workshops, sites that had been in the forefront of labour militancy in the post-war period, Bloch effected a significant overhaul of working practices, based upon a sharp division of labour and delineation of tasks and, above all, the transfer of overall responsibility for the repair of an individual locomotive away from the individual teams of workers. Instead a team of four senior foremen would now take control of the various stages in the process. The application of these practices did succeed in improving productivity levels, although, as Christian Chevandier has noted, not as significantly as Bloch hoped. In the Oullins workshops in Lyon which adopted Bloch’s approach, the time taken for a locomotive overhaul was reduced from 60 to 35 days, well short of the 21 days demanded by Bloch’s reforms. Bloch’s approach was founded, as Caron has underscored, both by a desire to bring to bear the application of new methods and technologies in the *ateliers*, but also by a determination that aimed at the ‘reconquest of an authority that they saw crumbling more and more’.¹⁰⁶ As such these measures fitted a more general pattern in management attitudes towards the *atelier* workforce as they sought, largely successfully, to bring a formerly recalcitrant workforce to heel.

Communist militants on the railways paid close attention to these developments, but a fully fledged critique of management practices took time to develop. Through the 1920s the *Tribune* carried regular articles protesting production line techniques and piece work in railway workshops. Such critiques echoed long established concerns among the workforce with regard to deskilling and to deteriorating working conditions. The prevalence of these objections in the pre-war and wartime era had encouraged the state to ban ‘travail à la chaîne’ on the Etat network in 1914, and across the whole rail industry in 1918.¹⁰⁷ With the defeat of labour in 1920, however, such

de chemins de fer’, *Revue historique des chemins de fer*, 28–29 (printemps-automne, 2003), 190–206 (201).

¹⁰⁵ Marcel Bloch, ‘Notes sur l’organisation du travail dans les grands ateliers de locomotives de la compagnie du chemin de fer de Paris à Orléans’, *Revue Historique des chemins de fer* (April, 1924), p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ François Caron, ‘A propos de la rationalisation du travail dans les ateliers des compagnies de chemins de fer’, *Revue historique des chemins de fer*, 28–29 (printemps-automne, 2003), 190–206 (206).

¹⁰⁷ François Caron, ‘A propos de la rationalisation du travail dans les ateliers des compagnies de chemins de fer’, *Revue historique des chemins de fer*, 28–29 (printemps-automne, 2003), 190–206.

practices were gradually readopted by railway management. It was not until early 1927 that an analysis of ‘rationalisation’ as a specific concept appeared in the *Tribune*, its publication in scare quotes suggesting that at this stage it was an unfamiliar concept among the cheminots. The writer of this March 1927 piece admitted as much, noting how thus far railway workers’ lives had been largely untouched by rationalisation processes.¹⁰⁸ Further evidence of the lack of familiarity with rationalisation measures may be suggested by the broad consultation exercise launched by the unitaire Federation in January 1928 as they sought to incorporate a detailed critique of rationalisation techniques into their campaigning efforts.¹⁰⁹ By May of 1928, however, the Federation leadership had not only mastered the concept of rationalisation, but also the ‘correct’ Comintern language in which to discuss it. In an article appearing in that month’s *Tribune*, Antoine Demusois, a leading member of the FNCU and at this stage a member of the PCF’s Central Committee, cast rationalisation methods on the railways in terms of the wider developments in global capitalism. Using the terminology of the Third Period, Demusois explained to his cheminot audience how rationalisation was lending an ‘aggravated character’ to class struggles. For the first time, a detailed explanation was provided of the communist line on rationalisation. Drawing a distinction between capitalist and Soviet rationalisation, Demusois emphasised that ‘rationalisation is good in itself’, but that its outcomes differed according to whether they were carried out in the service of the capitalists or the working class.¹¹⁰

This contrasting view of the effects of rationalisation under capitalism on the one hand and in Soviet Russia on the other hand is a familiar theme in this period. As Laura Frader has emphasised, a clear distinction was drawn within CGTU discourses between Soviet and capitalist rationalisations. The latter was vigorously opposed as a technique aimed at increasing the exploitation of workers for the profit of employers and industrialists. Under Soviet leadership, however, the utilisation of scientific labour methods and streamlined workplace organisation were conceptualised as emancipatory practices, introduced as they were under a workers’ republic, for the benefit of the working class.¹¹¹

The FNCU leadership’s adoption first, of the concept of rationalisation and then, second, the subsequent articulation of the significance of capitalist rationalisation through the language of ‘class-against-class’ demonstrates

¹⁰⁸ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/3/1927.

¹⁰⁹ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/1/1928, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 15/5/1928.

¹¹¹ Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model*, p. 141.

the process through which the new Third Period line was transmitted down through the Communist Party and into its affiliate organisations. FNCU leaders who also held senior positions in the party, such as Antoine Demusois, communicated the fundamentals of the new line to the broader cheminot audience. The developments in the FNCU analysis of rationalisation discussed above closely mirrored those within the Comintern itself as the contradictions within the capitalist economy came under intensified scrutiny. The key figure in this regard was Nikolai Bukharin, whose arrival at the head of the Comintern in 1926 set in motion a shift in the analytical underpinnings that had hitherto guided communist strategy. In a series of articles published in the international communist press at the end of 1926, Bukharin elucidated the fundamental tenets of what would become widely known as the 'Third Period', a phrase he in fact coined at the Seventh Plenum of the Russian Communist Party in 1926.¹¹² Bukharin set forth in bold terms his analysis both of the foundations of capitalism's relative stabilisation after 1923 and, significantly, the internal contradictions that were simultaneously contributing to its ultimate demise. Key among these was the ever-expanding application of rationalisation techniques, notably 'new methods of work organization, such as the assembly line and more stringent managerial supervision associated with the American-originated Taylorist system, in an effort to reduce labour costs'.¹¹³ This analysis formed the conceptual framework behind the political line of 'class-against-class', the 'leftward shift' officially announced at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in August 1928, as we have seen. The core tenets of the new orientation were elucidated at some length by Marcel Gitton in an address delivered at the first CGTU congress following the announcement of the 'class-against-class' line in September 1929. Here Gitton, too, emphasised the growing combativity of the workers in the face of increasingly exploitative management practices.¹¹⁴

The FNCU's critique of rationalisation thus developed hand-in-glove with the dissemination of the Third Period critique from Moscow through the apparatus of the Communist International. Yet, the new unitaire focus upon rationalisation also closely tracked the rail industry's own growing enthusiasm for certain elements of the scientific study of work. International influences and local developments thus operated in tandem to shape cheminot reactions to rationalisation in the workplace. As has been mentioned, railway companies were at the forefront of the interwar

¹¹² Kozlov and Weitz, 'Origins', p. 395.

¹¹³ Kozlov and Weitz, 'Origins', p. 395.

¹¹⁴ Marcel Gitton Address, in CGTU, *Ve Congrès National de la CGTU tenu à Paris du 15 au 21 septembre 1929. Compte rendu* (Paris, 1929), pp. 11–27.

vogue for the scientific study of work, and railway engineers formed an enthusiastic audience for ‘modern’ organisational thought. The Compagnie du Nord was one of the early proponents of rationalisation on the railways, the Company Director Paul Javary creating a ‘Commission d’Organisation’ in 1927. The new commission was headed by two young enthusiasts, Robert Le Besnerais and Raoul Dautry.¹¹⁵ Created to apply the benefits of ‘rational organisation’ to the Nord, the commission collected detailed reports of contemporary rationalisation projects from across Europe and North America. The rationalisation movement was a broad, transnational project, and engineers from the Compagnie du Nord were among those who attended the 4th International Congress on the Scientific Organisation of Work held in Paris in 1929. Here they attended seminars and collected documentation on a variety of ventures. These included industry-specific developments, such as the reorganisation of the Polish railways and, closer to home, the introduction of scientific workplace organisation at the Compagnie de l’Est where, the engineer responsible claimed, the new scientific organisation of rail services had doubled the efficiency of the workforce.¹¹⁶ Material collected by company organisation specialists also extended to distinctly utopian projects that entered the realms of science fiction. This included the project to create a ‘rational’ city of the future – a skyscraper with capacity for 5,000 residents, who would be housed in comfort, commuting via aircraft, and cocooned in an atmosphere safe from ‘radiation’ and from gas warfare.¹¹⁷

Though Dautry and Le Besnerais were the principal drivers of the commission, Javary, the Nord’s director, was also committed to the idea, though his enthusiasm was more circumspect than that of his younger subordinates. Javary identified the complexity of the railway industry and its labour-intensive nature as potential barriers to the introduction of rationalised working methods. He was, nonetheless deeply impressed by the commission’s early work and called for solutions to be found to meet the challenges posed by the ‘economic and financial situation of the networks and the country’.¹¹⁸ Among the approaches favoured by Javary was a technique known as psychotechnics. Pioneered by the French industrial psychologist Jean-Marie Lahy, psychotechnics was an early form of modern psychometric testing. For Lahy, industrial psychology was a vehicle through

¹¹⁵ CAMT 202AQ1166, ‘Rapport sur les travaux de la commission d’organisation en 1928’, March 1929.

¹¹⁶ CAMT 202AQ1166, ‘Dossier sur l’organisation du travail’.

¹¹⁷ CAMT 202AQ1166, E. Paulet, *L’Organisation scientifique de la construction et l’aménagement des cités: Projet d’une cité rationalisée* (International Labour Office publication).

¹¹⁸ CAMT 202AQ1166, Javary to Moyrand, 4/1/1928.

which the individual worker could be successfully integrated into the work process. Through rigorous testing, individuals could be matched to roles in the workplace to which they were most physically and temperamentally suited. For Lahy, whose political views inclined towards socialism, psycho-technics was a direct challenge to Taylorist time-and-motion studies which, he argued, failed to take account of the human factor in the workplace.¹¹⁹ It was also expressly a means of reducing social conflict in the workplace, which, Lahy argued, Taylorist practices only served to exacerbate.¹²⁰

It is easy to see why Lahy's approach, with its emphasis upon professional competence and social peace in the workplace, might appeal to railway company managers wedded to familial discourses when discussing the railway workforce. In 1931 Lahy was offered the use of a laboratory at the Compagnie du Nord's headquarters in Paris and began tests upon the Nord's employees. Company reports waxed lyrical on the opportunities that psychotechnic testing offered, noting how such tests could root out accident-prone staff and raise productivity in the workplace.¹²¹ Such was the enthusiasm for psychotechnic testing among railway managers that when other French employers were abandoning such tests during the depression era due to the high costs involved, the railway industry nevertheless chose to persist in their use. The unitaires, unsurprisingly given the broader communist critique of capitalist rationalisation, took a more critical view of the industry's embrace of psychotechnics. Brandishing company regulations and the 1920 railway statute, cheminot militants argued that the tests fell outside of the railway workers' contractual obligations. As such, they announced a general boycott of the procedures.¹²² The FNCU response to psychotechnics also sought to guard against the possibility of the railway companies abusing the tests to either downgrade or transfer union militants in the workplace. The concession gained from the Nord's Director Paul Javary that no cheminot would be downgraded as a result of a poor test result was seized upon by FNCU delegates who insisted the remark be entered into the official minutes of the meeting.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley, 1992), p. 253.

¹²⁰ Jean-Marie Lahy, *Le système Taylor et la physiologie du travail professionnel* (Paris, 1916), p. 14.

¹²¹ CAMT 202AQ217, 'Conference de M. Soulez', 26/11/1930, p. 11; CAMT 48AQ3551, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président du Comité des Grands Réseaux, 4/7/1932, pp. 1–2.

¹²² CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Activités des délégués (1/5), Compte rendu de la délégation auprès du Directeur, 1933 (1^{er} Semestre), pp. 5–6.

¹²³ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire, Activités des délégués (1/5), Compte rendu de la délégation auprès du Directeur, 1933 (1^{er} Semestre), pp. 5–6.

Despite its adoption by the railway industry, psychotechnic testing does not seem to have caused significant disquiet among the workforce. This may have been in large part a result of its relatively narrow focus. The overwhelming majority of tests on the Etat network (81%) were used to select new railcar drivers.¹²⁴ Existing staff were therefore largely untouched by the tests. However, elsewhere on the network, rationalisation measures did provoke unrest among the workforce. As in the past, the focus of this militancy were the company *ateliers*. Here, as we have seen, the introduction of Bedeaux inspectors provoked a brief strike among workers at the La Garenne workshops in the west of Paris.

It was not only the communist-led unitaires who sensed the growing combativity of ordinary railway workers in response to company cost cutting and rationalisation measures. Among the various trade unions on the railways, the Catholic Confédération Français des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC) were also vehement in their denunciation of company practices, and in April 1932 sought to make common cause with the FNCU in defence of cheminot working conditions. Following a unanimous vote at the CFTC's Cheminot Federation annual congress, the union's vice-president wrote to the FNCU to propose the formation of a *Comité d'Entente Nationale* composed of representatives of all cheminot unions. The hour was grave, wrote the CFTC leader, 'you know the projects of the major networks concerning our salaries, our pensions, the eight-hour working day legislation, job losses [...] Before these dangers, all the cheminot unions must form a bloc for the defence of our established rights.'¹²⁵

This attempt to develop common action between Catholic and communist union activists had precedents elsewhere in interwar France. Bruno Béthouart, in his study of the CFTC in the Pas-de-Calais in the interwar period, reminds us of the 'ardeur militante' which could exist within this professional union. Though the union remained 'faithful to the class collaboration advocated by the Encyclicals and the social doctrine of the Church', this did not hold them back from embracing a programme 'centred upon the generalisation of family allowances, the struggle against rationalisation and the reduction in the length of the working day due to the eight-hour day'.¹²⁶ In addition, as Julian Mischi has argued, local circumstances could be crucial in

¹²⁴ Aimée Moutet, *Les logiques de l'entreprise: la rationalisation dans l'industrie française de l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, 1997), p. 334.

¹²⁵ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale 14/4/1932, p. 1.

¹²⁶ Bruno Béthouart, 'La Naissance du Syndicalisme dans le Pas-de-Calais, 1919–1939', *Mouvement Social*, 174 (Jan.–Mar. 1996), 75–95 (84). On the CFTC more broadly see Michel Launay, *La CFTC, origines et développement, 1919–1940* (Paris, 1986).

the development of union strategies and tactics, in Saint-Nazaire throughout the period communist and Catholic trade union federations regularly made common cause against the CGT establishment within the shipyards.¹²⁷ The cheminot CFTC were not proposing anything approaching amalgamation and were realistic about the ideological differences which existed between the different unions: 'too much', they wrote, 'still divides us'.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, the CFTC believed common action to be both possible and necessary.

This 'main tendue' in reverse received short shrift from the communist railway Federation. Less than a week after receiving the CFTC's offer of joint action, the FNCU leadership had replied rejecting it. In language characteristic of the sectarian 'Third Period', the unitaire union argued that they could not participate with any union leadership who based their philosophy on the concept of class collaboration, 'a fraud to which the Executive Commission of the Cheminots Unitaires cannot subscribe'.¹²⁹ Any cooperation between cheminot syndicats, it was made clear, would occur on FNCU terms, in accordance with wider communist tactics of the 'united front from below', the unitaire response ending with an appeal to the CFTC membership to bypass their leaders and take part in local comités d'unité for the struggle against the patronat.¹³⁰

The Politics of Railway Safety

From the earliest days of the railways, safety had been a key preoccupation for those employed to work upon them. In the face of repeated railway accidents an early call for cheminot safety delegates had come in 1870 from locomotive footplatemen.¹³¹ In the twentieth century, railway workers had continued to pursue the demand for their own representatives to carry out accident investigations. At the end of 1920, the still-unified Union des syndicats du réseau du Midi had petitioned the Ministry of Public Works for cheminot safety delegates with powers to impose sanctions on railway companies who were infringing safety standards in the workplace.¹³² The

¹²⁷ Julian Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: sociabilités militantes au PCF*, p. 149.

¹²⁸ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 14/4/1932, p. 1.

¹²⁹ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 14/4/1932, Réponse FNCU to CFTC, p. 2.

¹³⁰ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 14/4/1932, Réponse FNCU to CFTC, p. 3.

¹³¹ G. Thuiller, 'La pétition des mécaniciens et des chauffeurs des chemins de fer en 1871', *Mouvement social*, 66 (Jan.–Mar., 1969), 65–88 (66).

¹³² AN F/22/508, Sécurité Chemins de fer (s.d., fin 1920), pp. 1–2.

issue of safety on the French railway network grew in significance in the late 1920s and 1930s. The eminent historian of the French railways, François Caron, noted the considerable spike in the numbers killed on the French railway network between 1928 and 1936. In Caron's analysis, two particularly horrendous accidents in the early 1930s, those of Saint-Elier (24 October 1933: 36 dead, 68 injured) and Lagny (23 December 1933: 230 dead, 300 injured), in large part account for this sudden spike.¹³³

The disasters at Saint-Elier and Lagny occurred on the Etat and Compagnie de l'Est networks respectively. While precise figures for these networks have not been found, the PLM company records do exist from this period. The picture they paint is stark. Between 1931 and 1934, PLM company accident inspectors investigated 82 separate accidents. Though only one fatality was recorded, 86 cheminots and 290 passengers had been injured.¹³⁴ According to company recording practices (discussed below), injuries were only documented when judged as 'serious'. Accidents were not only confined to passenger services on the railway network, of course. The danger of serious injury was present almost everywhere on the railways, from industrial accidents in workshops and depots to the threat of crushing in shunting yards.

In the late 1920s, with accident rates increasing, Moch launched a stinging offensive against railway managers, notably the cavalier disregard he saw in their attitude to worker safety. Failure to adopt modern coupling technology such as existed in Japan and America, he argued, was costing the lives of around 40 workers every year. Casting the railway industry as a bastion of out-moded approaches and old-fashioned thinking, Moch condemned the 'inertia' of railway managers, and 'the spirit of routine which opposes itself to any idea of modernisation, to change in method'.¹³⁵ Moch's was a particularly strident voice, but criticisms of the railway industry extended across the political spectrum. Even Yves Le Trocquer who as minister for public works under the Bloc National government in 1920 had ensured the railways remained in private hands, voiced unease at the high rate of accidents. Such were the concerns that the parliamentary committee requested permission to conduct their own detailed inquiry into workplace conditions, a request denied by the government.¹³⁶

Unsurprisingly the communist-led cheminot Federation were a vocal participant in such debates. Though detailed coverage of railway accidents had been a regular feature of the union's newspaper since the creation of the

¹³³ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer*, tome 2, pp. 934–937. On the Lagny catastrophe, see below.

¹³⁴ AN F/14/14901, Accident figures PLM 1931–1934.

¹³⁵ AN C//14911, Tome 1, PV 27/2/1929 and 13/3/1929, quote at p. 37.

¹³⁶ AN C//14911, Tome 1, PV 6/2/1929, p. 25.

FNCU in 1921, the critical analysis of railway accidents developed noticeably during the 'class-against-class' period as the Federation began to explicitly link railway accidents to company rationalisation policies and to the wider exploitative nature of capitalist production.

Thus, at Bordeaux in 1928, the local FNCU addressed a placard 'to the travelling public' condemning company practices of running trains with just one member of staff on board. This, argued the union, was a return to the 'follies' of old which, prior to the First World War, was alleged to have caused a substantial number of accidents. 'Passengers', declared the poster, 'despite you paying huge prices for transport, the railway administration, in accord with the Ministry of Public Works, seriously compromise your safety.'¹³⁷ At Dijon in 1932, the local unitaire branch publicly defended a level-crossing attendant who was accused of negligence resulting in a major collision between a train and an automobile. The union condemned the local press for their reporting of the incident, arguing how 'these paid-for hacks bring down upon the shoulders of an overworked level crossing attendant all the responsibility for this catastrophe. And this attendant, a father of five [...] is accused of being a drunk, when he is obliged to work 12 hours a day, despite the existence of thousands of unemployed.'¹³⁸

The significance of railway safety as an issue around which the FNCU could build support was demonstrated by the fallout from the Le Mans catastrophe in August 1928. On that occasion a train had derailed as it entered the station, immediately killing five station workers. A sixth – a passenger on the train – died later in hospital. The driver of the locomotive, who had escaped unharmed from the crash, was arrested at the scene. The charge, as later recorded, was that he had exceeded the speed restrictions on the approach to the station and therefore, 'through non-observation of the regulations, caused the deaths of six people'.¹³⁹ The driver in question, named Uguen, was a member of the FNCU, and his regional union organisation took up his defence. Antoine Rambaud, the anarchist and leading figure within the Cheminot Federation conducted a personal inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the derailment. At his trial at the Le Mans *Chambre Correctionnelle*, Uguen was represented by Maître André Berthon, a PCF deputy and criminal attorney. Drawing upon the report compiled by Rambaud, Berthon challenged the company's version of the crash. With the courtroom full, and ranks of railway workers pressing in at the doors, Berthon laid bare the findings established by the union. The train had been

¹³⁷ AN F/7/13670, Commissaire central Bordeaux à M. le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 24/7/1928.

¹³⁸ AN F/7/13571, Préfet Côte d'Or à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 5/11/1932.

¹³⁹ AN F/7/1367, Préfet de la Sarthe à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 25/1/1929.

an accident waiting to happen, Berthon declared. ‘Passengers crammed in, filling up the corridors... stock defective.’ Moreover, the formation of the train had gone against established practices. According to the FNCU’s analysis, repeated in court by Berthon, the cause of the accident lay with a light wooden goods van placed directly behind the locomotive that had jumped the points on the approach to Le Mans. The effect of this wagon leaving the rails had been to cause the locomotive itself to derail through no fault of those on the footplate. On the steps of the court, Antoine Rambaud announced that the real culpability lay with the company and their ‘criminal negligence’ in maintaining non-metallic wagons in service.

A counter-narrative thus established, the key question of the locomotive’s speed on the approach to the station remained to be resolved. Suspicions of an attempted cover-up soon surfaced as the prosecution was unable to produce a vital piece of evidence, the locomotive’s speed-recorder. This device, known as a *bande flaman*, was fitted to every locomotive. A time-motion graph within the recorder plotted the speed of the engine against its position on the route. Initially suspicious of this emblem of company authority within the locomotive, it was known by footplate men as the ‘spy in the cab’, most engine drivers and firemen warmed to the device as it represented an independent witness to events leading up to the crash. The system, however, was open to abuse. While *cheminots* were not permitted to access the contents of the speed-recorder, company officials, according to inquiries made by the ministry of public works, were regularly in the habit of obtaining this key piece of evidence prior to trial. Minister for Public Works, André Tardieu, had condemned such practices in December 1928, just before the opening of the Uguen trial. Writing to the directors of France’s major rail companies, Tardieu underlined how:

In the course of different inquiries, and notably in recent accidents, it has been observed that the said recorder has been removed after the accident in such conditions that the useful element of the graph curve was entirely covered by fingerprints, rendering a reading almost impossible. It has equally occurred that a recorder was delivered to the *parquet* in an incomplete state, the part missing being precisely the key element in the inquiry.¹⁴⁰

The minister requested that from that point on all speed recorders were to be only removed by either Ministry staff or representatives of the *Parquet*.¹⁴¹ Such procedures had not been followed following the Le Mans derailment.

¹⁴⁰ AN BB/18/2912, 10A34, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président des Grands Réseaux, 1/12/1928, pp. 1–2.

¹⁴¹ AN BB/18/2912, 10A34, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président des Grands Réseaux 1/12/1928, p. 2.

The bande flaman had in fact been taken by a railway official, and had subsequently gone missing. The Ministry for Public Works announced the official's early retirement shortly afterwards.

Dautry's arrival at the head of the Etat altered the circumstances of the prosecution. Proceedings against Uguen were immediately dropped.¹⁴² However, disciplinary measures were brought instead against Antoine Rambaud, the union official who had led the worker's inquiry that had ultimately helped to clear Uguen. In the face of a furious campaign launched by the FNCU, the Etat director backed down, though Rambaud was issued with a 'final warning'.¹⁴³

The Le Mans episode demonstrated the influence the Federation could yield within the railway industry. Robust action had not only cleared the locomotive driver, but also exposed questionable company practices. The determined communist-led campaign also brought under scrutiny the policy of the immediate arrest of footplate men following an accident. In December 1929 the minister for public works wrote to his colleague in the Justice Ministry arguing that, with the technical advances in railway signalling, 'preventative incarceration justifies itself less and less in the case of railway accidents'. Above all its negative effect upon cheminot morale was a key concern for the minister. Preventative arrest he wrote, 'often provokes a real emotion among the cheminot who consider the measure all the more unjust as it is almost never applied to automobile drivers charged with homicide or injury caused through imprudence'.¹⁴⁴

Following the trial, Uguen became a regular guest of honour at FNCU meetings across the region covered by the Etat rail network. In his appearance before the cheminot audiences he served as a symbol both of company victimisation, but also of the Federation's ability to challenge the arbitrary power of employers and the state. Furthermore, beyond the ideological significance, the union demonstrated its practical role in defending their members in the workplace.

Through the course of the campaign to clear Uguen, the evidence supplied by Antoine Rambaud had been key in developing a counter-narrative to the company's version of events. Three years later under pressure from a number of directions, not least the workforce themselves, the government decided to create official worker safety delegates on the railways whose role would be to investigate into the causes of any accidents which occurred.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Michel Avril, *Raoul Dautry: la passion de servir* (Paris, 1993), p. 61.

¹⁴³ See editions of *L'Humanité*, 17/9/1928; 13/9/1928.

¹⁴⁴ AN BB/18/2912, 10A34, Ministre des Travaux Publics à Ministre de la Justice 4/12/1929, pp. 1–2.

¹⁴⁵ For further details on the safety delegates on the railways, see Thomas Beaumont,

In February 1931, ahead of the formal announcement that April, the government ministries of the Interior and Public Works collaborated on a report examining the possibility that worker safety delegates might become a vehicle for communist subversion on the railway network. Drawing upon the recent history of communist participation with railway personnel elections, ministry officials concluded that such manoeuvres were an effort on the part of the FNCU to gather detailed information on the industry's administrative practices. The report noted that the Soviet Embassy in Paris was eager to receive such information. The authors concluded that communist support for safety delegates represented a very real espionage threat to the railway network.¹⁴⁶ Whatever the veracity of such claims, these fears served as the unspoken justification for the decision to severely restrict the scope of the safety delegate role on the railways. The obvious model for the safety delegates was the analogous position in the mining industry. Created in 1890, these worker safety delegates had wide-ranging investigative powers, and the ability to temporarily shut down sections of mines deemed too dangerous for miners to work in. The example of the mines had formed the basis of SFIO and PCF calls for railway safety delegates. From the start, however, the government placed much tighter restrictions on railway safety delegates. Firstly, their autonomy was restricted. They were not permitted to investigate accidents as they saw fit, but rather had to be convened by management. This would only occur once an accident was considered to have resulted in 'serious' injury or death. The definition of what counted as a 'serious' injury was itself laid down in law. No accident could be investigated unless a member of the workforce suffered injuries requiring at least 20 days absence from work. This assessment would be made by company doctors in the period immediately following the accident. As well as possessing no independent investigative powers the delegates would also not be empowered with the right to sanction rail companies. Nor would these delegates be directly elected. Rather, they would be selected by a form of electoral college made up of cheminots elected to company management committees.¹⁴⁷

Faced with these restrictions, the immediate response of the communist cheminot leadership to the 1931 decrees was to completely reject their provisions. The failure of the role to measure up to the demands of the communist federation was an important consideration in the decision, but

'Communists and French Railway Workers: The Parisian Leadership of the Cheminots Unitaires', pp. 77–80.

¹⁴⁶ AN F/7/13671, Rapport, 19/2/1931.

¹⁴⁷ AN F22/435, Délégués à la sécurité, Chemins de Fer, *Journal Officiel*, 22/4/1931, pp. 4486–4487.

underlying it was an ongoing concern with the manner in which railway communists were becoming bound into the structures of railway capitalism.¹⁴⁸ There was considerable discomfort among the union hierarchy about the direction that participation was taking them, raising difficult questions regarding the communists' revolutionary identities. In the heightened sectarian atmosphere of the international communist strategy of 'class-against-class', such concerns were very much in line with official communist policy. Yet, dissatisfaction with the safety delegates was not limited to the communist-led union. The CGT-affiliated federation also elected to boycott the delegations for failing to measure up to their own demands.¹⁴⁹ What is more, the communists precipitously reversed their position just a few months later and announced that they would, in fact, serve as safety delegates in the railway industry. The catalyst for this change of heart was a major rank and file rebellion against the Federation's boycott.¹⁵⁰

Communists, as we have noted in previous chapters, could not and did not exist in pristine isolation from the societies in which they lived, worked, and militated. On the railways, communists were not simply working in opposition to company and state, but were involved in a competitive structure of industrial relations in which strength and influence were measured in terms of membership levels and votes in industry-wide personnel elections. In such circumstances the interests and opinions of the everyday workers simply could not be sacrificed to abstract ideas of revolutionary purity. What is more, of course, communists on the railways were themselves either current or former railway employees. Figures like Lucien Midol and Raymond Tournemaine had grown up working within the railway networks, they knew what was expected of cheminot trade unions. Notably, the union leadership drew attention to the fact that it would be better to try and shape the safety delegations from within than to disavow participation.

Despite the hurdles placed in front of safety delegates and the limited scope of their operation, the FNCU decided that the struggle for real safety delegates would take on much greater sharpness if pursued from the inside.¹⁵¹ FNCU delegates would fulfil their functions as safety delegates while campaigning to ameliorate the perceived abuses in the system as it stood. Despite initial hesitations, the FNCU quickly adapted safety delegates into their wider revolutionary understanding. Communists on the

¹⁴⁸ CGTIHS, FD CGT/CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, circulaires, délégués à la sécurité, projet des délégués à la sécurité (s.d.).

¹⁴⁹ CGTIHS, Union Nord, Fédération Confédérée, 1922–1935, 19/12/1932, pp. 1–2.

¹⁵⁰ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire Délégations (3/5, Sécurité), circulaire 48, 30/8/1932.

¹⁵¹ CGTIHS, Union Nord Unitaire Délégations (3/5, Sécurité), Circulaire No 9, 30/10/32', p. 2.

railways, through the practice and experience of the safety delegate role, conceptualised safety investigations as elements of a wider revolutionary schema. In an annual report of trade union activity, the FNCUs Federal Bureau highlighted in August 1933 that the inquiries of the communist delegates were of a high quality, defending cheminot interests and allowing the FNCU to 'embarrass the rail companies'.¹⁵² The report went on, 'our comrades do not fail to signal the faults which they encounter', including 'negligence on the part of the company to apply security measures'.¹⁵³ The example of Jouveau, a safety delegate from Nîmes, was held up as an example of what could be achieved by communists in this area, the FNCU noting that, 'this delegate is very active in embarrassing the Principal Inspector, as well as the Chief Engineer with his reports which conclude each accident to be the responsibility of the Company'.¹⁵⁴

The FNCU took the role of the safety delegates very seriously. The annual report of August 1933 underlined the importance that the wider cheminot population attached to this delegation.¹⁵⁵ The preparation of delegates' annual reports to the chief engineer was a crucial period for the union. On the occasion of the 1933 reports, submitted in January 1934, the FNCU reminded delegates that 'we must on this occasion realise not simply a demonstration of discipline, but clearly accuse company rationalisation policy of being the cause of numerous accidents'.¹⁵⁶ To this end, a model report was sent out to delegates, which concluded how, 'from observations made in the course of enquiries undertaken, it follows that numerous accidents often originate in the application of the rationalisation policies and new working methods which aggravate working conditions'.¹⁵⁷ Insufficient numbers of employees, forced increases in productivity, the failure to enforce eight-hour-day legislation and the bonus system were all woven into an explanatory analysis of railway accidents.¹⁵⁸ A key element of the analysis

¹⁵² CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p. 6.

¹⁵³ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p. 7.

¹⁵⁵ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p. 1.

¹⁵⁷ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p. 2.

however, was the inadequacy of the safety delegate role as laid down by the 1931 decree.¹⁵⁹

The FNCU maintained a constant critique of the inadequacies of the safety delegates, demanding extended powers of investigation for workers into the circumstances of any accident, as well as powers to act to intervene pre-emptively should working conditions be deemed dangerous. Unsurprisingly such demands received short shrift from management and government. The communists enjoyed greater success, however, in their effort to reform another element of the safety delegation system, namely the definition of what constituted a ‘serious’ accident, the level of accident at which safety delegates were required to investigate. Under the terms of the ministerial decree which created safety delegates on the railways, accidents did not need to be investigated unless they were deemed to be ‘serious’, the definition of serious being any accident that resulted in railway workers requiring at least 20 days medical absence from work. That it was left to company doctors to determine following a brief examination of the worker immediately after the accident raised concerns that the system was open to abuse. Following a complaint by Lucien Midol over a case of a welder whose severe eye injury following a workplace accident was judged by company doctors not to reach the required threshold to qualify as ‘serious’ – the welder subsequently lost his eye and returned to work several months later – the Ministry of Public Works launched an investigation in industry practices. Unearthing widespread under-reporting of accidents by company doctors who repeatedly under-estimated the seriousness of accidents in the workplace, the Ministry overhauled the reporting system. Communist pressure thus led to a significant reform of the safety delegate system.¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

The communists’ ‘turn to the workplace’ occasioned by the Comintern’s ‘class-against-class’ tactic was a seminal moment in the history of the FNCU. Engaging with the everyday concerns of the workforce, communist activists cemented their support among a significant proportion of France’s railway workers. This experience is in marked contrast to the more established picture of these years that emerges from the literature which

¹⁵⁹ CGTIHS, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ AN: F/14/14928, Dossier E84D, Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Chemins de fer au Ministre des Travaux Publics, 3/11/1933; AN: F/14/14928, Dossier E84D, Rapport de L’Inspecteur du Travail, Réclamation contre les mesures qui seraient prises par le réseau de l’Est pour éviter les enquêtes des délégués à la sécurité, 23/11/1933, pp. 5–7.

centres upon the growing isolation of communist militants from their working-class constituency in these years. Central to communist success on the railways during the 'Third Period' was their pragmatism, and the desire to ensure that union activists remained closely attuned to the concerns of the membership. In this fashion railway communists negotiated the application of the Comintern line into the specificities of the railway environment. Such a process was not without tensions, as we have seen the perceived need to placate cheminot opinion on a range of issues from membership of the Conseil supérieur to participation with the railway safety delegate positions challenged the communists' own perception of themselves as revolutionaries. Yet, despite such misgivings, communist participation in the everyday realities of railway industrial relations continued. The experience gained through such 'hostile participation' during the 'class-against-class' period would prove invaluable during the altered political and social environment of the Popular Front.

7

Railway Workers and the Popular Front: From Victory to Defeat, 1934–1939

For a brief period, the events of May–June 1936 transformed the social and political landscape in France. Following almost two decades of employer ascendancy and the relative impotence of the labour movement in France, divided as it was into often warring communist and non-communist factions, a re-united and supremely confident CGT seized back the initiative. A massive surge in rank and file militancy following the election of the first Socialist prime minister in the nation's history led to widespread strikes across French industry and commerce beginning in May 1936 and carrying on through the following months. Alongside the strikes French workers adopted the relatively novel tactic of occupying their workplaces, raising among some the hopes, and fears, of an impending revolution. Beginning among aircraft workers in Le Havre and Toulouse on 11 May the strike wave quickly spread, first through other aircraft factories before broadening out through other industrial sectors. By the end of the month the strikes had reached the Parisian banlieues and had increased dramatically in scale. On 1 June there were ten occupied workplaces in the Paris region. By midday on 2 June this had reached 66, and by that evening 150 workplaces had been occupied.¹ As economic activity began to grind to a halt, the newly elected Popular Front government responded. On 6 June the newly elected Prime Minister Léon Blum announced in parliament that the government would be immediately implementing a programme of social legislation. Employers were thrust onto the back foot. In secret talks the following day with representatives of major industrialists at the prime minister's official residence, the Hôtel Matignon, the Popular Front government exacted significant concessions which fundamentally recast social relations in the workplace. As a result of these concessions, French workers now had the right to join unions, elect shop stewards to represent them in negotiations

¹ Antoine Prost, *Autour du Front Populaire: Aspects du mouvement social au xx^e siècle*, p. 72.

with management and gained pay increases across the board. This sudden, unsolicited extension of trade union power within the workplace was one of the major achievements of the Popular Front government. It was as, Herrick Chapman notes, a 'stunning breakthrough for the CGT'.² The Matignon Accords were announced on Monday 8 June, yet they failed initially to curtail the strikes. Occupations persisted through June, finally petering out in early July, at which point 12,000 workplaces had been affected by the strikes, with 9,000 occupied.³

Further events continued to reconfigure the dynamics of power within workplaces across France. Collective contracts were drawn up between workers and their employers. Negotiated by CGT delegates and subsequently policed by union shop stewards, the collective contracts terminated the previously unassailable authority of employers in the workplace. Shortly afterwards, legislation was passed introducing the 40-hour working week, a totemic achievement which in turn was introduced and operated under the watchful scrutiny of the CGT. Taken as a whole, these achievements fundamentally recast the working environment, reconceptualising it as a legitimate political space. The social explosion of May–June 1936 demonstrated that the *patron* could not expect to be at 'home' in the workplace in the same way in which he was 'at home' with his family. The 'authoritarianism of the *patron*' was replaced by something akin to a social contract... the strike', argues Chapman, 'was a rebellion against employer autocracy a struggle to make the aircraft factory a more secure and sensible place to work.'⁴ And, as Antoine Prost emphasises, what was the case for the aircraft workers studied by Chapman also holds true for French workers more broadly.⁵

The social explosion and subsequent reforms in industrial relations of June 1936 fundamentally transformed the Popular Front.⁶ What had begun as an anti-fascist political alliance was transformed into an experiment in industrial social democracy. The extension of democratic principles into the workplace was largely unprecedented, the result of rank and file action channelled by grassroots activists into an unstoppable force for change. This social democratic experiment held sway, not without tensions, for more than

² Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p. 85.

³ Prost, *Autour du Front Populaire: Aspects du mouvement social au xxie siècle*, p. 75.

⁴ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism*, p. 90.

⁵ Antoine Prost, *Autour du Front Populaire: Aspects du mouvement social au xxie siècle*, pp. 71–103.

⁶ On the key significance of the Matignon negotiations in transforming Popular Front economic policy, see Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy and the Matignon Negotiations', *Historical Journal*, 30, 3 (1987), 663–684.

two years until, in November 1938, it collapsed in the face of a determined employer backlash carried out with the full support and encouragement of a newly energised, economically liberal government led by Edouard Daladier. State coercion was placed at the service of employers to ensure that working-class opposition was broken and employer autocracy restored. The defeat of the 30 November general strike marked the end of the Popular Front democratic experiment.

Throughout the heady days of the early summer of 1936, however, one sector of the French economy remained notably untouched by the strikes that were paralysing industry. Through May and June 1936, the nation's railways continued to function as normal. There were no strikes, and no depots or workshops were occupied. The cheminots continued with their work as normal. This fact was clearly the source of some later embarrassment for post-war historians of cheminot trade unionism. The Federation's official history makes no mention of the cheminot absence, merely skipping over the Popular Front years to focus instead upon the cheminots' heroic wartime experiences. In cheminot autobiographies, including that of the railway workers' leader Lucien Midol, the cheminot absence from the summer strike wave also goes unrecorded. Some historians have regretted the lack of a railway strike. Jean Kergoat argued that a general strike and occupation of the railway network would have transformed the situation, presumably in a more revolutionary direction. Other historians have seen in the cheminot refusal to strike an indifference, even hostility to the Popular Front's social explosion. With the strikers being previously unorganised workers without a history of union activity and without the job security and occupational benefits already enjoyed by the cheminots, they were, argued Gérard Noiriel, viewed with suspicion by those on the railways.⁷

Such a view is unfair on a number of counts. First, as we shall see, France's railway workers were closely engaged in the anti-fascist campaigns of this period, and notably played a significant role in extending aid to the Spanish Republic during the Civil War, focussing in particular on the Spanish railway workers. Communist municipalities, including those dominated by cheminots, adopted many hundreds of Spanish child refugees from the conflict. Significantly, railway workers were at the heart of the Popular Front experiment in industrial social democracy. Central to this chapter is the contention that the period 1936–1938, from the June strikes and Matignon Accords to the abortive general strike of November 1938, was at base an attempt to fundamentally transform social relations in France. Beginning as an anti-fascist alliance, the Popular Front government was transformed by the strike wave of May–June into

⁷ Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines républicaines de Vichy* (Paris, 1999), p. 88.

an experiment in industrial social democracy.⁸ Understood in this light, the absence of the cheminots from the events of May–June 1936 becomes less of a puzzle. As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, railway workers and, crucially, their communist trade union representatives had from the latter part of the 1920s onwards come to conceptualise their role within railway capitalism as predicated upon the extension of worker power and trade-union legitimacy within the industry. This was viewed as constituting a direct challenge to the unqualified authority of rail company owners and managers. Having established an independent space for union action within the industry prior to June 1936, cheminots could therefore initially afford to take a back seat.

Yet, in November 1938, in stark contrast to June 1936, French railway workers placed themselves at the forefront of attempts to defend the totemic social legislation which the strike waves of the summer of 1936 and the Matignon Accords had done so much to inaugurate. In November 1938 the infamous *revanche* of the French *patronat*, with the support of the French state, took place against the Popular Front social legislation. In a series of decrees in early November, the newly appointed Finance Minister Paul Reynaud announced the abrogation of the totemic 40-hour week legislation. The response of the labour movement was an eruption in spontaneous wildcat strike actions and, eventually, the calling of a national general strike for 30 November 1938. In his classic study of this last stand of the Popular Front, Guy Bourdé emphasised the centrality of the cheminots to the unfolding of events. Without the unambiguous support of railway workers, 70% of whom were organised within the CGT, the strike would have been unlikely to have taken place at all.⁹

The general strike of 30 November was, of course, a complete failure – in the face of individual requisition orders, the threat of imprisonment, and a military occupation of key railway centres, cheminots were compelled to report for duty on the railways. The massive state response in support of employers, together with disastrous timing on the part of the CGT leadership in calling a general strike just as the wave of opposition to the decree laws appeared to be falling off, equally account for the failure of the opposition movement. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, right up to the eve of 30 November and even on the day of the strike itself, significant numbers of the cheminot rank-and-file as well as the union hierarchy were

⁸ In this it can be seen in a broader context of European movements in the interwar period, see Stefan Berger, *Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany* (Harlow, 2000), p. 125.

⁹ Guy Bourdé, *La défaite du front populaire* (Paris, 1977), p. 153; membership figures from Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, p. 150.

fully committed to industrial action in defence of the Popular Front. For Bourdé, however, the apparent reversal of position represented by this new-found militancy did not in fact amount to a major reorientation in the outlook of the railway workers. Rather it was material interests that were placed at the fore. Cheminots, argued Bourdé, played a leading role in calling for a general strike because, of all workers, they were the most affected materially by the Reynaud decrees of November 1938.

These were not, however, the terms in which cheminots understood their political engagement. In response to the November 1938 decree laws the cheminot leadership made explicit the material impact upon their members, to be sure. But in their public pronouncements and in correspondence with railway managers and the French state, the core of their opposition focussed upon the principal of shared power and collective responsibility between management and workforce. It was this principal that cheminots felt had been at the heart of the Popular Front experiment, an experiment in which the cheminots could be seen to play a leading role between 1936 and 1938.

While not neglecting the material gains of the Popular Front years, this chapter stresses rather the symbolic dimension of Popular Front policy. By emphasising the centrality of demands for expanded power and dignity for men and women in the workplace, it demonstrates that, far from being marginal participants, the example of the cheminots takes us to the heart of the meaning of these years for a great many workers. For the Cheminot Federation, Popular Front legislation was symbolic of a fundamentally transformed social republic in which workers played a significant role in the public sphere. It was in defence of this conception of national economic organisation that the railway workers attempted to act in November 1938.

Towards the Popular Front

Between 1928 and 1933, Communist parties around the world had followed the Comintern strategy of 'class-against-class'. While the line softened somewhat from 1931, at the beginning of 1934 the central tenets of 'Third Period' tactics remained in place. International events through 1933 and 1934, however, had a transformative impact upon the Comintern approach. As Jonathan Haslam emphasised in an important article, Hitler's election as Chancellor of Germany in early 1933 and the repression unleashed against German communists and trade unionists threw Comintern strategy into 'disarray'.¹⁰ Events in France contributed to the questions being asked of the

¹⁰ Jonathan Haslam, 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934–1935', *Historical Journal*, 22, 3 (1979), p. 676, p. 690.

continued applicability of ‘class-against-class’ in the light of international circumstances. On 6 February 1934 a demonstration of the right-wing leagues turned violent with a sizeable group marching upon the National Assembly building. These actions caused Daladier to resign as prime minister to be replaced by the right-leaning Gaston Doumergue.¹¹ One week later, on 12 February, counter-demonstrations were organised by the CGT and the CGTU against the leagues. Though the leaders of the two confederations had organised two distinctive demonstrations, the efforts of CGTU and CGT officials to keep their respective rank-and-file members apart failed. The two marches merged together in a united display of left-wing anti-fascism. The CGT also called a general strike for 12 February which yielded powerful results. According to Michael Seidman, 45 percent of French workers participated in the strikes, their numbers swelling the demonstrations to 300,000 in Paris, ‘anti-fascism easily outmatched at least sixfold the numbers of its enemies in the streets’.¹²

The new strongly felt urgency of anti-fascist organisation together with a desire, in Xavier Vigna’s estimation, ‘to exit from the economic crisis by reinforcing the social dimension of the republican regime’, brought grassroots CGT and CGTU members together, bypassing the continuing mutual hostility of their union leaders.¹³ The clamour for unity among trade unionists was matched within the political parties of the left. At their May 1934 conference, one-third of SFIO deputies voted in favour of united anti-fascist action with the PCF, a point used in Moscow by the new head of the Comintern Georg Dimitrov to press upon Stalin the desirability of a decisive shift in the Comintern line away from ‘class-against-class’ to an anti-fascist Popular Front alliance.¹⁴ For his part, Maurice Thorez soon became a committed devotee of the new line. By the time of his arrival in Moscow on 30 April 1934 he was considered by Dimitrov’s then personal secretary Alfred Kurella to be a convinced supporter of a new Popular Front Comintern line, including communist participation in a Popular Front government.¹⁵ With demands from within the Comintern eliding with shifting Soviet foreign policy objectives, notably the desire for a renewed alliance with France, Stalin was reluctantly convinced of the merits of this

¹¹ On the 6 February riots, see Chris Millington, ‘February 6, 1934: The Veterans’ Riot’, *French Historical Studies*, 33, 4 (Fall, 2010), 545–572 (545); Jackson, *The Dark Years*, p. 72.

¹² Michael Seidman, *Transatlantic Antifascism: From the Spanish Civil War to the End of World War II* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 55.

¹³ Xavier Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France au xxie siècle* (Paris, 2012), p. 121.

¹⁴ Jonathan Haslam, ‘The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934–1935’, *Historical Journal*, 22, 3 (1979), pp. 679–681.

¹⁵ Romain Ducoulombier, ‘Henri Barbusse, Stalin and the Making of the Comintern’s International Strategy in the 1930s’, *French History*, 30, 4 (2016), pp. 544–545.

new position. The Popular Front strategy was officially announced at the Comintern's international congress held in Moscow in July 1935.¹⁶ The left in France moved far in advance of Comintern policy, however. An alliance between SFIO and PCF was concluded in July 1934 and a broad coalition of left and centre, including the Radical Party, was finally inaugurated by Maurice Thorez at a speech in Nantes on 24 October 1934.¹⁷ The political alliance forged would, in May 1936, go on to convincingly win national elections resulting in SFIO leader Léon Blum becoming France's first Socialist prime minister.

While the general strike and demonstrations of 12 February 1934 proved enormously successful, mobilising hundreds of thousands of French workers, results among the cheminots were patchy. Both CGT and CGTU leaders nationally called upon railway workers to respond en masse to the fascist threat by participating in the 24-hour stoppage. The outcome, however, was disappointing. For the very most part, cheminots reported for work as usual. As the prefect of Indre-et-Loire was informed by local police reports on the day, the railways in the department maintained a normal service.¹⁸ The same was true across France. On the Eastern railway company, a total of 1,734 workers were disciplined for having participated in the strike, though the vast majority of these (1,254) had only ceased work for between 15 minutes and half an hour.¹⁹ On the PO (the company which employed large numbers of cheminots in Tours), 706 were similarly disciplined.²⁰ These figures have led leading historian of railway trade unionism, Christian Chevandier, to conclude that 12 February 1934, at best, only saw the token involvement on the part of the cheminots, though measured against the previous 14 years of inactivity even such small numbers of participants could be seen as marking a significant development.²¹ The picture from local archives allows us to slightly nuance Chevandier's overall picture, however,

¹⁶ On Soviet foreign policy objectives and their role in defining Popular Front policy, see Annie Kriegel and Stéphane Courtois, *Eugen Fried: le grand secret du PCF*, p. 232. On Stalin's reluctance, see Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London, 2004), p. 201. On these debates broadly see Eric D. Weitz, *Popular Communism: Political Strategies and Social Histories in the Formation of the German, French, and Italian Communist Parties, 1919–1948* (Ithaca, 1992), p. 55 n. 54.

¹⁷ Jacques Fauvet, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français, 1920–1976* (Paris, 1977), pp. 121–137, pp. 142–143.

¹⁸ AD I-L, 1M237, Commissaire spécial à Prefet Indre-et-Loire, 12/2/1934.

¹⁹ SNCF, 25LM203, Manifestations du 12 février 1934: statistique de punition, Directeur de la compagnie de l'Est à M. le Président des Directeurs, 14/2/1934.

²⁰ SNCF, 25LM203, Manifestations du 12 février 1934, statistique de punition, Réseau PO-Midi, Incidents du 12/2/1934.

²¹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, p. 144.

and to suggest that the cheminots were less passive on 12 February than has commonly been thought. Certainly, participation in strike activity was low, but railway workers were, nonetheless, in certain areas, an imposing presence in the day's demonstrations.

Like many across France, railway workers in Tours did not wait for the official national strike day to make known their opposition to the perceived fascist coup. On the evening of 9 February, as workers filed out of the railway offices and workshops, a large joint demonstration between unitaires and confédérés was organised. The cortege paraded through the streets of the town, carrying aloft placards calling for the 'dissolution of the fascist leagues' and 'down with fascism'. The march passed off relatively peacefully, although there were tense moments, notably when the marchers passed in front of the local headquarters of Action Française. At another point a bystander who shouted insults at the marchers was forced to beat a quick retreat, taking refuge in a local hotel whose 'shutters were hastily closed' as he ran inside to escape the crowd. When the march reached its end point, the assembled railway workers were addressed by communist and non-communist speakers who, it was reported, congratulated the workers for having demonstrated to the fascists and the 'camelots du roi' that the streets of Tours 'belong to the workers'.²²

On 12 February itself, the general strike entirely shut down the mail, and only a skeleton staff of operators maintained an emergency telephone service. Roughly a thousand workers gathered in the early evening at the local Bureaux des syndicats to hear speeches, and several present were disappointed by the absence of the railwaymen from their number. Forming a demonstration of roughly 400, the marchers then set off for Place de la Gare, 'pour retrouver les cheminots'. Arriving at around 5pm, when many cheminots were clocking off for the day, the cortege made a tour of the square, 'their ranks swelling by a large proportion'. By the time the marchers set off again their numbers had grown to 3,000.²³

Such instances were not enough to satisfy the Cheminot leaders, however. CGT leader Jean Jarrigion himself chided railwaymen for their lack of engagement in the anti-fascist demonstrations that had taken place across France. Writing a few months later in the *Cahiers du bolchévisme*, the Communist Party's theoretical journal, Lucien Midol struck a more positive tone. Midol emphasised the historic commitment of certain groups of

²² AD I-L, 1M 237, Commissaire central de Police à Prefet Indre-et-Loire, 'Manifestation des syndicats unitaire et confédéré, PO', 9/2/1934, pp. 1–2.

²³ AD I-L, 1M 297, Commissariat de Police à Prefet Indre-et-Loire, 12/2/1934. The 3,000 figure is given in AD I-L, 1M 297, Commissariat de Police à Prefet Indre-et-Loire, 13/2/1934, p. 1.

cheminots to the anti-fascist cause. In particular, he reminded readers of the actions taken by railwaymen in the south-east of France against Mussolini's fascists in 1926. Railwaymen, he claimed, continued to work in this international spirit, joining campaigns in support of Dimitrov and Thaelmann. Midol also suggested that workers in border towns were using their positions to smuggle political literature into and out of France.²⁴ Writing in the same edition of the *Cahiers*, CGTU General Secretary Benoît Frachon was, however, less positive. He reflected the frustrations of many in the Communist Party when he wrote that there were those 'who hold over the totality of the railway workers, "who do not want to fight", who are "passive", responsibility for the weakness of the movement'. Frachon called for ever greater efforts by communist militants among railway workers.²⁵

While February 1934 may have yielded disappointing results, the following months nevertheless witnessed a rapid politicisation of the cheminot rank-and-file. At the root of the marked growth in cheminot militancy through 1934 and 1935 was the anger generated by a series of government decree laws targeting cheminot pay and pensions, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Railway workers of all political persuasions united in their opposition to the government cost-cutting measures. Joint meetings were held between CGT and CGTU local sections to protest the decree laws. The Ministry of the Interior recognised increasing levels of militancy among cheminots. This was a cause for concern, especially as the more moderate CGT was judged to be increasingly 'outflanked by the base'. The FNCC was doing much better in profiting from the unity movement, a fact which according to the Ministry was pushing the FNCC into action, as the CGT union realised that unity was clearly going to happen 'with them or despite them on the entirety of the French railways'.²⁶ Across France, just as at Paris-Nord, the impact of increasingly hostile management practices was inclining FNCC militants towards outspoken attacks upon government and railway companies. The secretary of the confédéré branch at Troyes, again at a unity meeting, attacked the private interests profiting from railway capitalism at the same moment that deficits were mounting and increasing sacrifices were being demanded of the cheminots.²⁷ Opposition to the decree laws

²⁴ Lucien Midol, 'Les cheminots et la lutte contre le fascisme et la guerre', *Cahiers du bolchévisme*, 1934, p. 663.

²⁵ Benoît Frachon, 'Après le congrès de la Fédération Unitaire des cheminots', *Cahiers du bolchévisme*, 1934, p. 648.

²⁶ AN 19940500/0198, Ministre de l'Intérieur à Ministre des Travaux Publics, AS Unité Syndical chez les cheminots, 22/11/1934, p. 1.

²⁷ AN, 19940500/0198, Commissaire Spéciale de Troyes, Rapport, 30/11/1934, p. 1.

continued to unite cheminot positions through 1935. In September of that year, 700 railway workers attended a meeting of the Interfederal Committee to protest the decrees and to call for unity among railway workers.²⁸ This was just one of a number of such meetings held by cheminots across France at this time. Significantly, opposition to the decree laws did not simply serve to unite previously opposed unitaires and confédérés on the railways. Falling as they did upon a wide range of public sector workers, the decree laws also fostered greater contacts between the cheminots and state sector employees.²⁹

Through 1934 and 1935, the new atmosphere of unity and solidarity in the face of the threat of fascism merged with growing anger and rank and file militancy aimed at railway company management and the right-wing governments of Pierre Laval and Gaston Doumergue, who were considered to be using ‘fascist’ and ‘dictatorial’ methods to cut rail company costs on the backs of railway workers. These concerns combined into an unstoppable force in favour of trade union unity on the railways, pushed by rank-and-file workers. In December 1934 cheminots on the Midi formed a unified Federation. Through the course of 1935 other regional Federations followed suit until in December of that year a national congress saw the fusion of the CGT and CGTU Federations. Pierre Semard and Jean Jarrigion emerged as leaders of the reunited Fédération des Cheminots (FdC). On the regional level this joint leadership was echoed, with former unitaires and confédérés sharing the leaderships. Former unitaires maintained a slight majority within the re-formed national Federation, making up around 54% of the membership.³⁰

1936

Few predicted the scale of the Popular Front’s electoral success at the national elections in May. The anti-fascist coalition gained a significant parliamentary majority over the combined forces of the political right. Furthermore, the French electorate turned to the parties of the Left in record numbers. For the first time the Socialist party emerged from a general election with more seats than the centrist Radicals. The most significant gains were made by the Communist Party, whose parliamentary representation expanded massively from ten seats at the 1932 elections to 72 seats and

²⁸ AD I-L, 1M238, Réunions Publiques 1935, commissaire de police du 1 arrondissement à M. le Commissaire Central, Tours, 1/9/1935.

²⁹ AD I-L, 1M238, Réunions Publiques 1935, 20/7/1935.

³⁰ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2007*, p. 141.

more than 1.5 million votes – a higher percentage of the total vote than that obtained by Edouard Daladier's Radical party.³¹ Among the PCF's deputies were leading figures in the cheminot trade union. Lucien Midol, was one such individual, retaining his seat in Seine-et-Oise, and Antoine Demusois who was also elected as a member of parliament for the same department. Pierre Semard, now joint leader of the re-united Fédération des Cheminots was elected as a Conseiller Général in the Seine department.

The situation facing the new government was hardly propitious. The success of a left-wing political alliance stimulated a panicked flight of capital out of France. The stock market also tumbled, and the value of the franc fell. International auguries were equally bleak.³² In an attempt to settle French and international opinion, the new Prime Minister Léon Blum underlined that he would stick rigidly to constitutional propriety and would attend the requisite one-month period before officially taking office. Amid the tensions generated by the hopes of radical change mixed with fears that the government would be forced to renege on its promises, strikes broke out in the French aircraft industry. From here the wave of strikes spread out rapidly. Shorter and Tilly calculate that for the year 1936, 2.5 million workers participated in 17,000 strikes with three-quarters of this number occurring in June of that year.³³ In turn, over three-quarters of these June strikes consisted of factory occupations.³⁴

Such events caused considerable alarm in bourgeois circles across France, all the more so as the largely peaceful nature of the occupations seemed to run counter to elite expectations of worker behaviour in the absence of authority. Though Fridenson's study of automobile workers has argued that 'sabotage and destruction of property were actually perpetrated during and after the sit-down strikes',³⁵ Blum in his Riom defence noted that the general sense of peaceful occupations distinctly unnerved French authorities, the concern being that this was the prelude to an appropriation of these factories by the workers.³⁶

As previously discussed, traffic on the national railway network continued unaffected by strike action. Nevertheless, French state officials and the

³¹ Results from <https://www.france-politique.fr/elections-legislatives-1936.htm>.

³² Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, pp. 73–74.

³³ Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France 1830–1968* (London, 1974), p. 127.

³⁴ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, p. 85.

³⁵ Patrick Fridenson, 'Automobile Workers and their Work in France, 1914–1983', in Stephen L. Kaplan and Cynthia J. Keopp (eds), *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization and Practice* (Ithaca, NY., 1986), 514–547 (528).

³⁶ Quoted in Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, p. 86.

incoming Popular Front ministers kept a watchful eye on the railways, fearful of how a nationwide railway strike might transform the situation. Railway workers were far from uninterested bystanders during the events of May and June 1936. As in other sectors of the economy, membership of the CGT on the railways, already at high levels relative to other professional groups, expanded significantly. By the summer of 1936, 70% of all railway employees were members of the FdC. Higher-grade white-collar workers from the Fédération des Cadres also put aside their long-held differences with the communists and joined the CGT.

May Day saw enormous cheminot demonstrations in the Paris region and in the Nord. The 2 May issue of *Le Peuple*, the CGT newspaper, carried a photo of a large-scale demonstration outside the PLM workshops at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, from where the 1920 General Strike had spread across the French rail network. On 3 May, the paper returned to the theme of the renewed sense of militancy detectable among railway workers, noting that May Day demonstrations among railway workers had been 'of a size comparable to the demonstrations prior to 1920'. The La Chapelle workshops in Paris had experienced demonstrations unseen since the general strike and 1,200 cheminots had attended a mass meeting that evening.³⁷ *Le Peuple* was able to further underline the importance of the day's events for the labour movement, this time linking the actions with the general strike of 1910 through its coverage of cheminot demonstrations at Tergnier, site of the outbreak of that action. 2,500 cheminots had joined demonstrations held at the Compagnie du Nord's cité cheminote, an important symbolic action taken on what was, to all intents and purposes, company property. A further 3,000 cheminots had demonstrated at Clichy, Paris.³⁸

Participation in May Day demonstrations was not the sum total of cheminot involvement in the 'social explosion' of 1936. In July, in the Nord département, a meeting at Hellemmes was attended by some 1,200 cheminots. At Lomme, the Lille-Délivrance union branch was, by early July, on its third mass demonstration, the first two having occurred on 5 and 11 June. During early marches the cheminot procession was reported to have stopped outside occupied factories while cheminots chanted their support and sang the Internationale. On 9 July, 200 cheminots processed behind the red flag from the company cité towards the centre of the commune of Lomme, on the outskirts of Lille. The cortege stopped briefly outside the home of the sous-chef de gare, where insults were chanted before proceeding to the home of a local notable who had hung a tricolour from his window. Cries of 'down with fascists' were hurled for several minutes before the

³⁷ *Le Peuple*, 1/5/1936 and 3/5/1936.

³⁸ *Le Peuple*, 5/5/1936.

crowd moved onto the centre of town where 700 cheminots gathered to listen to speeches from local communists.³⁹ Anti-fascism and the defence of democracy were central to Popular Front political culture, as they were, too, for the cheminots. Cheminots were equally involved in taking up the cause of Spanish Republicanism and the defence of Spanish democracy against Franco's forces, as we shall see.

It is also the case that strikes involving workers in industries associated with the railways did occur across France in June 1936, though largely in the Paris region and among those workers not directly employed by the major railway companies. Employees of the Wagon-Lits company had struck, as had cleaning staff at the Gare du Nord.⁴⁰ At Nancy, 215 staff at a private company contracted by the Compagnie de l'Est had ceased work, demanding a 40-hour week and fifteen days' holiday.⁴¹

The key point about such actions, and these were not isolated, is that they affected workers in private companies working under contract with the large rail companies and who were not covered by the terms of the 1921 railway statute. The CGT Cheminot Federation took careful notice of such strikes, union leaders moving to ensure that the strike actions moved in directions approved of by the CGT – that is towards collective contracts with employers under the aegis of the Fédération des Cheminots.⁴² In seeking to resolve strikes among non-statutory railway employees, one of the major concerns of the Federation leadership was the potential role individual cheminots might be compelled to play as strike breakers by their employers. Just such a situation occurred at Noisy-le-Sec in June 1936, where a number of cheminots had been ordered to carry out the work of striking package handlers. Both of the joint leaders of the national Cheminot Federation, Pierre Sémard and Jean Jarrigion, condemned such practices while recognising the real pressures which rail companies could bring to bear on workers in such situations. In order to protect railway staff from being placed in such circumstances, the Federation entered into direct discussions with the railway companies on the issue, Jarrigion announcing to the Federal Bureau in early June 1936 that such practices would cease.⁴³

³⁹ AD N, M595/92, Commissaire spécial de Lille à M. le Préfet du Nord 11/7/1936 AS Réunion d'information du syndicat des cheminots d'Hellemmes. See also in same: Commissaire de Police de Lomme à M. le préfet du Nord 9/7/1936, AS syndicat unique Lille – Délivrance pp. 1–2.

⁴⁰ CGTIHS, Fédération réunifiée 1935–1939, carton 1, Bureau Fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936, pp. 1–2.

⁴¹ AN F/14/14928, E150D, Nancy, 17/6/1936.

⁴² See the discussions in CGTIHS, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936.

⁴³ CGTIHS, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936.

As the historian Jacques Kergoat has emphasised, a railway strike in June 1936 would have had ‘major consequences’. Perhaps in such circumstances, to paraphrase Marcel Pivert, all really would have been possible.⁴⁴ This was not a point lost on those responsible for governing France in the summer of 1936. As strikes spread through Paris and out across France reaching Lyon metalworkers on 3 June,⁴⁵ the Elysée Palace became increasingly nervous. In his history of the Popular Front, Jules Moch recorded that President Lebrun was extremely fearful that the strikes and occupations might spread to the French railways, which had as yet been unaffected by the social explosion.⁴⁶ There was indeed some cause for concern; on 5 June a serious threat from Parisian transport workers to strike forced the national CGT deputy leader René Belin to address an emergency meeting of these workers. Encountering a strong sentiment which argued for transport workers to play their role in the historic events, Belin was, nonetheless, able to calm the situation and keep the capital’s arteries open.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, fears that Paris might run short of bread in the event of an impending transport strike moved Jules Moch together with a CGT official to undertake a late-night dash into the nearby countryside to secure supplies of fuel for Parisian bakers from an occupied factory. For his part Belin, however, describes Moch’s account of this threat as ‘melodramatic’.⁴⁸

Directly moved by fears of an impending railway strike, President Lebrun summoned Blum to a meeting to discuss the crisis on 4 June. Up to this point, Blum had been assiduous in keeping rigidly to constitutional propriety which mandated that the new government should be invested on 6 June. As a concession to Lebrun’s request that the Socialists take command of the situation, Blum agreed that the ministers of the interior and of labour would take their posts that evening. Jules Moch, Blum’s chief of staff, took up his role at the Hôtel Matignon on 5 June, with the rest of the government being invested, as planned, the next day. The following day, 7 June, the famous Matignon Accords were signed between representatives of the CGT and the employer organisations, aiming to give satisfaction to worker grievances, and thereby end the strikes. Many workers, despite their participation in Popular Front action, were excluded from the agreements,

⁴⁴ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire* (Paris, 1986), p. 151.

⁴⁵ Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France, 1900–1930* (New York, 2010), p. 233.

⁴⁶ Jules Moch, *Le Front Populaire: Grande Espérance* (Paris, 1971) p. 138.

⁴⁷ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire*, pp. 115–116; René Belin, *Mémoires du Secrétariat de la CGT au Gouvernement de Vichy, 1931–1942* (Paris, 1978), p. 97.

⁴⁸ René Belin, *Mémoires du Secrétariat de la CGT au Gouvernement de Vichy*, p. 97; Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire*, p. 115.

notably those in banking, insurance and department stores, as well as agricultural workers.⁴⁹

In the immediate wake of the negotiation of the Matignon Accords, the government moved quickly to head off any potential railway strike. Six leading members of the Cheminot Federation, including Pierre Semard, were invited to the home of Léon Blum to discuss the crisis with key members of the Popular Front government. Present at the meeting, in addition to Prime Minister Blum himself were Finance Minister, Vincent Auriol; Minister for the Economy, Charles Spinasse; Minister for Public Works, Bedouce and Jules Moch, the SFIO's transport expert and Blum's chief of staff. The sole item on the agenda was what it would take to keep the railway workers at their posts. The cheminot delegation arrived with a clear set of demands, including three weeks' paid holiday, as compared to the two weeks' granted to other French workers. Despite some reservations from Spinasse on this point the government readily acceded to the Cheminot demands.⁵⁰ It was a period in which in spite of not going on strike, as Pierre Semard noted, the railway workers 'obtained everything we demanded'.⁵¹

The timing of the agreement was propitious indeed. Through early June, protest movements had been developing among groups of railway workers, acting on their own initiative and not sanctioned by the Federation, seeking to launch a railway strike. On June 5 the Federation leadership had felt the need to emphasise in print the need for cheminots to remain calm and confident in the national Federation. Under the title 'Confidence and Discipline', the Federation leadership wrote how

The *Fédération des Cheminots* is informed that several protest movements have been launched, or threaten to be launched on certain networks... While acknowledging cheminots' legitimate impatience, it cannot be permitted that comrades, without mandates from their Federation or union, appear at centres where they are not employed and exert pressure with the aim of creating there a movement of agitation.⁵²

Such were the concerns of an impending cheminot strike that on 8 June the Federal Bureau was informed by telegram from the national CGT leadership that on no account should the strike wave be extended into the public sector.⁵³ On 14 June, the detailed article 'Ce qu'obtiennent les travailleurs du rail' was prominently published in *Le Peuple*. Details of the outcomes of

⁴⁹ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire*, p. 118; On agricultural workers, see John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front*.

⁵⁰ Pierre Semard, *Histoire de la fédération des cheminots*, pp. 74–75.

⁵¹ Pierre Semard, *Histoire de la fédération des cheminots*, p. 75.

⁵² *Le Peuple*, 5/6/1936.

⁵³ CGTIHS, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936, p. 2.

discussions between the union, management and the state were discussed, all successfully obtained, the FdC underlined, ‘thanks to the strength of our Federation... thanks to its cohesion and the discipline of all its members.’⁵⁴ Semard had made the same point at an enormous meeting of cheminots in Paris two days previously on 12 June.⁵⁵

Tensions remained high, however. With strike movements continuing throughout France through June and into July, the railways continued to be carefully monitored. Uncertainty surrounding the intentions of the cheminots led to a good deal of nervousness on all sides. In the fraught atmosphere of the summer of 1936, rumour and the misinterpretation of events occasionally threatened to upset the efforts of the CGT and government to maintain calm on the railways.

Just such an event occurred on 15 June. At 5.30pm the secretary of the Etat Region of the FdC received a phone call from Raoul Dautry, Director of the Etat network. Arriving at Dautry’s offices at Gare Saint-Lazare, the Federation representatives were stunned to hear news that railwaymen at the massive depot at Sotteville on the outskirts of Rouen had voted to strike the following morning. Concern mounted as further news arrived that a strike at Rennes had only narrowly been averted after an emergency meeting held by the local union official. Reports arriving on Dautry’s desk that evening appeared to point to a major rank-and-file movement developing on the Etat, and the Federation leadership knew nothing about it. A phone call to Rennes helped calm the mood in Dautry’s office. The local union official confirmed the mass meeting but insisted it had been routine, called to keep local workers abreast of negotiations between union and management. While all seemed calm in Rennes, the situation in Rouen remained unclear. No contact could be made with the local Federation organisation and so Robert Lutgen, a member of the regional bureau, was dispatched that evening to Normandy to speak in person to the local union secretary. It was not until 11.30pm that Lutgen was able to locate his man. The local union secretary was astonished to see the Federation official and even more so to hear news of the impending strike among his workers. He completely refuted the claim.

The following morning Lutgen took the train into Rouen, listening carefully to the conversations of workers heading to their jobs for any sign of a threatened railway strike. Hearing nothing to alarm him he next headed to the Sotteville depot. Finding all the workers at their post, Lutgen met with the Depot manager and the regional railway inspectors. It quickly became

⁵⁴ *Le Peuple*, 14/6/1936.

⁵⁵ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2007*, p. 144.

apparent that the strike had never been a reality. A local railway inspector had misinterpreted a meeting of railway workers at Sotteville and, upon hearing their demand for a meeting with managers had panicked and rushed off a letter to Dautry informing him of an impending railway strike. Lutgen, according to the account he later prepared for the ministers of the interior and public works, proceeded to give the company inspector a dressing down. He strongly reproached the man for having acted so precipitously and for having not raised the matter with local union delegates. Addressing the government ministers in his report of the incident, Lutgen voiced concern about the spread of such ‘rumours’ and ‘false news’. He worried that in the heightened atmosphere, such gossip could be used by those who sought to sabotage the Popular Front. Rumours, he argued, could ‘create a state of nervousness’ which might degenerate into conflict. Such conditions, he cautioned, would be exploited by those seeking to undermine the Popular Front.⁵⁶

The episode demonstrates just how tense the atmosphere was on all sides during the summer of 1936. It also demonstrates just how worried CGT leaders were about the fragility of the Popular Front social legislation, and reveals how they feared those opposed to the Popular Front might seek to engineer its downfall. A further window into such thoughts is provided by Raymond Tournemaine, one of the most senior figures within the Cheminot Federation. In a speech to Parisian railway workers in March 1937, Tournemaine reflected on the cheminot leadership’s fears of a strike in June 1936: ‘If at this time a strike had been called, the Popular Front would have been broken, and the workers treated like those in neighbouring countries.’⁵⁷ Facing an upswing of cheminot discontent in early 1937 following the ‘pause’ in social legislation by the Blum government and anger as rising inflation ate into wage rises, another leading CGT Cheminot figure at the same meeting raised the spectre of the failed rail strikes of the past, ‘we must not return to the years of 1910 and 1920’, he underlined.⁵⁸

The false news of a railway strike on the Etat network also demonstrates how central the Federation had become to social relations on the railways in June 1936, and how much railway directors like Raoul Dautry now relied upon the CGT to resolve personnel issues. Contacts between union delegates and management had long been a feature of the railway industry, as we have seen. However, after Matignon the balance of power in these relationships shifted significantly in favour of the CGT. This was not just a feature of union–management relations at the national level. It was also a

⁵⁶ AN 20010216, Dossier 1588, Report 16/6/1936, pp. 1–3.

⁵⁷ AN 20010216/5, dossier 76, 12/3/1937.

⁵⁸ AN 20010216/5, dossier 76, 12/3/1937.

key feature of the relationship between workers and managers at the local level. The confrontational relationship of previous years gave way to a more collaborative partnership, though not one that was wholly without tensions. At the depot in Tours, local CGT delegates welcomed the new collaborative, constructive approach of the local *Inspecteur d'arrondissement*. The delegates welcomed the Inspector's conversion to the spirit of the Popular Front, and underlined that 'if the companies wish to apply honestly and in good faith the engagements which they have signed up to, they will find us to be loyal and scrupulous collaborators.' In their approach, the cheminots argued they were acting not only in the name of the cheminots, but also for the success of the railways, the functioning of which 'profits the whole nation'.⁵⁹

On 26 June, the *Tribune des cheminots* again reiterated all that had been achieved under the headline 'une première victoire'.⁶⁰ The Federation worked hard to publicise their successes, tying them into a narrative of discipline and order aimed at ensuring that the rank-and-file members retained confidence in the strategy of negotiations being conducted by the FdC and as a result, it was hoped, would remain at their posts. The stakes were high in this regard: failure to demonstrate that they could control their membership would significantly weaken the FdC's position in future negotiations. This was a vital consideration as the union worked to establish itself as the undisputed sole legitimate representative of cheminots in France. This aim was achieved with the signing of the collective convention between the FdC and the newly created SNCF in 1938. The contract replaced the railway statute and would remain in force until 1950. Article two codified the relationship between management and workforce, with the CGT recognised as the sole representative of the railway workers. Employers were now obliged to liaise closely with CGT representatives. All this was to be undertaken, the convention made clear, in a spirit of collaboration founded upon the recognition of the rights and shared responsibilities of employees and management.⁶¹

⁵⁹ AD I-L, 2133 PERU1, *La Voix du Peuple*, 'A travers les usines. Dépôt de Tours, PO', 23/1/1937.

⁶⁰ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 26/6/1936.

⁶¹ SNCF 505LM136, dossier 14, 1938, relations syndicats/SNCF, convention collective, livre 1, droit syndical; Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, p. 149.

Spain

While the cause of anti-fascism within France's borders demanded a robust extension of the democratic sphere, internationally the anti-fascist cause demonstrated the strength of cheminots' sense of belonging to an international working-class railway family as French railway workers were moved en masse to aid their fellow ferroviarios in Spain. Contacts between the French FdC and the Spanish railwaymen's union had existed for a number of years. Following the outbreak of hostilities communications were continued regularly, and representatives of the two unions travelled back and forth across the Pyrenees.⁶² Railway workers in the south of France were well used to crossing back and forth across the Spanish border, whether for work or holiday, on union business or all three. As late as May 1936, delegates from the Midi Union's regional congress made the relatively short trip across the border to the town of Puigcerdà for a post-congress holiday.⁶³

In November 1937 a delegation from the Cheminot Federation visited Spain to demonstrate in person the solidarity of the cheminots with their fellow Spanish railwaymen and with the Republican cause in Spain more broadly. 12 delegates set off from Paris on 2 November, their journey taking them through the key Republican strongholds as well as to the front line of the conflict. The visit by representatives of the French railway workers was greeted with massive enthusiasm by their Spanish counterparts. With their journey undertaken largely by rail – in a railcar due to the lack of coal – the cheminot representatives were greeted by huge numbers of Spanish railway workers and their families at each station. 1,500 turned out to greet them at Valencia's station alone and in Madrid the Frenchmen were escorted from their hotel back to the station by ranks of their fellow Spanish workers singing the Internationale and the Marseillaise. In the booklet published to publicise the visit, the railwaymen laid out in detail their impressions and experiences in Spain. Particularly affecting was their visit to the front and their reports of fascist atrocities committed against Republican sympathisers in the town of Belchite where the male population was reported to have been massacred by Franco's troops. As a result of the town's resistance to the fascists it had been bombed into ruins by the air force, the bombers flying as many as 18 separate sorties against the town in the course of a single day.⁶⁴ The delegates also visited Albacete (a key organisational centre for the International Brigades), Barcelona

⁶² Fédération des Cheminots, *La vérité sur l'Espagne Républicaine: récit du voyage accompli par une délégation de la Fédération des Cheminots au mois de novembre 1937* (Paris, n.d.), pp. 6–7.

⁶³ Fédération des Cheminots, *La vérité sur l'Espagne Républicaine*, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Fédération des Cheminots, *La vérité sur l'Espagne Républicaine*, p. 28.

and Madrid where they had the opportunity to rekindle friendships with Spanish railway workers who they had met on previous visits to Spain during the 1930s, one of whom was now one of the leading organisers of the Republican resistance in the city.⁶⁵

The delegates in their report to the cheminot readership laid out what had been achieved through the solidarity of the French railway workers with Spain, but called on them to do more to aid the Republic against its enemies in 'International Fascism'. Ensuring that they encouraged their fellow workers to subscribe to the 1-franc-a-month stamp was an important step, as was the encouragement of their wives to knit items of clothing for the men in the trenches. Above all, however, the delegation called upon the French government to end its policy of non-intervention and to come to the aid of the Republic in Spain by providing weapons, war materiel, food, and other basic supplies such as coal. Ending non-intervention was a theme taken up again by the Cheminot Federation at their congress in March 1938. In a pamphlet published after this congress the key resolutions were publicised. The union leadership strongly condemned the weakness of the government position regarding the Spanish Republican forces, particularly as German and Italian forces were forcefully and openly intervening on the side of the Francoist rebels. The conflict, noted the FdC, presented a major threat to peace and to France's own security, both in terms of the shared border with Spain and the threat it posed to links with North Africa. The Cheminot Federation called for the opening of the border with Republican Spain and the establishment of trading links with the Republic. Finally, the union called for an international conference to defend peace.⁶⁶

Following the assault by the rebel forces led by Franco against the democratically elected Republican government, railway workers in France rallied to the beleaguered Republican cause. Leading Spanish railway men visited Paris and were given a rousing reception by their French comrades. Following the visit a subscription service was launched for Spain by the Cheminot Federation raising money which the Federation was using to send supplies of food to Spain.⁶⁷ Cheminot largesse also helped to evacuate 500 women and children from Madrid who were housed in an orange plantation at the small town of Mario de la Constancia, 18km from Valencia, supported by donations from French cheminots. In France itself, the cheminot Orphelinat was also pressed into service to aid Republican Spain, in this case providing a refuge for 24 children who had fled the fighting in Spain.

⁶⁵ Fédération des Cheminots, *La vérité sur l'Espagne Républicaine*, pp. 40–41.

⁶⁶ SNCF: 505LM136, Dossier 12, Conseil national de la Fédération des Cheminots, Résolution général, mars, 1938, pp. 2–3.

⁶⁷ Fédération des Cheminots, *La vérité sur l'Espagne Républicaine*, p. 91.

The Popular Front and the Railway Industry

The creation of the SNCF was a significant Popular Front development for railway employees. The legitimacy of private capital operating a public service had troubled Republicans since the time of Gambetta and the SFIO had maintained a hostile front against the private rail companies in the form of Jules Moch through the interwar years. The creation of the SNCF in 1938 was in many ways the culmination of a steadily augmenting process of state involvement in railway management dating from at least World War One. However, it was the coming of the depression which fatally undermined railway company independence.

The Popular Front programme unveiled prior to the elections in May 1936 contained direct references to a policy of nationalisations of certain sectors of the economy. These included nationalisation of the armaments industry and greater state control over the Bank of France. These commitments and the wider Popular Front nationalisation policy, which was eventually to include the railways under the Chautemps government in August 1937, should not be read as part of an attempt on the part of the SFIO to transform the economy along Socialist or 'planiste' principles, however. The hostility of the Radical Party and PCF government partners to nationalisation was a key element. Significant, too, was the considerable opposition to economic planning within the SFIO itself, which retained something of its Marxist aversion to reformism within a capitalist economy. As Richard Kuisel has noted, planning 'smacked of the reformism of Thomas and Millerand'.⁶⁸ Despite an energetic current within the SFIO between 1933 and 1936 grouped around Georges Lefranc and the Neo-Socialists, planning, with its receptiveness to Keynesian economic thinking, had been defeated by May 1936.⁶⁹ In a series of articles in 1935, Blum defined a limited view of the place of nationalisation in French Socialist thought, 'nationalisation was not socialisation [...] merely substituting state control for private ownership did not eliminate wage labour or surplus value'.⁷⁰ For the SFIO, planning could only be of value after the workers' revolution.

Yet, nationalisations linked to the planned economy remained an important element within CGT thinking at the highest level with Georges Lefranc and CGT leader Léon Jouhaux being key supporters. Strongly inspired

⁶⁸ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century*, p. 114.

⁶⁹ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, pp. 164–166; See also Julian Jackson *The Politics of Depression in France 1932–1936*.

⁷⁰ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century*, p. 114.

by the works of the Belgian politician Henri de Man, planiste thought became increasingly influential within the CGT between 1932 and 1936 as the economic crisis bit.⁷¹ Yet, even within the CGT feelings were mixed, with support contained within certain sections of the Confederation. The leadership of the Fédération des Fonctionnaires were strongly supportive of moves towards state planning of the economy, no doubt influenced in their positive conceptions of state power by the fact that their members were all employed in the public sector. When, in October 1934, a special issue of the trade union journal *L'Homme Réel* was published entitled *Le Syndicalisme et le Plan*, three of the contributors were Fonctionnaire leaders.⁷² By 1934 the CGT leadership was itself divided over the issue. While Jouhaux and Belin were supporters, Raoul Lenoir and Georges Buisson were opposed. Neither *Le Peuple* nor *La Voix du Peuple* contained articles supporting planning principles through 1934.⁷³

As planning principles lost ground within the SFIO, they rapidly gained support within the CGT. The CGT published its own Plan in 1934, which was refused by the Socialist Party. However, the union movement continued to develop its thinking around economic planning, with nationalisation of key industries a vital element of any dirigiste model. From 1931, notes Jean-François Biard, the CGT had begun to identify rationalisation with the economic difficulties which France was beginning to encounter. Mechanisation and re-organisation had caused production to race ahead of wages, argued the Confederation, leading to a crisis of overproduction. The remedy would be an increase in wages together with working time reductions.⁷⁴ Yet, while being in large part a reaction against government deflation and protectionism, for the CGT planning had an equally significant attraction. For Léon Jouhaux, planning promised to open up the CGT to a broader constituency, placing them at the centre of national debates which the CGT could animate and shape.⁷⁵

In March 1937 the Paris prefecture of Police prepared a report on the question of railway nationalisation and of nationalisation more generally. Jouhaux, noted the report, had declared himself strongly resolved to obtain the nationalisation of key industries, including the railways. Importantly, Maurice Thorez had argued that, although the PCF remained hostile to the principle of nationalisations, he was in full agreement with the Radical Party

⁷¹ Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France*, pp. 138–145.

⁷² George Lefranc, 'Le courant planiste dans le mouvement ouvrier français de 1933 à 1936', *Le Mouvement Social*, 54 (1966), 69–89 (75).

⁷³ George Lefranc, 'Le courant planiste dans le mouvement ouvrier français', p. 75.

⁷⁴ Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p. 115.

⁷⁵ Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p. 142.

that 'certain large, public interest concerns, constituted in societies, should return to collective ownership.'⁷⁶ This was a significant declaration and proof of the meeting of PCF leadership with wider discourses which animated French popular culture. The PCF leaders, in full pursuit of the anti-fascist alliance, were unwilling to cause disquiet in middle-class opinion with attacks upon private property; yet, the special issue of the railways allowed for a more muscular approach. For their part, the Fédération des Cheminots were far more radical. The involvement of the state was a necessary measure to bringing a greater degree of coordination to transport policy and, in addition, nationalisation would sweep away 'the politics of personal profit or dividends'.⁷⁷ There was a clear gap between what nationalisation meant to the Fédération des Cheminots and the mixed society preferred by the PCF and Radical Party.

Appearing before the Commission des Travaux Publics in February 1937, Jean Jarrigion, the joint leader of the CGT Cheminot Federation, firmly made the case for the nationalisation of the railway industry. He first of all countered the company arguments that personnel costs were the major source of their financial difficulties. For the four years prior to 1937, Jarrigion argued, there had been a recruitment freeze on the railways, personnel levels were lower than those in many European countries. Equally, salary levels were in many cases much lower than in other European states. Over the same period, productivity on the French railways had increased significantly. The deficit facing the railway industry, argued Jarrigion, could not be attributed 'to work regulations, to a lack of professional conscience or to worker salary increases'.⁷⁸ The only solution to the crisis in the industry was immediate nationalisation, an argument which Jarrigion couched in the language of narrow company concerns against the national interest: 'if we do not do this, the railway companies will maintain their strength. Moreover, their directors only aspire to conserve in their hands the commanding levers of the principal businesses of our country, to continue to exercise their omnipotence over economic and social life'.⁷⁹ For Jarrigion nationalisation would be a means of bringing greater organisation to French economic life and a greater measure of justice to society.

The Popular Front strategy of the PCF led the former unitaire leaders, now in the CGT, to fully embrace the politics of collaborationism. Though

⁷⁶ Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (hereafter APP), DA866, SNCF Correspondance 1934–1945, AS de la nationalisation des chemins de fer 2/3/1937, p. 1.

⁷⁷ APP, DA866, SNCF Correspondance 1934–1945, AS de la nationalisation des chemins de fer 2/3/1937, p. 2.

⁷⁸ AN, C//15196, Tome II, PV. 10/2/1937, pp. 3–4 (4).

⁷⁹ AN, C//15196, Tome II, PV. 10/2/1937, p. 4.

both unitaire and confédéré groups were disappointed by the outcome of negotiations which led to the creation of a société mixte rather than a full nationalisation, the union did not push strongly a radical alternative vision of the place of workers in the economy. The chief concern of the FdC was to see the state take on responsibility for the running of the railways in concert with representatives of passengers and the workforce. Unlike in the aircraft industry, there seems to have been little or no discussion of worker control in the railways.⁸⁰ The Federation had supported the SFIO's proposals, in large part based on Moch's 1931 project. But the package which emerged from negotiations between companies, government, and parliament, with marginal government majority shareholding (51%) and the continued space for private finance, was not rejected by the union, despite grumblings over the Sabotage de la Nationalisation par le Capitalisme Ferroviaire (SNCF). The CGT did now have representatives sitting upon the Conseil d'administration of the new body, the union leaders Seward and Jarrigion. The presence of labour on a genuine managerial committee represented a significant step forward for the strategy aimed at the pursuit of power and influence at the heart of the industry in which both communists and non-communists had been engaged over the previous decade.

While the Popular Front government was grappling with the process of transforming the French railway network into a public society, the working lives of the cheminots were being transformed by the introduction of the totemic piece of Popular Front labour legislation, the 40-hour week. This key piece of legislation had not formed any part of the common programme upon which the Blum government had been elected in May 1936; rather it had been forced upon the government as a result of the June strikes.⁸¹ Historians have been unanimous in condemning the measure, noting its negative impact upon the French economy as it attempted to respond to the exigencies of government rearmament policies. In the depths of depression, the life breathed into the economy by the September 1936 devaluation was sucked out by the law of January 1937.⁸² The implementation of the law created a vicious inflationary spiral, as Adrian Rossiter has argued, 'in expectation of higher labour costs because of the imminent reduction in the working week, the bosses indulged in prophylactic price rises, which in turn justified higher

⁸⁰ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism*, pp. 112–113, pp. 145–147.

⁸¹ Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy and the Matignon Negotiations', *The Historical Journal*, 30, 3 (1987), 663–684 (663).

⁸² Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres* vol. 2 (Paris, 1965–1975), pp. 297–298.

wage demands.⁸³ On the railways, Joseph Jones has argued that higher labour costs proved disastrous for the financial position of the industry. In one fell swoop, the gains of years of natural reductions in personnel numbers were undone. Moreover, labour unions were in no mood for compromise. Conscious of the manner in which arbitrary government action had rescinded the eight-hour day, cheminots were zealous in their policing of the new working week.⁸⁴ Yet, as historians have become increasingly aware, labour's attachment to the 40-hour legislation was not quite as straightforward as it has often been painted.⁸⁵ The attitudes of cheminot union leaders in the negotiations over the implementation of the law and the ongoing discussions over its implementations through 1937 and 1938 sheds light upon the position of the railway workers in this regard.

Through the course of 1936 the Cheminot Federation, having been invited by the rail companies to participate in discussions, threw itself enthusiastically into negotiations over the introduction of the 40-hour week on the railways.⁸⁶ Optimism was high on all sides. The head of the industry delegation, Robert Le Besnerais, recorded with satisfaction the cordial relations between union and management representatives.⁸⁷ For its part, the Cheminot Federation demonstrated a magnanimity towards management which had been far from characteristic of the previous decades of railway industrial relations. When, in December 1936, Le Besnerais was replaced at the head of the company delegation by Henri Gréard, Pierre Semard delivered a fulsome tribute to Le Besnerais, going on to assure Gréard of the 'spirit of confidence and the desire for collaboration' which animated the union delegation.⁸⁸

Having spent three months negotiating over competing plans regarding the implementation and operation of the 40-hour week, by 14 January a decree text had been agreed by all parties.⁸⁹ As a result of this close

⁸³ Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy', p. 684.

⁸⁴ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France* (Montreal, 1984), p. 83.

⁸⁵ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France, 1938–1940* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 249–250.

⁸⁶ CGTIHS, Conseil du direction des réseaux, dossier comité de direction des grands réseaux, momento de réunion, 24/9/1936, p. 3.

⁸⁷ AN F/14/14959, Dossier semaine de quarante heures, rapport du directeur du contrôle du travail à sujet de l'application de la semaine de quarante heures aux agents des grands réseaux de chemins de fer, p. 2.

⁸⁸ CGTIHS, Conseil de direction des réseaux, dossier comité de direction des grands réseaux, 30/12/1936, p. 1.

⁸⁹ AN F/14/14959, Dossier projets et observations, rapport au Président de la République, 14/1/1937.

cooperation the decree came into force on 18 January 1937, several months ahead of the full extension of the 40-hour week to the whole of the French economy.⁹⁰ After the national agreements local arrangement had to be made for the introduction of the 40-hour week. Contrary to a widely held view, local unions did demonstrate a willingness to oversee the operation of the 40-hour week in a pragmatic fashion. Following Blum's radio broadcast of February 1937 in which he announced a 'pause' in Popular Front social legislation, the local cheminot delegates at Tours made their own appeal to local railway workers in support of the Popular Front, announcing that the cheminots needed to 'support and aid our Popular Front government.' The cheminots, the union delegates argued, 'must with all our hearts ensure that our successes do not lead to any disorganisation of the functioning of the railways'. In such circumstances, the local Federation delegates announced that they were working in collaboration with managers to ensure that workers' rest days under the 40-hour week were properly distributed across the whole week to ensure that the railway service did not suffer any lack of available staff at key points over the week.⁹¹

November 1938: Defeat of the Popular Front

The autumn of 1938 saw a new policy of firmness on the part of the Daladier government in the sphere of international policy. The Munich agreement of late September 1938 had marked 'the high-water mark of France's retreat before the resurgence of Germany'. Now the French government issued guarantees to Poland, Romania and Greece.⁹² Daladier's more bullish approach to foreign affairs proved popular in the country. Support for Munich, argues Daniel Hucker, proved ephemeral, the government's firm response to Italian demands over Corsica, Nice, and Haute-Savoie met with strong public approval.⁹³ For Daladier, meeting the international challenges faced by France necessitated a decisive break from Popular Front economic organisation. In early November the prime minister served time on the Popular Front experiment, removing the centrist supporter of greater state regulation of the economy, Paul Marchandieu, and replacing him with the 'champion of economic liberalism', Paul Reynaud.⁹⁴ In a radio address upon

⁹⁰ Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres* vol. 2, p. 243.

⁹¹ AD I-L, *La Voix du Peuple*, 'l'application de la semaine de 40h', 20/2/1937.

⁹² Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933–1939* (Oxford 2000), p. 298, and chapter 9.

⁹³ Daniel Hucker, 'French Public Attitudes Towards the Prospect of War in 1938–1939: Pacifism or War Anxiety', *French History*, 21, 4 (2007), 431–449 (444).

⁹⁴ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France, 1938–1940*, p. 262.

taking office Reynaud made clear his position. ‘We live’, he announced, ‘in a capitalist system. For it to function we must obey its laws. These are those of profits, individual risk, free markets and growth by competition.’⁹⁵ Upon taking office Reynaud moved quickly. In mid-November a series of decrees was issued by the government which aimed a decisive blow against Popular Front social legislation, in particular against the 40-hour week, which became for both sides of the debate a symbol of the gains (or losses) of 1936.

As Jones makes clear,⁹⁶ the Cheminot Federation were zealous in overseeing the operation of the new working-time regulations but the argument that this resulted in an intransigent defence of the legislation against the interests of the railway industry would not have been recognised by the head of the newly created SNCF, Le Besnerais. In meetings of the SNCF’s Conseil d’Administration in July and August 1938, Le Besnerais regularly spoke warmly of the openness of the personnel to discussions over a more flexible interpretation of the 40-hour week. In the August meeting he announced that ‘the representatives of the Federation have given their agreement to a relaxing of the working regulations created by the decree of 18 January 1937. They have promised to meet with their representatives in the comités du travail and to give them... directives concerning the cooperation they are going to bring to this loosening’.⁹⁷ The extant documentation, if not entirely supporting Le Besnerais’s position, does at least demonstrate that the Cheminot Federation recognised the need for flexibility in the operation of the 40-hour law. In June 1937 the union leadership had written to Le Besnerais announcing the need for both the spirit and the letter of the law to be maintained. They argued strongly that the flexibility the SNCF agreed was necessary was, in fact, contained within the negotiated decree itself, discussions could, therefore, continue on that basis.⁹⁸ By August, however, if Le Besnerais’s view is to be trusted, the union had let it be understood that it was prepared to go much further in this regard.

These complexities within the Federation’s position suggested by an apparent adaptation of the cheminots’ ideas between June and August in many ways reflects the wider ambiguities which Georges Vidal has identified within French communist politics at this time. Following 1936 the Communist Party in France had placed itself at the forefront of calls for a firm response to Nazi Germany. The communist hierarchy followed through

⁹⁵ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France, 1938–1940*, p. 264.

⁹⁶ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in Twentieth-Century France*, p. 83.

⁹⁷ SNCF 505LM138, dossier 18, extrait de Conseil d’administration, 3/8/1938.

⁹⁸ SNCF 505LM139, dossier 18, Fédération des Travailleurs de Chemins de Fer Français à M. le Président de la SNCF, 8/6/1938.

with the logic of this position, recognising the need to ensure the readiness of France's war industries and to strengthen France's overall economic position as a central element in meeting the German menace. From 1937 the party called on its militants to work to raise production and, by 1938, the party leadership supported a re-negotiation of the 40-hour laws. With this policy the party, however, ran into the determined resistance of its rank-and-file militants, particularly those active in the trade unions.⁹⁹ The ambiguities of the cheminots' position on the issue of the 40-hour law may itself emanate from similar difficulties between leadership and the rank and file, with the union hierarchy attempting to find a way of negotiating between the strongly held views of the rank and file and its position of responsibility at the heart of railway politics.

What is clear, however, is that the engagement of the Federation over this issue was recognised and praised by both SNCF managers and state representatives. The Reynaud decrees struck at the heart of this collaboration. The decree laws launched a new wave of labour protest. While the national CGT leadership vacillated, wildcat strikes and lockouts spread through Paris and beyond. They were met by determined employer and state resistance.¹⁰⁰ From 21 November, metalworkers and chemical workers struck, and factories were occupied in Paris, Nord and Basse-Seine. The railways were this time affected. In the Valenciennes area, for instance, wildcat strikers moved to occupy the local railway network. Traffic on several lines was severely interrupted in the area of the crucial railway hub of Somain.¹⁰¹ Rank and file activism continued to put pressure on the CGT, Léon Jouhaux and René Belin at the head of the Confédération being unwilling to sanction a general strike and suspicious of such movements, believing them to be inspired by communist militants. The tipping point was reached when the railway workers' Federation voted overwhelmingly to support calls for a general strike. On 25 November enormous demonstrations by cheminots took place in Paris. 4,000 protested at Gare de Lyon, 5,000 at Gare du Nord, with 2,000 more a hundred metres or so further along the Boulevard Magenta at the Gare de l'Est. That day the Federation leadership voted by 87 votes to 12 in favour of a general strike.¹⁰² As Guy Bordé notes, within the CGT 'all opposition to the strike fell at a single stroke'.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Georges Vidal, 'Le parti communiste français et la défense nationale (septembre 1937–septembre 1939)', *Revue Historique*, 630 (avril, 2004), 333–370 (361–363).

¹⁰⁰ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938*, p. III.

¹⁰¹ SHG, 59E57, Section de Valenciennes, 24/11/1938, pp. 361–364.

¹⁰² *L'Humanité*, 26/11/1938. Also quoted in Bourdé, *La défaite du front populaire*, p. 153.

¹⁰³ Bourdé, *La défaite du front populaire*, p. 153.

Within the Cheminot Federation both former unitaires and confédérés were in bellicose mood. Semard charged the government with having promulgated a policy which represented 'a veritable destruction of the railways'.¹⁰⁴ Jarrigion condemned the manner in which the rights of the cheminots had been 'arbitrarily and abusively violated'.¹⁰⁵ The rest of the executive struck a similar tone. In a letter to *Le Peuple* the Federation announced on 29 November that despite cheminots having worked in the national, collective interest, the government had chosen to 'brutally' break with this collaboration. Efforts on the part of the government to intimidate the workers, announced the union, would serve only to reinforce the will of the cheminots and to demonstrate 'the bad faith and the repressive aims of statesmen'.¹⁰⁶ On the eve of the strike, the rank and file seemed to share in this bellicosity. On the former Paris-Orléans network a large meeting of cheminots voted unanimously to proceed with strike action. In the face of requisition orders the cheminots would report for work, but would 'employer la force de l'inertie' in opposition to SNCF and government policy.¹⁰⁷

The general strike of 30 November 1938 was a failure. Yet, this is not to be explained through a lack of identification with the Popular Front, rather the CGT call to arms ran into massive state reaction. Troops, including soldiers from the colonies, were used to ensure the national transport arteries remained open. Soldiers were used to break up demonstrations.¹⁰⁸ The prominent role of cheminots in the build up to the 30 November general strike has been explained by a key historian of the event as due to the fact that of all French workers, cheminots had the most to lose. They were particularly targeted by the decrees having gained significantly from the Popular Front's social legislation.¹⁰⁹ In many ways this fits into the key paradigm within the history of the cheminots which sees railway workers as, above all, motivated by the maintenance of their limited corporate interests. As such it suggests a distance between railway workers and the wider Popular Front 'spirit'.

It is certainly true that railway workers stood to lose the most as a result of the Reynaud decrees, but this is not how their opposition was framed. The response of the cheminot leadership was expressed firmly in terms of their desire to defend the democratic ethos of Popular Front industrial relations. The 1938 strike action is best understood as a clash over two divergent

¹⁰⁴ *Le Peuple*, 28/11/1938.

¹⁰⁵ *Le Peuple*, 28/11/1938.

¹⁰⁶ *Le Peuple*, 29/11/1938.

¹⁰⁷ AN 19940500/0198, rapport assemblé des cheminots Paris-Orléans, 29/11/1938.

¹⁰⁸ AD N, M595/92, CGT Cheminot bulletin d'information no 5, 20/12/1938, pp. 7–8.

¹⁰⁹ Guy Bourdé, *La défaite du front populaire*, p. 152.

conceptions of French industrial relations. On the one hand, employers and state aimed to re-establish the uncontested authority of the *patron* within a reorganised free market economy.¹¹⁰ On the other, the French labour movement, both communist and non-communist, aimed to defend the social-democratic ethos of Popular Front industrial politics. On the railways, both Semard and Jarrigion made clear that what was at stake were not particular benefits or privileged working conditions, over which they were prepared to give ground, but rather the wider principle of collaboration and cheminot representation within the workplace. Once more the key theme was opposition to arbitrary power, now identified with the ‘illegal’ and ‘fascist’ decree laws.

In a furious response to the introduction of the decree laws in mid-November, Jean Jarrigion made explicit the Federation’s feelings. For the cheminots, ‘the principle is the consultation between railway organisations: employers and workers.’ For Jarrigion this principle was at the centre of their opposition to the decree laws, it was a principle which Reynaud had ‘totally destroyed’. Jarrigion argued strongly against the government line that the decree laws were necessary to ameliorate the French economy. The cheminots, he noted, had never ceased to collaborate with management; indeed the SNCF hierarchy had been fulsome in its praise for the cheminots in this regard. The decree laws, he warned, could only serve to compromise the social peace for which all were working.¹¹¹ In a letter of 22 November the Federation once more sought to undermine the rationale of increased economic efficiency behind the decrees. Emphasising again the cheminots’ collaboration with the SNCF, even on the most contentious of issues, the union leadership noted that the workers ‘had never refused to take on their share of the sacrifices... and they have constantly offered their collaboration with a view to raising productivity and to achieve rational economies within the SNCF’.¹¹²

In short, according to the cheminot analysis, the Reynaud decrees could not be explained in straightforwardly economic terms; yet again the cheminots highlighted the praise which SNCF managers had heaped upon the fruits of cheminot collaboration. The decrees represented, for the cheminots, a state-sanctioned power-grab, once more giving employers the uncontested upper hand in the workplace. According to the FdC, the Reynaud decree

¹¹⁰ Talbot Imlay, ‘Paul Reynaud and France’s Response to Nazi Germany, 1938–1940’, *French Historical Studies*, 26, 3 (Summer 2003), 497–538 (506–515); Richard Vinen, *The Politics of French Business, 1936–1945* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 80.

¹¹¹ CGTIHS, Conseil de direction des grands réseaux, déclaration de M. Jarrigion relative aux décrets lois, 16/11/1938, pp. 1–2.

¹¹² SNCF, 025LM203, Fédération des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer de France à M. le Président de la SNCF, 25/11/1938, p. 1.

laws were ‘anti-democratic’, motivated by a ‘dictatorial will’ and aiming at ‘social regression’.¹¹³

The Reynaud decrees’ rupture with the collaborative and democratic approach to industrial relations of the Popular Front period and the enormous victimisation which followed in the wake of the failure of the 30 November general strike profoundly impacted upon the fabric of French society. As Talbot Imlay has demonstrated, the liberal economic regime inaugurated by the decree-laws proved disastrous for French war preparations. The poisoned relationship between French elites and the working-class population occasioned by the power contests of the Popular Front era would have significant implications for France’s ability to respond to the Nazi menace, even if the defeat of June 1940 is explicable primarily in military terms.¹¹⁴

The Nazi-Soviet Pact

In late August 1939, with war seeming increasingly inevitable, the Comintern issued instructions to its member parties in Europe calling upon them to ‘continue even more energetically the struggle against the aggressors, especially German fascism’.¹¹⁵ This position, however, was soon to change drastically. On Stalin’s direct orders, following the secret signing of the non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, the Comintern issued new instructions to the global communist movement on 9 September. Workers and Communist parties were instructed to renounce all support for the war, breaking dramatically with the previous Popular Front line.¹¹⁶ These instructions threw the European Communist parties into huge confusion. As late as 2 September, the PCF deputies had voted in favour of war credits and even after the Comintern instructions arrived belatedly in France, leading members of the PCF continued to insist upon their primary opposition to fascism. Finally, on 21 September, the PCF leadership under Comintern pressure finally announced its opposition to the war and declared

¹¹³ SNCF, 025LM203, Fédération des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer de France à M. le Président de la SNCF, 25/11/1938, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Talbot Imlay, ‘Democracy and War: Political Regime, Industrial Relations and Economic Preparations for War in France and Britain up to 1940’, *Journal of Modern History*, 79, 4 (March 2007), 1–47; idem. ‘Mind the Gap: The Perception and Reality of Communist Sabotage of French War Production During the Phoney War, 1939–1940’, *Past and Present*, 189 (November 2005), 179–224; idem. *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France, 1938–1940*.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, p. 192.

¹¹⁶ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, pp. 193–194.

the conflict to no longer be part of an anti-fascist struggle.¹¹⁷ The PCF's volte-face threw its political and labour wings into disarray. The situation became bleaker still when the Daladier government proscribed the PCF and its affiliates, making the Communist Party an illegal organisation on 26 September. As Serge Wolikow emphasises, this move on the part of the government was not in fact a direct response to the communists' new attitude to the war, but rather a continuation of the anti-communist policies that the Daladier government had been implementing since August.¹¹⁸ The result of the government persecution and the shock of the shift in the official communist attitude to the war left rank-and-file militants and union activists facing difficult choices. As Herrick Chapman has underlined, while some closed ranks in the face of the government attack, most 'were put in an untenable situation politically and forced into either internment, clandestine activities or a quiet withdrawal from trade union politics'. In all cases, the result was a major decline in communist influence within the workplace.¹¹⁹

Not all observers backed the government's repression of the PCF. The move was strongly protested by Léon Blum who, in the pages of the Socialist party newspaper *Le Populaire* argued that while individual communists might be guilty of treason, the Party as a whole should not be targeted. 'The only punishment it should face', argued Blum, 'is universal reprobation.'¹²⁰

Though on 28 August the FdC Executive passed a resolution tabled by Pierre Semard claiming that the pact 'could only contribute to the establishment of a durable peace', opinion against the communists among the cheminot leadership was hardening. Following the German invasion of Poland, the Federation reversed its position. On 25 September a motion condemning the Nazi–Soviet pact was passed by the Federal Bureau by a large majority. Only Midol, Tournemaine and Jourdain voted against. The following day, 26 September, the PCF was declared an illegal organisation by the Daladier government. Two days later the FdC removed all ex-unitaires from positions of authority within the union.¹²¹ The new Federation leadership described the pact as 'formal proof of the treason

¹¹⁷ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, p. 197. On the Comintern's pressure upon the PCF, see Serge Wolikow, *L'Internationale Communiste, 1919–1943: Le Komintern ou le rêve déchu du parti mondial de la révolution* (Paris, 2010), pp. 116–118.

¹¹⁸ Serge Wolikow, *L'Internationale Communiste, 1919–1943: Le Komintern ou le rêve déchu du parti mondial de la révolution*, p. 118.

¹¹⁹ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p. 218.

¹²⁰ *Le Populaire*, 27/9/1939 in AN 496AP/27 Fonds Daladier, 3DA12Dr2.

¹²¹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité, 1848–2001*, pp. 159–160.

against peace committed by those who claimed to call for proletarians to struggle against fascism, and Hitlerism in particular'.¹²²

Pierre Semard was forced to observe these events from the small railway station in the rural town of Loches in Indre-et-Loire. Semard had been relocated to Loches, a relatively out-of-the-way location, by the SNCF as punishment for his role in the 30 November strike. Demoted to a lowly position within the railway hierarchy, Semard ruefully noted in the diary he kept during this period that he found himself back in the same post in which he had begun his railway career twenty years before. Semard's demotion from a seat on the SNCF board to a rural station just outside Tours received comment from his new co-workers. His station master asked him pointedly why he had allowed 'ideas' to ruin his position at the commanding heights of the railway industry.¹²³ Semard was arrested on 20 October 1939.¹²⁴ Imprisoned by the Third Republic on the eve of France's defeat, he was later transferred to Epernay, where he was shot by the German occupation forces on 7 March 1942. Immediately, news of Semard's execution was communicated across France by the clandestine Communist Party. The text of Semard's final letter written in the hours before his execution was widely circulated. On the Liberation of France, Semard was adopted into the pantheon of communist resistance martyrs, with a memorial work written by André Marty and a major funeral held in Paris on 10 March 1945, even as the war was still ongoing.¹²⁵

In early October 1939, the now lone Federation General Secretary Jean Jarrigion announced the expulsion of the former unitaires from the FdC. 'Notre Fédération affirme', wrote Jarrigion, 'que les intérêts corporatifs ne sauraient pas être subordonnés à des intérêts extra-syndicaux'.¹²⁶ A letter from a former unitaire, A. Jaux, was published in the *Tribune* a few months later. Jaux, had been a member of the Communist Party for 20 years having joined as a 21-year-old in the aftermath of the First World War. 'I joined the revolutionary movement and supported the Russian revolution because, for many militants of the time, the Russian revolution represented an ideal, a beacon.' For Jaux, however, the Nazi–Soviet pact represented a betrayal, 'driving me to renounce twenty years of activity and dedication to this ideal'.

¹²² AN 496AP/27 Fonds Daladier, 3DAr2Dr2, 'Réactions au mouvement de la dissolution du Parti Communiste'.

¹²³ CGT IHS, Fonds Pierre Semard, Pierre Semard, *Les jours sombres* (unpublished manuscript), p. 1.

¹²⁴ CGT IHS, Fonds Pierre Semard, Pierre Semard, *Les jours sombres* (unpublished manuscript), p. 2.

¹²⁵ Footage of the funeral can be viewed at <https://www.cinearchives.org/Films-447-79-o-o.html> (accessed 4/8/2018).

¹²⁶ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 2/10/1939.

He announced that he had resigned from the party.¹²⁷ This piece echoed a number of letters written by mobilised cheminots published by the *Tribune* in the months following the expulsion of the unitaires. The cheminots wrote approving of the Federation's actions. One informed the leadership that he was 'happy to see their newspaper become syndicalist once more'. Another wrote that they were 'very contented with the clean out [nettoyage] that you have undertaken'.¹²⁸

The communists' pragmatism, in many respects the hallmark of their political and industrial activity among the railway workers through the interwar period, failed them in September 1939. The Nazi–Soviet pact derailed communist activity on the railways. Yet, the swift recrudescence of clandestine activity on the railways under the occupation and the re-emergence of the PCF as the dominant voice of the cheminots with the Liberation is testament to the deep roots put down by the party among these workers during the interwar period. It was a legacy that the events of 1939–1941 could not expunge.

Conclusion

Far from being tangential to the Popular Front years, as they appear in many accounts, this chapter has argued that, rather, the experience of the railway workers in France sheds important light upon the wider significance of the period 1936–1938. By foregrounding the contest for power, legitimacy and representation at the heart of the meaning of the Popular Front experiment, the example of the cheminots demonstrates a key element of the aims and ambitions of French workers. In the assault upon the citadels of arbitrary employer power represented by June 1936, the cheminots could afford to take a back seat having already carved out an important and independent space for worker representation within the railway industry prior to this moment. The long experience of muscular trade unionism in confrontation with management and state, however, ensured that cheminot representatives were well placed to make significant gains amid the febrile June atmosphere. A new atmosphere of collaboration permeated railway industrial relations between 1936 and 1938 as communists, on the one hand, followed the logic of the altered Comintern line and, on the other, reinforced by an enormous membership, supportive state and, after 1937, a place at the heart of the SNCF executive, engaged for the first time from a position of strength. Such strength, as it turned out, was transitory. The collaborative industrial policy of the Popular

¹²⁷ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/3/1940.

¹²⁸ *La Tribune des cheminots*, 1/11/1939.

Front was predicated upon the support, or at least the neutrality, of the state. Once this keystone was removed in November 1938, the cheminots' position quickly unravelled.

The example of the cheminots also sheds important light upon a significant current operating within French communism in the interwar years. While historians rightly emphasise the impact of the Popular Front period upon communist leaders and militants, the picture which emerges from the railway industry suggests that such developments require nuanced interpretation. Railway communists in the period prior to 1936 had been confronted with the type of industrial relations frameworks which marked the Popular Front, but had to respond to them without the support of a friendly state or the collaborative and optimistic spirit of 1936. The realities of competitive railway industrial relations and a cheminot population inclined to take railway politics seriously meant that the communist-led CGTU Cheminot Federation felt unable to neglect the everyday necessities of trade union activity on the railways. In such circumstances the unitaires drew creatively upon the existing imagery and language of communism, re-configuring what they condemned on the part of the CGT as collaborative reformism as 'hostile participation', engagement being understood as another front in the ongoing class war.

While 1936 may have been the moment in which the majority of communists became willing to engage with management and 'ring doorbells' at government ministries, it is clear that a significant section of the French communist movement was already engaged in precisely this activity from the late 1920s.

Conclusion

This book has shed important new light on the interconnected histories of interwar communism and the French labour movement in three key areas. First, it has explored the growth of communist support among one of the PCF's key working-class constituencies, the railway workers. *Fellow Travellers* is the first book to provide a detailed examination of how and why communist militants were able to put down such deep and long-lasting roots among this significant group of workers during the interwar years. In particular, by placing the emphasis upon the workplace and industrial politics, this work provides one of the few book-length studies of communist trade unionism in France during the interwar period, and sheds important new light on the communist-led CGTU and its relationship with workers and the Communist Party.

Second, this work has sought to place communist activity firmly within the political and social contexts of the railways and railway industrial relations. By exploring the manner in which communist militants sought to respond to the particular challenges and dilemmas posed by the railway context through the 1920s and 1930s, the work has shed important light upon the shifting strategies and approaches adopted by the communist-led railway trade union as its leaders and local activists negotiated a path between their communist political convictions and the everyday realities of the railway workplace. In so doing we have seen how communist militants, through their deepening relations with management and state officials, contributed to the shaping of what was to become a particularly French approach to industrial politics during the interwar years, echoing the findings of Herrick Chapman in his early research on France's aircraft workers.¹

¹ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*.

Third, this work has focussed upon the question of power and the place of workers within the late-Third Republic. From the late 1920s onwards, communist militants on the railways placed the extension of working-class representation and the contestation of managerial authority within the railway industry at the heart of their industrial strategy. Defeated, divided, and excluded from positions of influence within the industry after the 1920 strikes, French railway workers, through the activities of communist militants, were increasingly able to exert themselves upon the calculations of railway company management and French state officials. This developing policy of engagement, which I have labelled ‘hostile participation’, was pursued with increasing pragmatism through the years of ‘class-against-class’, and reached its apotheosis with the advent of the Popular Front. Here, from a new position of strength, and with this a renewed spirit of optimism and collaborative endeavour, cheminots, alongside other workers, helped to shape an all-too-brief experiment in industrial social democracy, resting upon the principles of shared power and responsibility between management and workers. Though this moment would be short lived, its legacies for French industrial politics would be long lasting.

The collaborative ethos in railway industrial relations within the SNCF, pioneered during the Popular Front years, re-emerged after the Liberation of France in 1944–1945. Once more, a communist-dominated labour movement worked in close cooperation with the state-operated railways, though not without significant tensions, notably during the major strikes of 1947. Yet, the collaborative spirit held sway through this crisis and the railways were largely spared the violence and victimisation that occurred in the mining industry in the aftermath of these strikes. The experience of the occupation played an important role in the shaping of post-war industrial relations on the railways. The Vichy period, of course, brought new challenges as the cheminots, along with the wider population of France, suffered the impact of defeat and occupation. As a vital national asset, Vichy largely left the structures of the SNCF in place. However, despite the enthusiasm of some within the CGT for Vichy’s new corporate economic order, workers were deliberately marginalised from Vichy’s plans for a new economic order.² Nevertheless, the shared experience of wartime deprivation and the trials of railway work through the occupation served to rebuild bridges between workers and managers within the SNCF, bonds that were reinforced at the Liberation by the resistance credentials earned by the French railways during the ‘battle of the rails’, and even more so by the mythologising of SNCF resistance in the post-Liberation

² On industrial organisation, see André Luc Brunet, *Forging Europe: Industrial Organisation in France, 1940–1952* (London, 2017).

era.³ This mythology could be a source of tension, notably between the post-war SNCF President Louis Armand and the communist-dominated CGT, the former strongly resentful of the latter's attempts to lay claim to the entire history of resistance on the railways. Nevertheless, the sense of a heroic past in the service of the nation, together with the professional ethos of railway work, served to reinforce the generally collaborative patterns of industrial relations on the railways during France's post-war reconstruction.⁴ Yet, for all the significance of the wartime experience, the key foundations of post-war industrial relations on the railways were laid during the interwar period as the growth in power and influence of communist-led trade unionism on the railways advanced alongside deepening state involvement in the industry.

Constantly evolving throughout the interwar years, communist practice on the railways demonstrated a marked pragmatism and an increasing propensity towards engagement with railway managers and state officials in the sphere of industrial politics. The communists' early rejection of anything that reminded them of CGT wartime reformism was quickly abandoned in favour of a more nuanced approach through the 1920s. This period of adaptation culminated in 1928 in the adoption of what I have termed a 'hostile participation' within the structures of capitalist industrial relations on the railways. Developed during the Comintern's 'class-against-class' period, this approach witnessed the communist-led cheminot union, the FNCU, reconceptualising the industry's tripartite consultative committees as key battlegrounds in the class war, arenas in which cheminot voices could challenge the authority of company managers and state officials. This new approach operated in tandem with a renewed engagement on the part of communist activists with the everyday realities of the railway workplace, particularly with regard to cheminot pay and the issue of railway safety. Though such practices had been set in motion prior to the shift to 'class-against-class', the new Comintern line gave renewed impetus to the railway workers' strategy as militants drew upon the sectarian language and imagery of class conflict in order to encode as revolutionary those practices they had previously denounced as CGT reformism. With some important modifications, this strategy would endure into the 1930s, and would help to shape the railway workers' approach to the Popular Front government.

The FNCU's original shift towards participation in railway industrial relations came clothed in the language of the Comintern's Third Period.

³ Ludivine Broch, *Ordinary Workers, Vichy and the Holocaust: French Railwaymen and the Second World War*.

⁴ On this, see Herrick Chapman, *France's Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018), pp. 203–204.

However, it was above all a response to the circumstances of interwar industrial relations on the railways, and the significant constraints faced by railway workers as they sought to maintain a revolutionary approach to trade union politics in the challenging years of the 1920s. The Great War had witnessed a marked rise in worker militancy on the railways. In common with other workers in France and elsewhere in the combatant nations, France's railway workers adopted an increasingly radical outlook as the experience of wartime privations and the growing class-based antagonisms within the war economy merged with a profound desire that wartime sacrifices should be rewarded by fundamental political and social transformations once victory was achieved.

Following the armistice, social divisions sharpened further as workers' frustrations with the slow pace of change were harnessed by a new revolutionary leadership that was growing in strength within the Fédération des Cheminots. Growing dissatisfaction with reformist strategies and an increasingly belligerent management, backed by a right-wing government eager to turn back the clock on labour's wartime gains and restore 'order' to the economy, led to a series of confrontations between labour and management on the railways in 1920. These culminated in the month-long general strike of May. The workers' defeat in this strike, and in particular the heavy-handed victimisation that followed in its wake, had a profound and long-lasting impact upon the French labour movement in general, and upon the railway workers in particular. For the latter, the mass sackings and imprisonment of the strike leaders cast a long shadow. After 1920, railway workers would not again be willing to so openly challenge the authority of railway managers and the French state. Through the interwar years, including during the 'social explosion' of May and June 1936, France's railway workers remained largely unmoved by calls to strikes or demonstrations, their apparent lack of political militancy a cause of regular frustrations within the French Communist Party.

It was not just the railway workers' union federations that faced challenging circumstances through the course of the 1920s and early 1930s. The post-war recession of 1921–1922 and renewed employer combativeness pushed workers generally onto the defensive, leading to a series of unsuccessful strikes in defence of established salaries and working conditions, notably in the northern textile industry. In 1921 metal workers in Le Havre launched a 100 day strike in protest against a 10% pay cut; the strike similarly ended in defeat for the workers.⁵ A mix of paternalist strategies and tight regulation of the workplace, including ensuring that politically 'troublesome' workers were isolated or removed altogether, served to effectively depoliticise industrial relations.

⁵ Xavier Vigna, *Histoire des ouvriers en France au xx^e siècle*, p. 76.

On the railways, the defeat of the general strike and the subsequent weakening of the union movement among the cheminots left railway companies and their supporters in parliament and in government clear to see off the threat of nationalisation. With the 1921 Railway Act, the French government recommitted to the centrality of private capital in the running of the national rail network. Yet, this picture of an unambiguous post-war ‘return to order’ requires nuance. The growth in state involvement in the railway industry could not be entirely turned back, and in particular the centralisation of railway affairs under the aegis of the Ministry of Public Works was reinforced during the post-war period. Moreover, the 1921 Act left railway finances more than ever an issue of national political concern as the state undertook to guarantee railway debts. Administrative developments progressed hand-in-glove with important structural changes in labour relations on the railways. The passing into law of the railway statute in 1920 was a significant moment, guaranteeing important elements of the cheminots’ working conditions and, for the first time, setting pay rates nationally. Importantly, the statute also introduced industry-wide personnel delegations, with representatives elected by their fellow workers to serve on advisory committees alongside local and national managers as well as with state officials. Alongside these developments a new generation of railway managers, most notably Raoul Dautry came into prominent leadership positions within the industry, committed to bridging the divide between management and labour, and to fostering a collaborative sense of partnership within the railway companies founded upon a shared sense of professional competence and commitment to the railway service.

Just a few years after the defeat of the 1920 railway strike, industry elites celebrated the new-found social peace on the railways. On the Nord, the company which had gone furthest in the promotion of an ‘organicist’ vision of labour relations, census compilers drew attention to the many markers of stability and contentment within their workforce. Indeed, throughout the interwar years, the railways continued to provide a measure of stability and steady career progression largely unknown elsewhere in French industry. Though the sackings that followed the 1920 strike had been severe, the industry continued to employ significant numbers, and company attempts to reduce the labour force proved largely unsuccessful. Yet, for all the signs of stability, significant tensions remained. The unravelling of the eight-hour day and company intransigence in the face of demands for the reintegration of the révoqués of 1920 generated much resentment among the cheminot rank-and-file which translated into ongoing support for the communist-led FNCU. Evidence presented in the course of this book also suggests that railway workers were much less in thrall to company discourses of unity and collaboration than has previously been thought. The scale of

the phenomenon of the denunciations of local managers that appeared in the letters section of the FNCU's bi-monthly newspaper, the *Tribune des cheminots* is one such marker of ongoing discontent at the grassroots. Significant, too, was the strong support among cheminots for the FNCU's policy of abstaining in the industry-wide personnel elections of 1922 and 1925. Rank-and-file workers thus proved unwilling to legitimate company attempts to co-opt them into an elite vision of shared interests.

A class-based language of *esprit de corps* therefore developed in counterpoint to the company rhetoric of shared interests that transcended class divisions. The FNCU played an important role in fostering this sense of cheminot identity that stood in contradistinction to company appeals to loyalty. What is more, trade unions remained strong on the railways. Yet, for all that, after 1920 the cheminots were deaf to the calls of both the FNCU and the PCF to engage in almost any strikes or demonstrations, whether these had political or strictly corporative objectives. During both the Ruhr crisis and the campaign against the Rif War, communists ran into the marked disengagement of the cheminots. The FNCU's early industrial relations strategy of calling for cheminot demands to be settled in the streets rather than in the workplace or through managerial committees as the CGT preferred was, therefore, hardly a recipe for long-term success among the railway rank and file. Had the union persisted with this approach, an outlook which was born of the deep animosity harboured among the former minoritaires towards the wartime Union Sacré, it is likely that communist influence among the railway workers would have suffered the same shrivelling away of support as occurred elsewhere in France through the 1920s. Instead, pragmatism and political innovation emerged as significant characteristics within the FNCU. Union leaders undertook a precarious balancing act, seeking to emphasise their revolutionary credentials while maintaining the confidence of the cheminot membership.

Fellow Travellers has also emphasised the significance of the railway workers to the history of the Popular Front in France. As this book has shown, French railway workers were at the heart of the Popular Front's transformation from an anti-fascist political alliance into an experiment in social-democratic industrial politics. In November 1938 cheminots were in the front rank of efforts to save the Popular Front, not, as some have argued, because of the importance attached to its material benefits, though these were important, to be sure. Rather, it was the political and symbolic significance of the Popular Front that the railway workers mobilised to defend in the autumn of 1938, an attempt to save the principle of working-class power in the workplace against the concerted backlash launched by employers who enjoyed the full backing of the state. The collaborative experience of the Popular Front era was not to last long, although on the railways the new

collective contract gained by the cheminots upon the nationalisation of the railways in 1937 did guarantee a continued measure of mutual engagement between union and management. Nevertheless, in common with the wider experience of French labour, the run-up to war was characterised by a general poisoning of the atmosphere between workers and management, together with a mounting anti-communism on the part of French elites. This atmosphere may in part help to explain the PCF's willingness to embrace the Nazi–Soviet pact, disastrous as this was for the party in the short term.

France's railway workers have been among the great overlooked elements in the creation and maintenance of a powerful, living communist culture in France between the two world wars. *Fellow Travellers* has sought to replace the cheminots firmly back within this history. However, the practices and realities of railway communism, and the tensions which they engendered within the Communist Party, also serve as a salient reminder that communism in particular, and working-class politics and society in France more broadly, were far from monolithic affairs.

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In recent years, archival research on the PCF and the Communist International has been revolutionised by major digitisation projects which allow the archives of the French Communist Party and the Comintern to be viewed online. The PANDOR project managed by the University of Bourgogne is an invaluable resource for scholars, as are the digitised collections of the Comintern, run by the INCOMKA project. In addition to the above, scholars are able to access significant sections of the Communist press and Communist publications via the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's Gallica project. Here the newspapers and publications held by the IHS Cheminot Federation can now be viewed following a recent digitisation project. As this book was in its final stages of completion, the IHS CGT Cheminot archive conducted a major reclassification project of its archival holdings. The research for this book was concluded prior to this recataloguing.

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