

Communists and Cheminots: Industrial Relations and Ideological Conflict in the French Railway Industry, 1919-1939.

Submitted by Thomas William Beaumont, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History, August, 2011.

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the tensions within French Communist identity as leaders and militants attempted to make sense of their role as Communists and revolutionaries operating within a non-Communist society. Focussing upon the Communist-led railway workers' trade union federation, the thesis argues both against monolithic interpretations of Communist activity during the interwar years and conceptualizations of Communism as a 'counter-society'. Rather, it emphasizes the complex process through which Communists developed their influence and leadership credentials amongst the railway workforce.

Communists on the railways had, by the end of the 1920s, moved from an anti-system position to one marked by participation in railway industrial politics, albeit clothed in the language of class conflict. This was a consequence of the pursuit of a strategy which aimed to contest the legitimacy of both employers and trade union rivals to speak on behalf of the rank-and-file. To this end, Communists developed a pragmatic reading of rank-and-file expectations and a realistic assessment of railway worker militancy. This uncomfortable accommodation with railway capitalism, however, posed challenges to the self-identification of union leaders as revolutionaries. The situation was significantly altered with the advent of the Popular Front and the new collaborative politics of the years 1936-1938. Yet this period also witnessed continuity. The united and newly confident *Fédération des Cheminots* drew upon a decade of experience of engagement to significantly advance the power and influence of railway workers within the industry. The railway experience, it is argued, underlines a significant element within French Communist politics both for the interwar period and beyond.

In an industry plagued by financial difficulties, its future organization contested, railway workers were participants in debates of national significance. Examining how state, companies and workforce competed to define a modernization agenda, this thesis contributes to the historiography of politics and society in late Third Republic France emphasizing the innovation and creativity of the 1930s. Yet in highlighting the contested nature of trade union power and the changing dynamics of industrial relations through the interwar years, the thesis argues that political questions were central to organizational debates and that competing visions of the future of France were shot through with assumptions about hierarchies, order and stability.

Acknowledgements

Research for this thesis was undertaken with financial support from the University of Exeter 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.

I owe an enormous debt to Martin Thomas, firstly for putting me on the trail of the *cheminots*, then providing encouragement, the benefit of his considerable expertise and attention to detail throughout the project. I could not have asked for a better supervisor. Andrew Thorpe acted as second supervisor for this thesis, I have learned an enormous amount from our discussions over several years on the subjects of British and European labour history. My thanks, too, to Stacey Hynd who acted as Mentor to the thesis. While not involved in supervising the thesis, Tim Rees continued to take an interest in my work and was always prepared to chat about my ideas. Jeremy Black, in the course of numerous conversations, has acted as a sounding board for ideas, posed challenging questions and offered advice and encouragement. Beyond Exeter's History department, I would like to thank Jackie Clarke for allowing me to see a chapter of her manuscript ahead of publication and Talbot Imlay who read and commented on sections of the thesis.

Friends and fellow postgraduates at Exeter have been an amazing source of advice and a very welcome diversion from work. In particular I would like to mention Richard Batten, Nicholas Birkitt, Jennifer Evans, Laure Humbert and Michael Lea O'Mahoney. Thanks too to Jon and Rosie Edgar, James Hadley, Alex Howard and Zena Wood. All have put up with my frequent discussions of railways, *cheminots* and Communists with patience and good humour. Cheers all.

Finally and most importantly, huge thanks to my family for their support and encouragement.

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Introduction

From the mid-1920s onwards revolution ceased to be a meaningful immediate or short-term goal for an important section of the Communist movement in France. Communist leaders and militants at the head of the cheminot trade union federation -- from 1922 until 1936 the largest group within the Communist dominated *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU) -- effectively jettisoned violence, subversion and even the political strike from their repertoire of protest. As this thesis aims to demonstrate, through the course of the 1920s leading Communists elaborated a different path. This saw the *Fédération Nationale des Cheminots, Unitaire* (FNCU or *unitaires*), still dominated and led by Communist trade union officials, abandon its self-imposed isolation from the industrial politics of the railways in order to defend cheminot salaries and working conditions, increasingly through negotiation with management and state representatives. Issues of job security, improvements in workplace and railway safety, and the protection of the established rights from which railway workers benefited were placed at the heart of this new political agenda.

Although more prepared to engage in talks with managers and government, railway union statements were still clothed in radical rhetoric emphasizing class struggle and opposition to capitalist power. This gap between stated objectives and actual practice was nonetheless consistent with the twin strategy developed by the FNCU's Communist leadership, enabling them to make sense of the role of Communist organization on the railways. Its first aspect was to maintain and extend the Communist-led organization as the representative voice for cheminots within railway industrial relations. This involved contesting the legitimacy of managers within the private railway companies, and later the *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer* (SNCF), challenging their authority to speak on behalf of railway workers or to shape cheminot political identities. This tactic also saw the FNCU competing aggressively with their rivals, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) affiliated *Fédération Nationale des Cheminots, Confédérée* (FNCC or *confédérés*) for influence among the cheminots in the period before the eventual reunification of the two rival union bodies in 1935. Prior to this, their more combative strategy encouraged the Communist-led union to situate cheminot interests at the heart of their platform to demonstrate that their militant approach was well judged both to defend cheminot interests and to achieve improved terms and conditions for their members. The extent to which any meaningful improvements could be achieved under

capitalism remained a source of considerable tension, however. As a result, the second strand within the Communist trade union strategy developed on the railways was the more significant. Closely linked to the first, it identified the central aim of Communist action as the advancement of worker power within the railway industry. The underlying aim was to counter the arbitrary power -- often conceptualized as 'arrogance' -- of railway companies in their relations with the workforce. In sum, while the FNCU continued to identify with the Soviet Union and International Communism, remained strongly linked with the *Parti Communiste Français* (French Communist Party, PCF), and was still intent on attacking capitalism and capitalist rationalization techniques, the union leadership departed from these ostensibly hard-line positions in practice. Indeed, the FNCU proved less concerned to overturn the 'system' of which it was the professed enemy than to carve out an independent and powerful voice for cheminots within it.

This more pragmatic stance is usually dated to a later point than will be suggested here. Communist politics in the late 1920s and early 1930s is often portrayed as having being mired in the sectarian isolationism of the Comintern's 'class against class' strategy. The turn to compromise is more normally associated with the fundamental reorientation in International Communist political strategy following the advent of the Popular Front, usually tied, in the French context to the re-evaluation of union objectives and tactics in the wake of the mass strikes and factory occupations of May and June 1936. Central to this Popular Front-era change was the new-found willingness to negotiate of Communist militants, who were now prepared to participate in company and industry personnel committees and ring doorbells at government Ministries.¹ In the process a new era of industrial politics was ushered in which saw state, industry and Communist-led trade unionism collaborating, albeit not without tensions, in the management of the

¹ The years between the schism in the French socialist and trade union movements in 1920-1921 and the emergence of the Popular Front line of 1935-1936 are often characterized as a fallow period in histories of the French labour movement. Georges Lefranc wrote of these years as a 'voie sans issue: révolutionnaires sans révolution, réformistes sans réformes', Georges Lefranc, *Le Mouvement syndical sous la Troisième République* (Paris, 1967), p.266; Herrick Chapman emphasizes the gap between CGTU militants and the rank-and-file workers in the aircraft industry prior to the Popular Front in Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry* (Berkeley, 1991), pp.43--44; see also, Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France, Defending Democracy, 1943-1938* (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 emphasize 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* (Paris, 1986); Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l'époque du front populaire* (Paris, 1964).

economy. Though this experiment lasted just two years and did not extend into all sectors equally, the experience nonetheless, profoundly marked Communist militants and the workforces they represented.² Only after World War II would this more conciliatory style of industrial relations resurface. As Irwin Wall has argued, between 1944 and 1947 a form of *de facto* social contract was elaborated between government, employers and the workforce, by then represented overwhelmingly by the Communist CGT, and predicated upon a fundamental redistribution of power. At this point in the early post-war era, a strong independent voice for workers within the management of the economy was the Communist price for engagement with the ‘battle for production.’ that proved so integral to French recovery.³

This thesis does not dispute the signal importance of these events, a decade apart. Rather, it will suggest that the broad outlines of the strategies discussed above were already nascent within the railway industry in the years prior to the Popular Front.⁴ It was during the early interwar period that the FNCU acquired the experience -- and the habit -- of participation in industry-wide personnel elections and direct representation on company personnel committees from local to national level. From 1928, for instance, FNCU delegates took an active part in the national corporative advisory body for the railway industry, the *Conseil Supérieur* or ‘High Council’, which grouped together industry representatives such as Édouard de Rothschild, with state officials, other national business leaders and, for the first time, a small number of elected workforce representatives. This was the logical outcome of the strategy of advancing cheminot representation -- and thereby consolidating union power -- within the industry. Yet it provoked something of a Communist identity crisis within the FNCU leadership. Several members of the National Federal Executive were high profile figures within the French Communist Party’s national leadership. And, as card-carrying Communists within the FNCU, they identified fully both with the party and with PCF leadership of

² Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*; John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front* (London, 2008), emphasizes how agricultural workers were not included in the Popular Front social legislation and Matignon Accords.

³ Irwin Wall, ‘The French Social Contract: Conflict amid Cooperation’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 50 (Fall, 1996), 116--124.

⁴ Important studies have traced these developments at work within the French Communist movement prior to the advent of the Popular Front, see in particular Bernard Pudal, *Prendre Parti: pour une sociologie historique du PCF* (Paris, 1989); Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schweitzer, *Le communisme à l’usine: vie ouvrière et mouvement ouvrier chez Renault, 1920-1939* (Paris, 1984); see also, Bertrand Badie, *Stratégie de la grève. Pour une approche fonctionnaliste du parti communiste français* (Paris, 1976).

the trade union movement. That said, in the years following the 1920 railway strike (of which more later), the FNCU leadership ultimately based its actions on a pragmatic reading of rank-and-file expectations of railway trade union activity and a realistic assessment of what *cheminot* militancy could achieve.

The central argument developed in later chapters is this. The decade from the mid-1920s until 1936 was characterized by what might be described as tentative oppositional engagement within railway industrial relations on the part of Communists, who, as union leaders, challenged company power while, at the same time, attempting to extend *cheminot* influence within their industry. Reconceptualizing their new-found willingness to participate in talks with management as opening another front in the class war, these union leaders found the necessary rhetorical justification for their increasing engagement in the industrial politics of the railways. As a result, the FNCU provided an important means of expression for *cheminot* militancy short of strike action. This was crucial because, for many rank-and-file members, bitter memories of the failed industrial actions of 1919-20 precluded any return to strikes as a political tactic, at least in the short term.

The interwar years have been identified as marking a period in which *cheminots* withdrew from social struggles into a narrow concern with their own corporative interests -- a situation which was to endure until the exigencies of the German occupation of World War II would once more force railway workers to make political choices.⁵ A number of historians have developed a range of theories to account for the decline in *cheminot* militancy (especially when measured in terms of the absence of strike action), emphasizing the role of railway company social projects, forward looking management figures such as Raoul Dautry and the importance of state involvement in the railways as key elements in containing *cheminot* militancy.⁶ This study, however, argues that rank-and-file radicalism continued to be an important factor in the industry.

⁵ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève ou la construction d'une identité* (Paris, 2002).

⁶ On the 'absence' of *cheminot* militancy during the interwar period see François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France, tome 2, 1884-1937* (Paris, 2005); Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*; Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines républicaines de Vichy* (Paris, 1999); idem, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xix-xxe siècle* (Paris, 1986); Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class, vol. 2: Workers and the Bourgeois Republic, 1871-1939* (Oxford, 1992); Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy: Trade Unions and Politics in Two French Cities in the Era of World War One* (Chicago, 1986); 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; Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France, 1830-1968* (London, 1974).

Cheminots voted in large numbers for FNCU candidates at personnel elections thereby allowing the *unitaires* to dominate these bodies and define the terms of cheminot engagement with them. That is not to imply that either the FNCU or the cheminot rank-and-file was quiescent. At significant moments, notably the government's 1922 reversal of legislation regarding the eight-hour day, a series of railway pay disputes between 1925 and 1928, and as a result of the Doumergue and Laval governments' deflationary policies in the early depression years, the authorities provoked major unrest among railway workers.

With the reunification of the railway workers' unions in 1935 and the election of the Popular Front government the following May, the cheminots' approach to industrial politics underwent a significant change of emphasis. Buoyed by a marked rise in their already large membership, at last united, and with a sympathetic government in office, the renamed *Fédération des Cheminots* (FdC) entered negotiations with the railway companies with a resurgent confidence in what could be achieved. With a much enlarged mass membership, a more streamlined organization, and a keen appreciation of their importance as representatives of a key strategic sector of the economy (plus years of experience in dealing with company and state representatives), the cheminot leadership was well placed to push its demands. Without resorting to strike action, the cheminots emerged from June 1936 having gained more than striking workers elsewhere in the economy, whose actions were only just beginning to reap the tangible rewards in working conditions with which the cheminots had long been familiar. Confident of their strength and facing railway companies whose demise seemed imminent as nationalization discussions proceeded apace, between 1936 and 1938 the FdC acquired a much stronger voice within the industry, extending its role in key decisions. This was particularly the case from January 1938 when, with the creation of the SNCF, the FdC gained a position on the new Administrative Council established to manage the newly-nationalized network. These pre-war advances, however, were not to last.

In November 1938 the railway 'social contract' founded upon the principles of shared responsibility between SNCF and FdC over workforce matters was arbitrarily overturned by government decree. This provoked anger among the rank-and-file and fury within the FdC leadership. The cheminots' decision to participate in the 30 November general strike was critical in persuading the national executive of the CGT to

endorse the action in protest at government policy. As is well known, the resultant strike was a failure. The involvement of rank-and-file trade unionists proved disappointing, being considerably less than anticipated. The FdC leadership had other industry-specific worries too: confronted by the prospect of military occupation of the railway network as well as requisition orders threatening cheminots with criminal action if they did not report for work. Clearly, the political environment had changed. Under the impetus of Édouard Daladier's government and his influential Finance Minister, Paul Reynaud, France seemed to be reverting to the earlier era in which the state placed very real obstacles to strike action and union power within the railway sector. The Reynaud decrees, which overturned the social legislation of June 1936 and, most importantly, introduced greater market liberalism to the French economy, signified the final rupture with the preceding worker-friendly policies of the Popular Front.⁷ The arbitrary reversal of all that they had worked to achieve over the interwar period was regarded as a major betrayal by the FdC, explaining the enthusiasm with which they threw themselves into plans for a general strike. That said, 30 November 1938 was not a revolutionary attempt to overthrow the state but a last-ditch rear-guard action to defend the principle of worker participation in management decision-making, something that, as we shall see in the forthcoming chapters, the union and its Communist-dominated predecessor had built up over the preceding generation. Key figures within the CGT considered this the basis of a more modern and equitable industrial society as well as a central pillar of French efforts to meet the fascist challenge, both domestically and internationally.

Trade unions were active participants in national debates concerning the organization of the railway industry and its place within the French national economy, the shock of November 1938 notwithstanding. With mounting railway deficits and the ever-present threat of accidents throughout the interwar period, the railways became an important focus for public debate in parliament and in the press about the forms, implications and consequences of industrial modernization. The professional concerns and interests of cheminots also assumed greater symbolic importance in the context of these debates. Railway unions -- both the FNCC and FNCU -- were aware of this, and engaged with these currents of debate in an effort to shape their outcome. Railway companies and

⁷ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France, 1938-1940* (Oxford, 2003); Richard Vinen, *The Politics of French Business, 1936-1945* (Cambridge, 1991); Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938*; Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1981), pp.125--127; Guy Bourd , *La d faite du front populaire* (Paris, 1977).

trade unions, including the FNCU, appealed beyond the confines of the railway industry, attempting to influence national opinion, particularly on the safety question. In addition, debates over the future of the railway industry were themselves increasingly subsumed within wider discussions over the future direction of France and, more particularly, over conflicting perceptions of crisis within French society and politics. All participants within railway industrial politics -- state, companies and trade unions, whether Communist or non-Communist -- were deeply implicated in the attempt to create a modernized railway industry fit for a 'modern' France. In an 'age of organization'⁸ participants in railway industrial relations competed to define the terms and meanings of a 'modernization' agenda. Through their attempts to extend cheminot influence within their industry, Communists on the railways would play an important role in defining the direction of these debates, attempting to counter the paternalistic family metaphors employed by railway company managers. FNCU political strategy ensured that the 'rationalizers' and 'organizers' within the industry, such as Raoul Dautry, met with a significant challenge to their visions of harmonizing social relations solely upon elite terms.

The railway industry thus provides a privileged, though under-examined, lens through which to analyse important developments in interwar industrial politics in France. Railway workers have been little studied in this period beyond their involvement in the tense strike waves of 1920. Important studies, such as those of Annie Kriegel, Georges Ribeill and Adrian Jones, do not extend beyond this moment in cheminot history.⁹ The most recent study of French railway workers by Christian Chevandier traces cheminot history across the twentieth century and, as such, provides only limited coverage of the interwar period.¹⁰ Moreover, Chevandier's concentration upon the role of strike action in the formation of cheminot identity provides only a partial reading of the broader experience of industrial politics within the railway industry. Chevandier's approach is revealing of a broader trend in labour history which privileges strike action as the key

⁸ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization: Factory Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy* (New York, 2011).

⁹ Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January-May 1920: New Syndicalist Ideas and Emergent Communism', *French Historical Studies*, 12, 4 (1982), 508--540; Georges Ribeill, *Les cheminots en guerre, 1914-1920: Métamorphoses d'une corporation* (Paris, 1988); Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots* (Paris, 1988), originally published as part of *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914-1920: Contribution à l'histoire du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris, 1964).

¹⁰ Christian Chevandier, *Les cheminots en grève*.

focus of industrial politics.¹¹ In the period after 1945, cheminots developed a pronounced reputation for industrial militancy. This was built upon the legacy of resistance to the German occupation, memorialized in René Clément's 1946 film *La bataille du rail*, involvement in the national strike waves of 1947 and 1968 and, most crucially, the high visibility and wide impact of even minor stoppages on the railway network.¹² Yet, in the period between 1920 and the onset of World War II, the cheminots did not strike. As we saw above, historians have developed various hypotheses to explain this apparent lack of militancy. The concentration upon strike action as the key locus of militancy, however, takes too narrow a view of industrial politics in the interwar period. It risks magnifying in importance the extraordinary at the expense of the complex day-to-day preoccupations of workers, management and, crucially in the context of the railways, the state.

This thesis thus explores the political culture of industrial politics on the railways in a manner which goes beyond a narrow focus upon strike activity and its causes. It focuses instead upon the manner in which cheminots principally, but also railway management and the French state, made sense of the developing industrial relations structures of the interwar period and adapted to them. This was not an uncontentious process, as we shall see, and witnessed trade unions, managers and state officials engaged in intense competition to define and give meaning to worker participation in the economic sphere. The emphasis upon competition is important, for it reveals a key element in the thesis's approach to labour history. Workers and management cannot be examined in isolation for in their regular interactions each was compelled to adapt to the position of the other. Cheminot trade unions and railway management constantly defined and redefined their industrial and political strategies in relation to one another. Moreover, industrial relations cannot be understood in isolation from broader trends in French culture and society. As the discussions of management and cheminot political culture in the chapters which follow demonstrate, railway industrial relations were always a prism through which broader concerns were refracted. These focussed, ultimately, upon the question of power in society, the place and role of workers in that society and their relationship with interwar French elites. The approach adopted in this thesis, therefore,

¹¹ Perhaps the best known work in this regard is Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France*; see also for the late nineteenth-century, Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France, 1871-1890*, 2 vols (Paris, 1974).

¹² On Clément's *La bataille du rail* see Martin O'Shaughnessy, 'La Bataille du Rail: Unconventional Form, Conventional Image?', in H. R. Kedward and Nancy Wood, *The Liberation of France: Image and Event* (Oxford, 1995), pp.15-27.

reflects that adopted in the work of Herrick Chapman and Talbot Imlay, whose triangular studies of industrial relations in the interwar years reveal this to be a vital field in the broader context of French political and economic life.¹³

The structure of the thesis

Chapter One examines the contexts in which railway industrial relations developed after 1918. Exploring recent academic debates over the decline and fall of the Third Republic, the chapter argues that the ‘hollow years’ characterization of the interwar period does justice neither to the complexity and dynamism of French politics and society, nor to the imaginativeness of the solutions proposed for the crises which France was understood to be facing. The chapter places the *cheminots* within the wider context of French workers’ experiences during the interwar period and provides important historiographical background to debates concerning Communist politics in this period. Arguing that historians have overplayed the extent to which Communists in the interwar period attempted to insulate themselves from French society and national debates, the chapter contends instead that an engagement with the aspirations and immediate interests of French workers was a fundamental aspect of Communist strategy, one that ultimately trumped an emphasis upon violence or preparations for insurrection.

Chapter Two examines the responses of railway management in general and certain directors in particular to the challenges facing the industry during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite unflattering depictions of them in parliament and in sections of the press as backward looking, and even a dangerous impediment to France’s economic and political development, the railway companies saw themselves quite differently: as part of a modernizing, technocratic elite. A central element in their approach was the desire to re-imagine relationships between management and workforce, the aim of which was to develop an ‘organicist’ reading of railway industrial relations that would serve as a counterweight to union militancy. Seeking to provide a new model for social relations in France, railway engineers such as Raoul Dautry sought to foster a sense of shared interest between management and *cheminots* through the adoption of a wide range of social benefits, most notably a massive company housing programme. Emphasis was placed throughout the industry upon a language of cohesion, expressed through the

¹³ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*; Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*.

metaphors of teamwork and family. The commitment to modernization also manifested itself in the desire among railway managers to update working practices and replace ageing railway equipment. Central to this was the drive to implement rationalized working techniques drawn eclectically from the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor but also from the French advocate of industrial psychology, Jean-Marie Lahy. Efforts were also undertaken to achieve economies and eliminate waste. This managerial style also resulted in several notable interventions in the wider cultural debate which animated 1930s France as to the nature of social cohesion in a society which seemed increasingly marked by division. More obviously, company thinking was also pivotal in the context of another debate, the on-going discussions over the future of the railway industry. Faced with increasing competition from road transport and a deteriorating financial position as the depression bit, railway company directors actively pursued and defined a modernization programme as a means to secure their position within the economic and political landscape of 1930s France.

Chapter Three examines the role played by anti-Communism in shaping the mental-maps of French elites as they struggled to make sense of Communist trade union organization on the railways. Government Ministers, Prefects and *Sûreté* officials drew upon their readings of international Communist practice and its presumed ideological motivations to make sense of the Communist presence within the railway industry. The actions and rhetoric of Communist trade union leaders on the railways were therefore judged by an abstracted set of criteria that combined alarming precedents from the Communist Party actions in the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 to the paramilitary military violence witnessed in Germany and Central Europe in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Communism in France was, therefore, equated with insurrectionary violence and conspiracy. On the railway network, clearly a vital strategic sector of the economy which also played a significant role in national security planning, Communists were viewed as a form of fifth-column within French society, ready at any moment to seize control of the nation's communication arteries. In many ways the rhetoric of militants within the national Communist Party and within the Communist-led cheminot trade union reinforced elite readings of the situation which posited that an important section of the railway workforce constituted a potential subversive threat. Yet such an analysis required the overlooking of the details of Communist practice on the railways. The recurrent emphasis upon Communism as an existential threat to France was damaging, undermining railway company efforts to

build the community of interests they desired. This was particularly the case in the 1920s when incidents occurring on the railway network were constantly attributed to acts of sabotage believed to have been carried out by railway workers. The effects of such accusations, often unsubstantiated, alienated important sections of the workforce from both company and state reinforcing a thesis of 'victimization' that became integral to Communist identity. Though such characterizations seem to have waned during the 1930s, they reappeared once more during the Phoney War period as government insecurities over war preparations drove anti-Communism to a new pitch of intensity. The chapter suggests, by contrast, that during its earlier peak in the 1920s, elite anti-Communism served as an important wedge between management and government on the one hand and a significant section of the cheminot workforce on the other.

Chapter Four turns towards the analysis of the Communist-led cheminot trade union, the FNCU, focusing on its involvement in railway industrial relations between 1919 and 1928. Following the general strike of May 1920 and the subsequent schism within railway trade unionism, the FNCU quickly and self-consciously asserted its identity as a Communist trade union. From the outset, the leadership was overwhelmingly comprised of current and former railway workers who were closely involved with the PCF at national and local levels. The leadership adopted the PCF and CGTU's Bolshevization plan in 1924 and a version of it was implemented in the railway sector, though with mixed results. The leading non-Communist member of the FNCU leadership, Antoine Rambaud, was hounded out of the union for his opposing the continuing strength of PCF influence within its decisions. Yet, despite this commitment to ideological orthodoxy, the union leadership entered into close interaction with management and state, participating in personnel elections and taking part in workforce delegate committees from the regional to the national level. These were committees which had been created by the 1921 statute and which operated according to the design of railway managers and government officials. As mentioned earlier, despite its initial hesitancy, even outright rejectionism, by 1928 the FNCU were full participants within railway industrial politics, taking up their seats upon the national *Conseil Supérieur*. The industrial relations structures created by the 1921 railway statute were almost without precedent, at least in peacetime, and importantly there was no pre-existing road map to guide Communists in their reactions to them. In the early 1920s a rejectionist, anti-statist approach seemed to best fit the political context of bitter opposition to the governing Bloc National. In fact, other extraneous events began to push the union

towards a reassessment of their position. Central to this was the long drawn out pay dispute of 1925-1928. Mobilizing opposition to the apparent lethargy in company, state and CGT efforts to reach a settlement attractive to the majority of the cheminots, the FNCU moved to the forefront of the campaign for fairer wages for railway workers. The campaign allowed the FNCU to develop a strategy that placed achievable cheminot demands at the heart of their political strategy, thereby meeting limited rank-and-file aspirations. This approach was, however, wrapped in the language of militant opposition to CGT 'reformists' and the combined 'capitalist' forces of railway companies and the state. Rhetorically forceful but increasingly practical, the strategy worked. Cheminots overwhelmingly backed Communist candidates in the 1928 personnel elections. Yet, as will be shown, the strategy which developed from this new approach raised considerable tensions within the FNCU, even so.

Chapter Five explores the tensions that the FNCU's participation in the 'bourgeois' structures of railway capitalism precipitated among the union's Communist leadership. Even with the adoption by the Comintern of the 'class against class' strategy in the summer of 1928, the FNCU maintained their position as engaged agents within railway industrial relations, championing cheminot interests and opposing railway company policies on rationalization and working practices. This did not preclude occasional agreements between the two sides entirely. Crucially, the FNCU worked the *Conseil Supérieur* and the regional personnel committees into their wider Communist ideological schema. Contrary to management visions of these committees serving corporatist and collaborative ends, the FNCU transformed them through their language and practice within the system into sites of class conflict through which Communist delegates opposed company power and unmasked CGT reformists. At the same time, however, the personnel committees were also bodies in which the FNCU upheld concrete cheminot interests, advancing cheminot influence in decisions concerning their work and defending job security on the railways. Increasingly, the evolving Communist approach to railway politics during the 1930s linked opposition to arbitrary company power with the desire for an independent cheminot voice at the heart of decision making, these two aspects emerging at the forefront of their agenda. Communist practice on the personnel committees also provided a space for cheminot militancy to express itself short of strike action. Through seeking to represent an independent cheminot voice and contesting the legitimacy of the CGT and the railway companies to speak on behalf of cheminots, the FNCU was, in practice, required to become a full

participant in railway industrial politics. It could not maintain its position through a return to the anti-system position of the early 1920s. The union, instead, came to accept its bureaucratic function as the vehicle for cheminots interests. The chapter suggests that, through the oppositional interplay of railway trade unions, management and state, the conditions for a social contract on the railways can be seen in embryo.

Chapter Six completes the analysis of the Communist approach to railway industrial relations in the pre-1936 era by examining the question of railway safety. This issue, more than any other in the interwar period, captures the full complexity of the Communist position in regard to railway industrial politics. From the mid-1920s the FNCU placed cheminot safety concerns at the heart of their agenda. Union leaders used the relatively high incidence of railway accidents and industrial accidents in the workplace as a central part of their critique of the ‘capitalist exploitation’ of the railway workers, attacking, in particular, the rationalization policies of the railway companies. Accidents on the railway network therefore became an important site of ideological conflict as railway companies and unions competed to provide rival interpretations. The FNCU attributed them to systemic capitalist failings; company managers to the actions of the individual cheminots involved. The FNCU also actively defended railway workers accused of having caused accidents, including in the courts. In the politics of safety, as elsewhere, the FNCU placed the opposition to arbitrary company power over the lives and livelihoods of the cheminots at the centre of their political agenda. They argued strongly for a cheminot voice at the heart of safety investigations, a campaign which led to the creation of personnel safety delegates in 1931. Despite brief initial misgivings, shared by their rivals within the FNCC, the FNCU threw themselves into the safety delegations. The Communist-led union defended railway workers against company accusations of improper actions and, significantly, attempted to reform both the role and scope of such delegations, a campaign that yielded some success. In addition, safety was intrinsically important, with implications that reached out beyond the world of railway industrial relations. Through their engagement with the question, the Communists became involved in a debate with truly national significance. Alert to this, Communists developed a national element in their propaganda. Through their language and presentation of ‘the safety problem’, the FNCU attempted to build a national coalition of all classes united against the ‘magnates’ of the railway industry who compromised the safety of everyone, regardless of class. This approach, evident from the late 1920s onwards demonstrates the flexibility and inventiveness of the

FNCU approach to railway politics and their growing awareness of the part they could play in national debate. Here, the chapter argues, may be seen an important forerunner of the Popular Front politics of the 1930s.

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, largely 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 play a significant role in the calculations of the French government, nonetheless. Concern that the *cheminot* might strike with all its attendant implications that the nation's economic arteries might be blocked, played strongly into the hands of the now reunited 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 forty-hour week under FdC supervision, and the nationalization of the railway network with the FdC represented on the board of the new SNCF, the Popular Front period saw the fulfilment of Communist and non-Communists aims held over the previous decade or more. Central to this was independent *cheminot* representation at the heart of power and a strong *cheminot* voice in decisions concerning the workplace. 1921 had laid the groundwork of a social contract on the railways; 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.

Taken as a whole, the thesis substantially agrees with much of the existing literature insofar as it accepts that *cheminot* trade union militancy was strongly determined by employer and state actions. Yet these factors were not, in and of themselves, sufficient cause either for *cheminot* militancy or its absence. Rather, while rank-and file radicalism was channelled into certain paths by these extraneous factors, it sustained its

own momentum derived from the internal dynamism of Communist trade unionists. However, Communists were forced to adapt to the particular circumstances of cheminot trade unionism, and this required a constant negotiation between theory and practice. Events demonstrated that there existed a space within the confines of PCF and Comintern ideology for such a reconciliation to occur. The analysis of cheminot Communism in the interwar period, through its contesting of power and its struggle for influence among the workers and within industrial politics allows us both to define and to examine an important strand of experience within French Communism, one that is important for understanding Communist practice in 1936-1938 and 1944-1947. Despite their revolutionary rhetoric, insurrection was never a fundamental element in French Communist politics. For all their apparent will to overthrow the established order, the quest to represent and advance working-class interests necessitated a practical engagement with capitalism. Sudhir Hazareesingh has emphasized the extent to which pragmatism and adaptability have been hallmarks of the Communist political tradition in twentieth-century France.¹⁴ During the interwar period, Communists carved out a space within which an independent working-class voice could be expressed within the republican framework. While historians have emphasized 1936 as a pivotal date in this process, it is clear that its antecedents are more firmly rooted in a certain Communist experience within France prior to this date.

¹⁴ Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Tradition in Modern France* (Oxford, 1994).

Chapter One: Politics and Society in Interwar France

Introduction

This chapter explores certain historiographical debates concerning French politics and social division between the two World Wars. The aim is to help illuminate the ways in which the politics of French trade unionism and industrial conflict have been constructed and explained within the wider context of French society in the twenty years preceding the defeat of 1940. Long examined through the prism of military defeat and Vichy collaborationism, interwar politicians, military strategists and French public opinion were analysed in terms of their 'decadence'. All were depicted as being afflicted by a moral crisis which inhibited the French response to the national and international crises of the 1930s and failed, in turn, to prepare France adequately for the challenge of war. The suddenness of the defeat of June 1940 has thus been read as History's judgement upon the Third Republic. Yet such a teleological reading of interwar French history has been challenged by a number of recent scholars who have emphasized the contingent nature of the military defeat which France suffered in the summer of 1940. Viewed from this perspective, with defeat by no means inevitable, historians have begun to nuance and to overturn received wisdoms regarding French military strategy, foreign and defence policy, the political will of French elites to face up to challenging realities and that of French society itself. Economic and cultural historians have too played a significant role in overturning received wisdoms of the 'hollow years' thesis, emphasizing the ubiquity of French thinking in the interwar years aimed at renovating and renewing French political, social and economic relations. Businessmen, economists and engineers played a significant role in genuinely national debates over France's present and future organization.

In the sections which follow, the chapter places the *cheminots* within the context of French labour history before exploring how both labour politics and French Communism relate to the broader debates which animated French politics and society in the interwar years. While Communist militants have sometimes been characterized as an isolated 'counter society' disengaged from wider French political debates, a growing number of historians have identified the close interaction between leaders and ordinary Communist activists in engaging with, and fulfilling, the everyday aspirations of French

workers. As we shall see, these ideas have been further developed, most notably in the work of Herrick Chapman, in ways that allow us not only to map the contours of Communist involvement in French industrial politics in the 1930s but also to trace the origins of important ideas and practices that would come to fruition in the reconstruction of French politics, industry and the economy in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Above all, such work demonstrates the important role of the Left, and the Communist Party in particular, in national debates over the future direction of France during the interwar years.

The Long Shadow: The Fall of France and the Vichy Regime.

The rapid defeat of France in June 1940 has cast a long shadow over the history of the interwar years. So, too, has the subsequent installation of the collaborationist and authoritarian Vichy regime under Marshal Philippe Pétain. The first analyses of the defeat of France drew upon the crises of the 1930s, the divisions within society and the perceived torpor and anomie of the republican regime, to explain the defeat. Initial diagnoses were under way in 1940 as the historian Marc Bloch reflected upon the moral crisis of conscience which had sapped the strength of the nation. Bloch's own biography, however, suggests a more complex picture. He enlisted in the French army despite being too old for service and went on to take part in resistance activity before being captured and executed by the Germans.¹ Meanwhile, the image of a France rent by social division during the 1930s became an important element in the efforts of the Vichy regime to present itself as both guardian and healer of France. The theme of past decadence confronted and exorcised was central to the rhetoric of Vichy's National Revolution. At Riom in 1942, leading political figures of the Third Republic, particularly those associated with the Popular Front administration, were placed on trial charged with weakening France's resolve and preparedness to fight.² Albeit from an altogether different ideological vantage point, Charles de Gaulle, in his attempt to establish his political vision for a restored post-war France, also contrasted his belief in decisive leadership free from Party wrangling with the ineffectual parliamentarianism of the Third Republic.³

¹ Marc Bloch, *L'étrange défaite: témoignage écrit en 1940* (Paris, 1946); on Bloch see Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge, 1989).

² On the Riom trials see Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford, 2001, 2003) p.419.

³ Charles de Gaulle, *Œuvres complètes. Mémoires de guerre. L'appel 1940-1942* (Paris, 1954); on Gaullism, the Cold War and the historiography of the late Third Republic see Peter Jackson, 'Post-War

The collapse of the French armies, together with the readiness of French commanders and political elites to conclude an armistice with Germany, have loomed large for historians attempting to evaluate the state of politics and society during the latter Third Republic. In the eyes of some early writers on the period, the Republic fell because too few felt it to be worth defending. Rent by division, too many were alienated from Republican France to identify with its fate.⁴ There is now a substantial and influential body of literature which has, in some cases, nuanced, in others, overturned such received wisdom. Reassessing public opinion on the eve of war, scholars have argued against the view that any moral crisis of conscience can be imputed as determining the defeat. In particular the conception that widespread pacifism and anti-war sentiment formed a decisive impediment to French war preparation has been strongly challenged.⁵ Nevertheless, the deficiencies of the republican regime, its perceived blockages, together with the damaging divisions within French society after 6 February 1934, captured in the image of a ‘franco-French Civil War’ lasting until 1944, continue to play an important role in the historiography.⁶ The crisis of the regime is central to current debates over the existence and extent of a distinctive fascist presence in France during the 1930s. While an older generation of scholars played down both the ideological extremism and the popular strength of the far right in interwar French politics, recent historians have argued strongly that fascism was a dynamic force, constituting a credible threat to the Republic.⁷ In a recent study of the political culture of the 1930s,

Politics and the Historiography of French Strategy and Diplomacy Before the Second World War’, *History Compass*, 4, 5 (2006), 870--905.

⁴ On foreign policy failures see Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence: 1932-1939* (Paris, 1979); a classic work which studies the Third Republic as a narrative of ‘collapse’ is William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Enquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (London, 1970); for a pessimistic assessment of public opinion prior to the collapse see Pierre Laborie, *L’opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris, 1990).

⁵ Jean Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les français de l’an 40. Vol. 1: La Guerre, oui ou non?* (Paris, 1990); on pacifism and the school teachers see Mona Siegel, *The Moral Disarmament of France*; on pacifism prior to the outbreak of war see Daniel Hucker, ‘French Public Attitudes Towards the Prospect of War in 1938-1939: ‘Pacifism or War Anxiety’, *French History*, 21, 4 (2007), 431--449; on Third Republic ‘decadence’ and the upsurge in support for war following the Munich agreement, see William Irvine, ‘Domestic Politics and the Fall of France in 1940’, in Joel Blatt (ed.), *The Fall of France of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford, 1998), pp.85--99; Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, pp.97--111.

⁶ On the ‘franco-French Civil War’ see Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, pp.72--80.

⁷ For the former see the classic study by René Rémond, *Les droites en France* (Paris, 1982). For a view which downplays the threat to the Republic from the far right see Serge Berstein, ‘L’affrontement simulée des années 1930’, *Vingtième Siècle*, 5 (1985), 39--53. On the essential Republicanism of veterans’ groups see Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*, 3 vols (Paris, 1977). An important, if controversial work on the centrality of Fascism to the Third Republic see Zeev Sternhall, *Ni Droite, Ni Gauche*; Key works exploring the Croix de Feu are William Irvine, ‘Fascism in France: The Strange Case of the Croix de Feu’, *Journal of Modern History* 63 (1991), 271--295; Kevin Passmore, ‘Boyscouting for Grown-Ups? Paramilitarism in the Croix de Feu and PSF’, *French Historical*

however, Jessica Wardhaugh has attempted to nuance the vision of France composed of two rival camps poised ‘to tear each other apart.’ Instead, by comparatively analysing both right and left in the final years of the Third Republic, Wardhaugh argues in favour of the flexibility of political identities and rhetoric during the 1930s, drawing forth the ‘common themes, hopes and fears’ of a latent consensus.⁸

While social historians have done much to draw out the complexities in Third Republic society, those investigating the military and strategic dimensions of French war preparations have equally emphasized the contingent nature of France’s military defeat. While Ernest May goes furthest in this regard, a number of historians examining French intelligence, strategic doctrine, leadership and soldier’s morale present a more optimistic picture of French preparedness for war by 1940, Martin Alexander noting ‘how narrow is the divide separating triumph from disaster in war.’⁹ In his important comparative study of British and French preparations for World War Two, Talbot Imlay stresses the strength of the British consensual approach as opposed to the disunity engendered through the authoritarian methods employed in French industrial relations. Trade unions were not necessarily a bar to successful rearmament; indeed, in Britain their engagement was crucial to the strength of the British position. Importantly, Imlay argues that French trade unionists were committed to engaging with the French state to an extent approaching that across the channel. Unfortunately for them, the alienation of employers and the political right as a result of June 1936 and the Popular Front’s social programme ensured that, in its approach to rearmament and industrial relations, the

Studies 19, 2 (1995), 527--557; idem, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928-1939* (Cambridge, 1997); Robert Soucy ‘French Fascism and the Croix de Fer: A Dissenting Interpretation’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26 (1991), 159--188; idem, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939* (New Haven, 1995); Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France Against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927-1945* (Montreal, 2007); Samuel Kalman, *The Extreme Right in Interwar France: The Faisceau and the Croix de Feu* (Aldershot, 2008); A study challenging Prost’s benign view of veterans’ groups can be found in Chris Millington, ‘February 6, 1934: The Veterans’ Riot’, *French Historical Studies* 33, 4 (Fall, 2010), 545--572.

⁸ Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-39* (Basingstoke, 2009), p.17; idem, ‘Fighting for the Unknown Soldier: The Contested Territory of the French Nation, 1934-38’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, 15, 2 (2007), 185--201.

⁹ Martin S. Alexander, ‘“No Taste for the Fight?” French combat performance in 1940 and the politics of the Fall of France’, in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds), *Time to Kill. The Soldier’s Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945* (London, 1997), 161--176 (175); Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (New York, 2000); Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933-1939* (Oxford, 2000); Martin S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge, 1992); ; Eugenia C. Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, Ka., 1996); Robert J. Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 1996); Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford, 2003).

Daladier government was in no mood to compromise by November 1938. It was the resulting embrace of laissez-faire industrial policy backed by an authoritarian state (increasingly governing through decree powers) which hampered France's response to the German menace and alienated labour from the regime. In such circumstances, French elites lost confidence in France's capacity to meet the German challenge. Imlay's work is an important corrective to the more positive accounts of France's capacity to fight a prolonged war against Germany in 1939/1940.¹⁰

French Economics, Society and 'Modernization' Debates

As scholars have explored the full complexities of French politics, military planning and public opinion in the interwar years, in a manner which refuses to see the defeat of 1940 as pre-determined, so attention has refocused on influential reassessments of the 'economic backwardness' and social stalemate of the Third Republic. The key work in this regard was the pioneering study by Stanley Hoffmann examining the 'paradoxes' of the French political community. Third Republic France, in this interpretation, was held back from the adoption of a modernizing agenda by the broad consensus among elites 'which accepted social mobility and evolution toward a more industrialized order, but only within sharp limits and along well-defined channels. Economic change was welcome only if new factors (such as techniques) were fitted into pre-existing frameworks, so that the traditional way of life would be affected very slowly.'¹¹ This, coupled with a political regime with 'plenty of breaks but little motor', ensured that France was dominated by a narrow republican synthesis which ultimately only World War Two could break. It would take its wartime experience for France to re-examine and re-make itself, thus setting the seeds for the post-war economic 'miracle' during which Hoffmann was writing.¹²

¹⁰Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*; see also Imlay's articles on these themes, '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; 'Paul Reynaud and France's Response to Nazi Germany, 1938-1940', *French Historical Studies*, 26, 3 (Summer, 2003), 497--538; '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.

¹¹ Stanley Hoffmann, 'The French Political Community', in Stanley Hoffmann et al, *In Search of France* (New York, 1965), 1--117, (4).

¹² Stanley Hoffmann, 'The French Political Community'; on France's economic miracle of the postwar era, see Jean Fourastié *Les trentes glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris, 1979).

Hoffmann's thesis has proved extremely influential and as late as 1994 Eugen Weber's work on 1930s France, *The Hollow Years*, continued to operate within its framework. French business and industry, declared Weber, were allergic to innovation, with profit being a dirty word.¹³ Nevertheless, important research has uncovered the extent of economic innovation and debate in the interwar period. Particularly significant in this regard have been the works of Richard Kuisel and Michel Margairaz. Most recently Philip Nord has identified in the animated discussions and programmes of the 1930s the origins of France's 'New Deal' which was to hold sway after the Liberation in 1944.¹⁴ In the sphere of labour history, significant works have underlined the willingness of employers to adapt the methods of scientific organization to their workplaces.¹⁵ The enthusiastic embrace of rationalization techniques and their considerable impact upon the lives of working women in particular, has been underlined by Laura Downs and Laura Frader.¹⁶ The economic dynamism of important sections of the French economy during the Third Republic has also been emphasized. The declinist thesis of interwar France, tied to concerns regarding the low birth-rate and the perception of a loss of international status, demographic potential and industrial capacity next to Germany, has also been linked to a sense of 'economic Malthusianism', in Alfred Sauvy's phrase, which sees French economic performance as fundamentally blocked during the interwar period.¹⁷ Economic historians since the 1970s have re-evaluated French economic performance in the first half of the twentieth century. Between 1870 and 1964 contributions to annualized GDP-growth per inhabitant stood at a higher level than in Britain and only slightly below the German figure.¹⁸ Between 1921 and 1929, French industrial output more than doubled, despite population growth of only 14%, a result which some historians put down to the significant expansion in advanced sectors of the economy, especially among those converting to mechanization and American

¹³ Eugen Weber *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York, 1994).

¹⁴ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France*; Michel Margairaz, *L'Etat, les finances et l'économie, histoire d'une conversion, 1932-1952*, 2 vols (Paris, 1991); Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton, 2010).

¹⁵ Gérard Noiriel, 'Du "patronage" au "paternalisme": les restructuration des formes de domination de la main-d'œuvre ouvrière dans l'industrie métallurgique française', *Mouvement Social*, 144 (Juillet-Sept., 1988), 17--35; idem, *Longwy: immigrés et prolétaires, 1880-1980* (Paris, 1984); Kathryn Amdur, 'Paternalism, Productivism, Collaborationism: Employers and Society in Interwar and Vichy France', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 53 (Spring, 1998), 137--163.

¹⁶ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, 1995); Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham, 2008).

¹⁷ Alfred Sauvy *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres. 4 vols* (Paris, 1965-1975).

¹⁸ Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labour in Paris and Barcelona During the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), p.176.

production techniques. Gérard Noiriel, by contrast, has argued that the strong growth of the 1920s can in very large part be explained by the massive influx of cheap migrant labour: amounting to well over one million workers, or at least 15% of the French 'working class', drawn principally from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as North Africa. Such workers were employed both in heavy industry and to do the more unpleasant, unsanitary and dangerous tasks increasingly vacated by French workers.¹⁹ Industrial concentration steadily increased. Steel and automobile production led the way with France placed second in regard to the former during the 1920s. In this context, restitution of the industrial heartlands of Lorraine to France in 1919 was also a significant advantage.²⁰ Meanwhile, in terms of automobile production France ranked second only to America in export volumes in 1931.²¹ And in 1939 the British periodical *The Economist* recorded that France was still producing as many automobiles as Germany, although fewer than Britain.²²

Despite the weight of this countervailing evidence, questions of crisis and decline continue to play an important role in the historiography of the Third Republic, notably in the research of cultural historians working on the period who have engaged with the vexed question of France's response to 'modernity' and 'modernization' in these years. In his landmark study, *True France: The Wars Over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945*, Herman Lebovics emphasized the turn to traditionalism in French political discourse during the 1930s, highlighting the growing interest in folklorist ideas and practices on both the political right and left. For Lebovics, such debates highlighted the reactionary response to modernity, providing evidence for the pervasive influence in interwar France of a current of thought which would be central to the ruralist ideology of Vichy regime.²³ This reading of cultural shifts on the eve of war has been challenged in the

¹⁹ Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work*, p.176; Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française*, pp.133--135.

²⁰ Alice Conklin, Sarah Fishman and Robert Zaretsky, *France and its Empire Since 1870* (New York, 2011), p.162

²¹ Michael Seidman, *Workers against Work*, p.177.

²² Quoted in David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London, 2011), p.71.

²³ Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, 1992).

work of Shanny Peer, however.²⁴ Equally, important studies of French reactions to interwar modernity have been written by Marjorie Beale and Robert L. Frost.²⁵

Moreover, the very concept of modernization, as Herrick Chapman has conceded, is a 'vexing notion', strongly marked by its associations with 'Modernization Theory' and the strong criticisms to which this approach has been subjected.²⁶ It nevertheless remains an analytical category to which historians continue to be drawn. Roger Magraw has examined the changing application by historians of ideas of modernization in debates surrounding French economic development, observing that historians have become increasingly aware of modernization as a multi-dimensional process, not one reducible to a single 'correct' path.²⁷ The most recent critique of the manner in which scholars have adopted the category of modernization and modernity in their analyses of French history in the early twentieth century is the work of Jackie Clarke. Arguing that historians, particularly cultural historians, have failed to break out of the analytical framework constructed by earlier studies, Clarke underlines the manner in which historians, such as Marjorie Beale and Robert Frost, have too often judged French debates about modernity and its impact in terms of an imagined normative concept of modernization, often inspired by the example of America. Whereas these historians have envisioned modernization as an extraneous process to which French society was forced to react, Clarke argues that historians should see modernization and modernity, not as impersonal historical forces, but as 'a historical project shaped by human actions'.²⁸

Clarke posits that the period from the 1920s through to 1944 represents an 'age of organization', during which time specialist discussions and projects centred on the renewal of France through the rationalization of its social, economic and political spheres. Clarke makes a convincing case for the centrality of these ideas and practices 'in debates about the social and economic order in interwar and Vichy France (and

²⁴ Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World's Fair* (Albany, NY., 1998).

²⁵ Marjorie Beale, *The Modernist Enterprise: French Elites and the Threat of Modernity, 1900-1940* (Stanford, 1999); Robert L. Frost, 'Machine Liberation: Inventing Housewives and Home Appliances in Interwar France', *French Historical Studies*, 18, 1 (1993), 109--130.

²⁶ Herrick Chapman, 'Modernity and National Identity in Postwar France', *French Historical Studies*, 22, 2 (Spring, 1999), p.293.

²⁷ Roger Magraw, "Not Backward but Different": The Debate on French 'Economic Retardation' in Martin Alexander (ed.), *French History Since Napoleon* (London, 1999), 336--363.

²⁸ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.270.

beyond).²⁹ Arguing against the view of French rationalizers as being ‘reactionary modernists’ who, on the one hand, attempted to channel processes of modernity such as technical advances or the rise of consumer society into established patterns, and, on the other hand, were driven by suspicion of mass society or the desire to re-assert gender boundaries, Clarke argues that it is necessary to ask what modernity meant ‘to particular historical actors in a particular historical time’. She thereby alters ‘the notion of modernity and concepts of progress and rationality that came to be associated with it’ into ‘*objects* of analysis rather than analytical categories.’³⁰

The railway industry was in many ways at the forefront of the scientific management and organizational thinking which Clarke identifies as being ubiquitous within the culture of interwar France. Aimée Moutet’s important study of rationalization and the scientific study of labour in interwar France, emphasizes the place of the railways as key sites in which the application of *l’Organisation Scientifique du Travail* (OST), whether inspired by the work of F W Taylor and Henry Fayol or the social psychological approach of the Psychotechnics school developed by Jean-Marie Lahy, was widespread.³¹ Rémi Baudouï, in his biography of railway engineer and technocratic politician Raoul Dautry, concurs that the railway industry was a key testing ground for modern management techniques.³² To explore the implementation of such practices and its effects upon cheminots’ political identities, it is necessary to turn to an examination of French labour politics in the interwar period.

Labour and Politics in Interwar France

The split within the French left at the Tours Congress in December 1920 saw the majority of the French Socialist membership split from the SFIO and commit themselves to the ‘party of a new type’. Most duly affiliated to the Communist International (Comintern), founding the *Section Française de L’Internationale Communiste*, or French Communist Party.³³ Parallel divisions emerged in the labour

²⁹ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.7.

³⁰ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, pp.7--8.

³¹ Aimée Moutet, *Les logiques de l’entreprise: la rationalisation dans l’industrie française de l’entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, 1997).

³² Rémi Baudouï, *Raoul Dautry, 1880-1951: le technocrate de la République* (Paris, 1992).

³³ See the discussions in Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924* (Stanford, CA., 1966); Annie Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914-1920, contribution à l’histoire du*

movement as revolutionary and reformist currents competed for the support of the rank-and-file in the politically radicalized context of Bolshevik revolution in Russia, revolutionary movements in Europe, and deepening industrial militancy in France as food shortages and wages failed to keep pace with spiralling inflation during the severe economic downturn of 1919-1921.³⁴ The rapidity of worker disenchantment with the transition to peace, confirmed by the defeat of the general strike of May 1920, gave added impetus to the *minoritaires* and in 1922 a schism within the national labour Confederation, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) saw the creation of a new, militant trade union confederation, the *Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire* (CGTU). With French trade unions organized along professional lines, many occupations now saw two opposing trade unions competing for members at shop-floor level. In 1923, the CGTU voted to affiliate with the Moscow-based International of Red Labour Unions (RILU, or Profintern) and so tied itself to the wider international Communist movement.³⁵ Nevertheless, as Kathryn Amdur's research underlines, anarcho-syndicalism remained an important current within the CGTU well into the 1920s before another schism triggered by disagreements over the directing role of the PCF within the CGTU led these militants to break away, either heading back into the CGT or moving into the newly founded and infinitesimally small *Confédération Générale du Travail: Syndicats Révolutionnaires* (CGTSR).³⁶

Running alongside these ideological divisions, the 1920s saw a significant shift in the centre of gravity of trade union membership away from what Noiriel describes as 'modern industry', principally metal workers who would form the shock-troops of the CGT and Communist Party in the post-1945 period, and towards the public or statutory sector.³⁷ Antoine Prost's pioneering 1960s study of trade union membership in France during the interwar years gives an important indication of the numerical strength of

mouvement ouvrier français, 2 vols (Paris, 1964); Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français* (Paris, 2000).

³⁴ Sophie Cœuré, *La Grande Lueur à l'Est La Grande Lueur à l'Est: Les Français et l'Union Soviétique* (Paris, 1999); Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890 – 1990: From Popular Protest to Socialist State* (Princeton, 1997); Robert Gerwarth, 'The Central European Counter Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria, and Hungary after the Great War', *Past and Present*, 200 (August, 2008), 175--209; on inflation, shortages and worker militancy see Tyler Stovall and Colette Friedlander, 'Du vieux et du neuf: économie morale et militantisme ouvrier dans les luttes contre la vie chère à Paris en 1919', *Mouvement Social*, 170 (Jan.-Mar., 1995), 85--113.

³⁵ Georges Lefranc, *Le mouvement syndical sous la troisième république*; Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*.

³⁶ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy*.

³⁷ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, XIXe XXe siècle* (Paris, 1986, 2002), p.160.

cheminot trade unionism during this period. For Prost, trade union strength was concentrated in the industrial heartlands of nineteenth-century France: mining communities, the railway and textiles industries, which Prost characterizes as ‘la France statique’. His imagery was redolent of a certain teleological reading of French trade unionism based upon the forward march of labour, which reflected prevailing views at the time he wrote his study during the 1960s.³⁸ Prost’s statistics remain useful, nonetheless. He provides figures drawn from calculations based upon published union figures for the years 1926 to 1938. Between 1926 and 1938 the density of cheminot trade union membership among the total railway workforce was regularly above 30%, and only dropped below this figure in 1935 when Prost suggests it fell to 22%. Prior to the advent of the Popular Front the figure hovered around 33%, with peak years in 1928 and 1930 when it stood at 37.4% and 39.9% of cheminots organized either within the CGT or CGTU. This figure does not include the smaller numbers within the Catholic CFTC or the *Fédération des Mécaniciens et Chauffeurs*. These percentages are strikingly high: often as much as four of five times the levels of trade union membership in France more widely. Prior to the coalescence of the Popular Front movement during 1935, Prost’s figures indicate that the highest mean level of trade union density in France was 9.1% in 1928. For the most part it varied between 7% and 9% between 1926 and 1935. During the subsequent Popular Front years, which saw the unification of competing currents within the CGT, cheminot union membership followed the trend elsewhere in French industry and jumped even further, despite its relatively high starting point. By 1937 more than seven in every ten railway employees was a member of the CGT.³⁹

Taken as a whole, Prost’s figures for the years 1927 to 1935 allow for a tentative comparative study of the membership strength of CGT and CGTU currents within the French railway industry. The general picture is one of strong CGTU membership, although on a significant downward trend, and volatile CGT levels overall. In 1927, CGTU membership on the railways stood at over 114,000. This number more or less held steady to 1931 (107,000 at the latter date) before dropping significantly to 79,275 in 1933 with a further small fall to 78,605 in 1935.⁴⁰ The CGT union started from a considerably smaller base: just under 47,000 in 1927. Nevertheless, its position had

³⁸ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du Front Populaire, 1934-1939* (Paris, 1964), p.95.

³⁹ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du Front Populaire*, p.207.

⁴⁰ Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du Front Populaire*, pp.187--191.

recovered to 70,000 in 1929 and by 1933 it had reached 85,605 placing the *confédérés* narrowly ahead of the *unitaires* for the first time. Nevertheless, by 1935 the CGT had once more dipped below the CGTU level to 77,000.

A number of factors have been advanced by historians to explain the apparent absence of cheminot militancy during the interwar period, particularly their absence from the iconic moment in the French labour narrative, the Popular Front strikes of summer 1936. Though employed by private railway companies until the creation of the *Société Nationale de Chemins de Fer* (SNCF) in 1937,⁴¹ railway workers were protected by a statute passed in 1921 which guaranteed certain working rights, career advancement and pay levels. Historians have emphasized the stability of employment enjoyed by cheminots in this period. A study published in 1963, conducted among railway workers employed during the interwar years, found that a major motivation for joining the rail companies was the promise of relatively well-paid, stable work with the expectation of advancement and a pension upon retirement at fifty-five, or even fifty-three for locomotive footplate men.⁴² As a result of such incentives the railway companies, argues Gérard Noiriel, were employers of choice for workers moving out of the agricultural economy during the interwar period.⁴³ Cheminots were not the only statutory workers at this time. Statutes for the most part protected public sector workers, employees in state-owned arsenals, and postal workers employed by the PTT. Such workers were largely insulated from the major scourges of many workers' lives during the depression years of the 1930s: unemployment coupled with a significant decline in purchasing power. The effects and experience of this have been eloquently recounted by Helen Chenut in her study of textile workers in Troyes.⁴⁴ Laura Frader has also

⁴¹ Prior to the creation of the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer (SNCF) there were six principal, privately owned railway companies in France. As was the case in Britain, prior to nationalization in 1947, each railway company acted as a monopoly in a certain geographical area and with their own stations in the capital. The French companies were the Nord (Northern); the Est (Eastern); Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée (PLM); Paris-Orléans (PO) and the Midi. The Midi was amalgamated with the PO in 1928. There also existed two state financed networks, the Etat (State) created following the nationalization of the failing Western railway company in 1909 and Alsace-Lorraine. Each railway had its own Parisian stations, the Nord: Gare du Nord; the Est: Gare de l'Est; PLM: Gare de Lyon; PO: Gare d'Austerlitz (formerly Gare d'Orléans) and the Etat: Gare Montparnasse and Gare Saint-Lazare.

⁴² The French term for a locomotive driver is *mécanicien*. The other role on the footplate, the *chauffeur* is translated as 'fireman'; the 1963 study is quoted in François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p.417.

⁴³ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française, xixe-xxe siècle* (Paris, 1986, 2002), p.145

⁴⁴ Helen Harden Chenut *The Fabric of Gender: Working Class Culture in Third Republic France* (University Park, Pa., 2005, 2006), see chapter 8, pp.341--357; on the organization of unemployed workers during the interwar period see Matt Perry, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-1945* (Aldershot, 2007).

illustrated the extent to which ‘in France overall’ wages contracted in tandem with the economic slowdown. As she notes, ‘between 1929 and 1935 industrial wages declined by 25% to 28.5% on average as many workers found their working hours cut.’ However, the decline in prices in this period ensured that, at least for those who remained in full employment, net purchasing power actually increased. Workers in the public sector, despite the retrenchment policies of successive governments in the early to mid-1930s, were particularly favoured by stability in employment and deflation.⁴⁵ The *cheminots*, as statutory workers, shared something of this privileged position. According to Noiriél, they represented a ‘protected’ workforce, marked by high levels of professional heredity with children following their parents into company employment. Moreover, argues Noiriél, such workers were characterized by high levels of homogeneity, largely unaffected by the higher proportion of migrant workers from Europe and the French colonies that represented a crucial element in the composition of the French labour market in the interwar years.⁴⁶

Relative stability of employment and isolation from the wider concerns of the French labour force provide one explanatory strand for the apparent apathy of the *cheminots*. A second reading focuses upon the actions of employers and management in the industry, the ‘enlightened’ paternalism of French technocrats, such as Raoul Dautry, whose conciliatory, consensual and consultative management style, it is argued, went a considerable way toward removing sources of tension within the workplace.⁴⁷ Unrest occasioned by the introduction of *chronométrage* techniques in the Paris region in the early 1930s were, for instance, quelled by Dautry’s engagement of the personnel in overseeing the implementation of the measures. Elsewhere, so this interpretation suggests, rationalization occasioned considerable resistance on the part of the rank-and-file. Famously, the early application of the methods of Frederick Winslow Taylor in France led to significant labour unrest resulting in a strike at Renault in 1912. Historians have also emphasized the importance of power relations within French industry as a crucial lens through which to view the application of the scientific study of labour - the *Organisation Scientifique du Travail*, (OST) referred to earlier. Laura Downs and Laura Frader have investigated how employers drew upon rationalization practices to reinforce gender differences in the workforce and in the elaboration of France’s social model.

⁴⁵ Laura L. Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens*, p.196.

⁴⁶ Gérard Noiriél, *Les ouvriers dans la société française*, p.160.

⁴⁷ John Sherwood, ‘Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France’; Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*.

Downs, in particular, has stressed the manner in which employers embraced rationalization as part of a broader strategy of incorporating the worker into the industrial life of the factory. An important group of labour historians have in their turn highlighted the means through which company rationalization efforts reinforced the control of employers and capitalists over the productive process, alienating the workers from power in the workplace, reducing skill levels and creating a broad category of *ouvriers spécialisés* (OS) or unskilled workers, often women or migrant labourers, whose days were spent undertaking unskilled, repetitive tasks. In the important work of Michael Seidman, workers are identified, as a result of such transformations in the working environment, as being fundamentally opposed to work. Blue collar workers, argues Seidman, conducting ‘a kind of guerrilla against work’ in civil war-era Spain and Popular Front Paris.⁴⁸

An important vein within Marxist historiography of the labour movement in this period has pointed to the importance of developments within the workplace and particularly de-skilling as generating the growth in class-conscious militancy among industrial workers. The most recent example of this strand is the work of Keith Mann whose study of the political identity of workers in Lyon centres upon the importance of de-skilling and control over the workplace as central factors in determining a militant ‘class-independence, anti-national’ identity over a reformist ‘class collaboration’ position.⁴⁹ There are many problems with such an analysis. Foremost is the question of the ‘reformist’ CGT, which does not fit straightforwardly into these categories. As Aimée Moutet has argued, the CGT effectively abandoned a straightforwardly collaborationist politics in 1931, moving towards support for economic planning and nationalization of key sectors. Such moves were founded upon an energetic critique of contemporary capitalist practice.⁵⁰

While in agreement with the findings of Aimée Moutet regarding the enthusiasm for adopting rationalization techniques within the railway industry, historians of the French railways and railway workers more generally have also alerted us to the complexities of the introduction of such techniques during the interwar years. Christian Chevandier has

⁴⁸ Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work*, p.6.

⁴⁹ Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity: Silk and Metal Workers in Lyon, France, 1900-1930* (New York, 2010).

⁵⁰ Aimée Moutet, *Logique de l'entreprise*; See also Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France, 1932-1936* (Cambridge, 1985); Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix: La naissance de l'idée du plan* (Paris, 1985).

emphasized that OST was in large part restricted in its implementation to company workshops (*ateliers*). Yet, in these areas the variety and specialized nature of the work involved in maintaining steam locomotives, for instance, made rationalization techniques difficult to implement. It would only be with the widespread adoption of diesel and electric locomotives that rationalization of the workshops would become truly effective.⁵¹ Moreover, pride in the professional identity conferred by the term *cheminot* is also an important theme in a number of autobiographies by former railway workers, particularly, of course, those of the railway drivers, the *Sénateurs du Rail* who drove the mainline Pacific locomotives and who enjoyed pre-eminent status within the railway hierarchy.⁵² Such workers, as Jean-Paul Molinari emphasizes, formed a privileged class of workers, symbols of modernism before the arrival of aircraft and automobiles.⁵³ The workplace in which they operated was a world away from the employee in the *ateliers* who had more in common with the *métallo* than with a locomotive footplate man.⁵⁴ In her study of *cheminots* during World War Two, Ludivine Broch has emphasized how sabotage and theft found their way into the repertoires of rank-and-file *cheminots*, though the context of the German occupation and Vichy government is key in this respect. Resistance in the workplace became a response to the wider political regime and international situation rather than with the question of labour.⁵⁵

Developments within the French railway industry appear in many ways to mirror those identified by Herrick Chapman within the aircraft industry. Focussing upon industrial relations from the late 1920s into the 1950s, Chapman explores how workers, managers

⁵¹ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, pp.946--966; idem, 'A propos de la rationalisation du travail dans les ateliers des compagnies de chemins de fer en France, 1880-1936', *Revue d'histoire des chemins de fer*, 28-29 (Printemps-automne, 2003), 190--206; Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, pp.131--132.

⁵² Jacques Lantier (Jean Gabin) in Renoir's *La Bête Humaine* (1938) drives a Pacific class locomotive. Autobiographies written by *cheminots* of this period include Pierre Pignede, *Vapeur en Cévennes* (Breil-sur-Roya, 1990); Marcel Raynal, *J'étais mécanicien vapeur* (Paris, 1996); Jacques Tonnaire, *La vapeur, souvenirs d'un mécano de locomotive, 1932-1950* (Paris, 1982); Ernest Lecam, *Souvenirs* (CER-PSL, 1993); Edouard Desprez, *Un cheminot raconte sa jeunesse, ses engagements, 1919-1949* (Paris, 1998), Desprez moved from involvement in Catholic trade unionism into the Croix de Feu, then via the resistance into the PCF; André Fonnet, *Ne touche pas à ma locomotive: scènes de la vie de Marcel Péroche, ancien mécanicien de l'Orient Express* (Paris, 1990); Marcel Péroche, *les mémoires de Marcel Péroche: sénateur du rail* (Paris, 1984); Lucien Bridier, *Mécanicien vapeur sur l'Etat* (Paris, 1998).

⁵³ Jean-Paul Molinari, *Les ouvriers communistes: sociologie de l'adhésion ouvrière au PCF* (Paris, 1991), p.17.

⁵⁴ Christian Chevandier, *Les cheminots en usine. Les ouvriers des Ateliers d'Oullins au temps de la vapeur* (Lyon, 1993).

⁵⁵ Ludivine Broch, 'French Railway Workers during the German Occupation, 1940-1944' University of Oxford, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2010.

and state officials interacted, how they ‘fought over fundamental choices in industrial policy and thereby transformed the relationship between labor, business and the state.’⁵⁶ Over the course of three decades, the triangular power struggles within the aircraft industry highlighted the means by which the major institutional features of France’s post-1945 industrial landscape were defined. The period saw the elaboration of a mass-based labour movement, strong Communist Party, organized employer groups, collective bargaining procedures and a highly interventionist state. ‘In the course of nearly four decades of turmoil’, writes Chapman, ‘the French institutionalized their highly contentious style of industrial relations.’⁵⁷

Central to Chapman’s analysis is aircraft workers’ experience of the Popular Front between June 1936 and November 1938. Popular Front politics, he argues, ‘served to narrow the gap between workers and militants’, with both groups experiencing the Popular Front ‘as a form of political education which changed the way workers viewed the state and their unions.’⁵⁸ The turn toward the Popular Front strategy encouraged Communist militants and union leaders within the aircraft industry to embrace a pragmatic approach to industrial politics. Whereas state officials had previously been attacked as class enemies, Communists within the aircraft industry ‘became willing to “ring doorbells at the ministries,” to lobby prefects, labor inspectors or anyone else with power to affect working conditions within the industry.’⁵⁹ Though reluctant to encourage the rank-and-file actions undertaken in the strikes and occupations of June 1936, the leadership of the *Fédération des Travailleurs en Métallurgie* placed themselves at the forefront of the movement, articulating the demands and aspirations of the rank-and-file. They channelled militancy into national bargaining positions and the negotiation of a collective contract. The result of such action, in Chapman’s view, was that the aircraft industry moved ‘centre stage for labour reform under the Popular Front.’⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p.1.

⁵⁷ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p.3.

⁵⁸ Herrick Chapman, ‘The Political Life of the Rank and File: French Aircraft Workers During the Popular Front, 1934-1938’ *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 30 (Fall, 1986), 13--31, (14).

⁵⁹ Herrick Chapman, ‘The Political Life of the Rank and File: French Aircraft Workers During the Popular Front, 1934-1938’, p.16.

⁶⁰ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, pp.89--100 (89).

Central to Chapman's thesis is that aircraft workers experienced the Popular Front movement as a decisive period in which they successfully contested the arbitrary power of employers in the workplace. Communist militants competed with management for the legitimacy of speaking on behalf of ordinary workers, and 'questions of workers' rights and managerial authority lay at the heart of most strike demands'.⁶¹ The aircraft industry during the Popular Front, with its strong component of skilled workers, was not motivated, *pace* Seidman, by any resistance to work. Rebellion was focussed upon a yearning for job security and an end to arbitrary employer power together with an extension of employee power within the workplace. The collective contract negotiated in June 1936 created 'something akin to a social contract' in the aircraft industry, a position which the CGT sought to reinforce during negotiations over the nationalization of the aircraft industry through the course of 1936.⁶²

Many of the gains of the Popular Front proved transient as the social legislation enacted by the first Blum administration was rolled back by decree laws passed under the Daladier government in November 1938. Yet Herrick Chapman concludes that, despite this, the experience of workers and Communist militants during this period was vital, shaping French industrial relations following the Liberation.⁶³ The years 1944-1947 have been identified by the historian Irwin Wall as a period in which a social contract emerged within French industrial relations. His analysis develops the interplay of conflict between Communist trade unionists, employers and state officials founded upon the notion of shared power within the nationalized industries.⁶⁴ Such analyses require us to re-evaluate the role of Communism within French politics and society.

Communism and French Politics

In the period roughly stretching from the 1930s to the early 1980s, the French Communist Party had a profound influence upon the French political landscape. The tenor of its impact is almost unique in Western European history. The Italian

⁶¹ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, p.91.

⁶² Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry*, pp.92--93 (92); on nationalization see *ibid.* pp.111--119.

⁶³ See for instance Herrick Chapman, 'France's Liberation Era, 1944-47: A Social and Economic Settlement?', in Andrew Knapp (ed.) *The Uncertain Foundation: France at the Liberation, 1944-1947* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp.103--121, (103).

⁶⁴ Irwin M. Wall 'The French Social Contract: Conflict amid Cooperation', 116--124.

Communist Party might be similarly considered for its impact upon the political and social environment in post-war Italy.⁶⁵ Even so, France stands out. It has been calculated that by the early 1980s as many as 40% of French men and women had either belonged to the Party or had been close to someone who had.⁶⁶ The PCF was long the only mass membership political party in France. In terms of votes it regularly outpolled its rivals on the Left. At the elections of 1946, the PCF won more votes than any other Party, outpolling the SFIO by 28.3% to 18% and outdistancing the Christian Democrat *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* by 400,000 votes. 182 of the 600-plus deputies in the National Assembly were Communists.⁶⁷ At the same time as it enjoyed this considerable popularity among certain sectors of the French population, the PCF was strongly marked by the vigour with which it pursued Stalinist orthodoxy. In the post-1947 period the Party was widely recognized as a bulwark of Stalinist thinking. With Maurice Thorez at the helm the Party even sought to ignore Khrushchev's (brief) attempts to open up the Soviet system. The Party condemned the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Prague spring in 1968, and it loyally supported the Soviet-backed Polish generals in 1981.⁶⁸

The Party has been the subject of as much polemic as history. However, analyses of the Communist movement are as old as the movement itself. The essential thrust of the debate was established very early; indeed the celebrated speech of Léon Blum at Tours in 1920 captured the key contours of a debate which has continued more or less unabated since. Arguing that Socialists would continue to defend and keep the 'old house', Blum underlined that,

For the first time in the history of Socialism you are thinking of terrorism not merely as a final recourse, not just as an extreme measure of public safety to be imposed on bourgeois resistance, not as a vital necessity for the revolution, but as a means of government. It is this, this emphasis on dictatorial terror, on the Russian model as a grid to be applied willy-nilly to France, together with the slavish, unquestioning obedience to Moscow that it presumes, that distinguishes you from us and always will.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For a comparative analysis of the French and Italian parties in the post 1945 period see Marc Lazar, *Maisons Rouge: les partis français et italiens de la libération à nos jours* (Paris, 1992).

⁶⁶ Tony Judt, 'Une Historiographie pas comme les autres: The French Communists and their History', *European Studies Review*, 12 (1982), pp.445--478, (446).

⁶⁷ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du parti communiste français*, pp.239--240.

⁶⁸ For an outline of Party history see Tony Judt, 'Une Historiographie pas comme les autres'.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron and the French Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL., 1998), p.67.

The key question has long been the role of the Soviet Union in the operation of member parties of the Comintern. Historians of both Left and Right have viewed the pernicious influence of the Soviet Union in Western European Communist parties as either a hindrance to the political left (whether revolutionary or not) or as evidence of an existential threat to western capitalism, a function of Cold War mentalities of mutually exclusive ideologies.

Communist histories have always been strongly marked by a certain *parti pris* approach. Early histories were largely produced by those who had either left, or more often, been expelled from the party. In the 1950s these were complemented by intellectual Cold Warriors eager to discuss 'the God that failed'.⁷⁰ Academic histories were equally often aimed at exposing Communist thought and practices and their close links with the Soviet Union as part of the political struggle against Communist politics. A major advance in scholarship on the French Communist Party was the work of Annie Kriegel. Her work in many ways established new parameters for the reading of Communist politics. Kriegel famously established three key tenets to explore Communist politics: as a historical accident of a certain conjuncture; as an alien Bolshevik graft onto French politics; and as a counter-society, aiming to develop as a parallel but separate entity to French society.⁷¹ Ultimately, wrote Kriegel, to discover the true essence of French Communism 'we are driven to the necessity of understanding the meaning of Russian Bolshevism.'⁷² Kriegel's work can be placed into a wider historiographical trend in the study of Communism in the mid-twentieth century, one which emphasized the totalitarian nature of Communist politics and which viewed Communist political parties as monolithic blocs, tightly controlled from the centre with little space for individual agency.

In the 1990s and into the 2000s a number of books began to explore the links between centre and periphery in international Communism. In doing so, they questioned the 'command/control' model of Comintern politics. These studies emphasized the importance of local contexts in fashioning the outlooks of Communist parties and, just as important, the space which could exist for local leaders to develop their own

⁷⁰ Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London, 1950).

⁷¹ Annie Kriegel, *Aux Origines du Communisme Français*; idem, *The French Communists: Profile of a People* (London, 1972); idem, 'The French Communist Party and the Problem of Power' in John C. Cairns (ed.), *Contemporary France: Illusion, Conflict and Regeneration* (New York, 1978) pp.92--109.

⁷² Annie Kriegel, 'The French Communist Party and the Problem of Power', p.94.

strategies. In some cases Communist leaders became adept at exploiting the various shades of opinion within Moscow itself to negotiate a Communist politics which was both loyal to Moscow and relevant to local contexts.⁷³

Running in parallel to these developments has been a renewed interest in the totalitarian nature of Communist politics. The key publication in this vein in France was the *Livre Noir du Communisme* which explored the crimes of Communist states, but also the complicity of western European Communists with them. Stéphane Courtois, the editor of that work, has continued to publish in this area, exploring the 'totalitarian' nature of Communism and French Bolshevism.⁷⁴ This renewed emphasis upon the closed nature of Communist parties has been, in part, driven by the cultural turn in Communist history. This is not a straightforward link, however. An early exponent of a cultural analysis of the PCF, inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, emphasized the means by which PCF militants were firmly rooted in French society and French political debates and norms. Bernard Pudal argued that the PCF was first and foremost inspired by the desire to gain legitimacy, and consequently, power for French workers within the Republic: 'the PCF' wrote Pudal, 'succeeded in counteracting the process of cultural and social illegitimization to which the social agents belonging to the working classes were subject.'⁷⁵

However a culturalist emphasis upon the subjective meanings of Communism has, in some cases, presented renewed evidence for the totalitarian and monolithic readings of

⁷³ On the Comintern see Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke, 1996); On the CPBG 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*; 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 experience, 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 Vigreux et Serge Wolikow (eds), *Cultures Communistes au XXe Siècle: entre guerre et modernité* (Paris, 2003).

⁷⁴ Stéphane Courtois (ed), *Livre Noir du Communisme: crimes, terreur et répression* (Paris, 1997), translated as *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror and Repression* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); more recently Courtois has continued publishing in this area, see his collections of essays, *Communisme et Totalitarisme* (Paris, 2009); and *Le Bolchevisme à la Française* (Paris, 2010).

⁷⁵ Bernard Pudal, *Prendre Parti: Pour une sociologie historique du PCF*, p.11. 'est parvenu à contrecarrer les processus d'illégitimation culturelle et sociale dont font l'objet les agents sociaux appartenant aux classes populaires.'

Communist parties in Western Europe. A key work in this regard was Raphael Samuel's study of the 'Lost World of British Communism' in which he argued that 'to be a Communist was to have a complete social identity, one which transcended the limits of class, gender and nationality. Like practising Catholics or orthodox Jews, we lived in a little private world of our own.'⁷⁶ This view chimes closely with Kriegel's counter-society reading of PCF politics. In this analysis, Communism becomes an individual project whereby the self is remade according to Communist ideological concerns. The study of the interior private world of Communism has reignited debates over the extent to which Communism comprises a 'secular religion', another reading of Communist politics as a 'total' experience taken up recently in the work of Michael Burleigh and, in the case of the British Party, by Thomas Linehan.⁷⁷

The tension between Communist parties, their activists and memberships and the wider capitalist societies in which they exist is highlighted by the complex relationship between Communism and revolution, understood here as violent insurrection aimed at overthrowing the capitalist system. For many historians, however, there is no such tension. The PCF was during the interwar period, according to Sylvain Boulouque, a Party intimately entwined with violence, 'the taking of power was the accepted objective, which would occur through the use of force.'⁷⁸ The amplitude and expression of this violence, Boulouque concedes, varied according to the particular context in which an individual Communist Party operated. In a democracy, Communist actions would be different from those in Soviet Russia for instance, but, Boulouque argues, the essential violence of the Communist ideology impregnated PCF politics indelibly.⁷⁹ In an important earlier work that echoed Kriegel's analysis, Jean-Jacques Becker also underlined the PCF's outsider status within French society and politics. The Communist Party, wrote Becker, 'is a revolutionary party. Its ultimate goal being not simply to

⁷⁶ Raphael Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism', *New Left Review*, 154 (Nov. – Dec. 1985), pp.3--54, (11).

⁷⁷ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste*, p.19; Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (London, 2007); Thomas P. Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920 – 1939: From the Cradle to the Grave* (London, 2007).

⁷⁸ Sylvain Boulouque, 'Usages, sens et fonction de la violence dans le mouvement communiste en France' *Communisme*, 78/79 (2004), 105--130, (105). 'la prise du pouvoir est l'objectif imparti, finalité, qui passe par l'usage de la force.'

⁷⁹ Sylvain Boulouque, 'Usages, sens et fonction de la violence', pp.105--106.

accede to power, but to conquer it, that it to say, to substitute another political, economic and social system to the one in place.’⁸⁰

A critical difficulty in this analysis for Becker, as for Boulouque, is what to make of the PCF and wider Comintern Popular Front strategy. That Boulouque ends his analysis in 1936 is perhaps suggestive of a period coming to an end. Becker makes clear that the opening up of PCF politics within these years did not mark a fundamental change in the essence of Communist’s understanding of the need for violent insurrection. In his view, from 1934, the Communist Party had renounced the conquest of power ‘*en le disant*’. Inspired by the Leninist model of the strategy of double power, a new strategy was devised which would allow the Party to conquer power ‘*sans le dire*’.⁸¹ Violent street actions, demonstrations and the political strike were all, argue these authors, central to the PCF’s insurrectionary understanding. In their assessment, violent political imagery formed a key component in PCF political culture, one that was reinforced by pamphlets and propaganda such as the 1931 book, *L’insurrection armée*, a highly seditious tract that, it seems, may have been prepared in Moscow.⁸² While not denying its revolutionary potential, historian Frédéric Monier has argued in *Le complot dans la république*, that this represents the high-water mark of Communist Party interest in violent insurrection as a means of conquering power. He suggests that calls to revolution reduced in significance thereafter, becoming instead a ‘long-term’ strategic goal. In his words, ‘the French Communist movement, aiming always, in the long-term, at the conquest of power, on the whole renounced persevering with the revolutionary direction between 1931 and the summer of 1934, as the ‘class against class’ strategy gave way to the Popular Front.’⁸³ Violence and insurrection were important elements within the political identities of many Communists, even so. They played a notable role in the speech and actions of the *Jeunesse Communistes*, particularly in the period 1928-1931 when Jacques Doriot emerged as a key figure in PCF politics, not least thanks to

⁸⁰ Jean-Jacques Becker, *Le Parti Communiste, veut-il prendre le pouvoir?* (Paris, 1981), pp.7--8. ‘est un parti révolutionnaire. Son but ultime n’est pas seulement d’accéder au pouvoir mais de le conquérir, c’est-à-dire de substituer un autre système politique, économique et social au système en place.’

⁸¹ Jean-Jacques Becker, *Le Parti Communiste, veut-il prendre le pouvoir?*, p.313. ‘le parti communiste avait renoncé à conquérir le pouvoir *en le disant*. S’inspirant du modèle léniniste de la stratégie du double pouvoir, il avait élaboré une stratégie nouvelle qui devait lui permettre de la conquérir *sans le dire*.’

⁸² Sylvain Boulouque, ‘Usages et sens de la violence’.

⁸³ Frédéric Monier, *Le complot dans la république: Stratégies du secret du Boulanger à la cagoule* (Paris, 1998), p.239. ‘le mouvement communiste français, visant toujours, à long terme, la conquête du pouvoir, renonce globalement à persévérer dans cette voie insurrectionnel entre l’été 1931 et l’été 1934, à mesure que la stratégie classe contre classe [...] cède le pas à la stratégie de Front Populaire.’

his fiery rhetoric and his capacities as a street fighter.⁸⁴ Such readings, nonetheless, fail to capture the complex variety of Communist experience as it developed in the interwar period. Georges Vidal has explored directly the evolving role violence played within the political culture of the PCF. Vidal notes how the PCF did form a Front Rouge in the early 1920s, consciously echoing the German *Roter Frontkämpferbund*, though with only limited success.⁸⁵ Though the arrival of the ‘class against class’ line in 1928 added new impetus to these efforts, Vidal’s findings demonstrate that even between 1929 and 1931, at the height of the sectarian line, PCF leaders did not accord significant attention to demands from the Comintern concerning ‘*autodéfense*’.⁸⁶ Between 1925 and 1934, notes Vidal, a significant move away from violence occurred among the PCF, before its effective abandoning of such positions with the arrival of the Popular Front.⁸⁷

The counter-society thesis, with its related emphasis upon the violent nature of PCF politics results in a limited understanding of French Communist politics in the interwar period. It fails to make sense of how Communist parties drew such large numbers of men and women into their orbits, people who often did no more than support Communist candidates at elections and in the workplace, or who were simply members of a Communist-led trade union. They also say relatively little about how French Communism was able throughout the interwar period to speak to the aspirations of French workers, whether this involved forming flying clubs during the Popular Front, a strategy of municipal improvements and ‘parish pump’ politics in the Parisian suburbs, or the creation of *colonies de vacances* in which, parents were informed, working-class children might ‘blossom within the structures of capitalist society.’⁸⁸ Nor was Communism straightforwardly a political movement of industrial workers. Despite the emphasis upon the factory worker or miner as the bedrock of Communist identity during the period, the Communist Party continued to draw very significant support from rural areas, often through a close engagement with rural issues and the aspiration of

⁸⁴ See Sylvain Boulouque, ‘Usages et sens de la violence’, pp.113--114; Susan Whitney, *Mobilising Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham, NC., 2009); On Doriot Philippe Burin, *La Dérive Fasciste, Doriot, Déat, Bergery, 1933-1945* (Paris, 1986); Jean-Paul Brunet, *Jacques Doriot* (Paris, 1986).

⁸⁵ Georges Vidal, ‘Violence et politique dans la France des années 1930: le cas de l’autodéfense communiste’, *Revue Historique*, 640, (Octobre, 2006), 901--922, (907).

⁸⁶ Georges Vidal, ‘Violence et politique dans la France des années 1930’, p.908.

⁸⁷ Georges Vidal, ‘Violence et politique dans la France des années 1930’, p.919.

⁸⁸ See Herrick Chapman, ‘The Political Life of the Rank and File: French Aircraft Workers During the Popular Front, 1934 - 38’, pp.21--22; Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley, 1990); Laura Lee Downs, ‘Municipal Communism and the Politics of Childhood: Ivry – Sur – Seine 1925 – 1960’, *Past and Present*, 166 (2000), pp.205--241, (211); Laura Downs, *Children in the Promised Land: Working Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880 – 1960* (Durham, N.C., 2003).

agricultural labourers and small proprietors, an engagement which had barely a passing resemblance to Marxist-Leninist doctrines.⁸⁹ It is of interest that studies which emphasize the strength of Moscow's influence or the tightly organized and controlled nature of Communist politics tend to focus firmly upon the national and international leaderships. Studies which decentre this focus onto the experience of militants, members and supporters provide a very different account of Communist identity. In his study of based upon Communist Federations in four diverse regions of France, Julian Mischi has provided invaluable detail about the means by which Communism established itself in the varying contexts of rural and industrial France. This was a complex and often contradictory process, led in large part by the militants themselves and based upon the sociability networks of friends, family, workplace and hobbies, which bound Communists into the public lives of their communities.⁹⁰

Through his examination of the varying local contexts in which Communism operated, Mischi argues that the whole picture of PCF political engagement is transformed, 'once one decentres the view away from the national leadership in order to observe Communist mobilization in its sphere of realization, the supposed monolithism of the Stalinist organization breaks down.' Mischi does not deny a certain process of homogenization, particularly through the process of the training and placing of cadres throughout the French party but 'the forms of collective action, the symbolic repertoires employed and the Party militants were far from being identical across all territories.'⁹¹ Mischi does not follow this logic through, however, wishing to avoid the 'image de morecellent du communisme'.⁹² In sum, the above examples make clear that arriving at a straightforward typology of Communism, even French Communism, is challenging. The Weberian ideal type employed by Courtois and Lazar, drawn in large part from the functions and discourses of the Paris-based PCF hierarchy, proves to be a distinctly

⁸⁹ See for instance the important work by Laird Boswell, *Rural Communism in France, 1920-1939* (Ithaca, 1998); Julian Mischi, 'Etre communiste au milieu rural', *Etudes Rurales*, 171/172 (Jul.-Dec., 2004); for a recent study on Communist organization among French agricultural workers see John Bulaitis, *Communism in Rural France: Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front*.

⁹⁰ Julian Mischi, *Servir la Classe Ouvrière: Sociabilités militantes au PCF* (Rennes, 2010).

⁹¹ Julian Mischi, *Servir la Classe Ouvrière*, p.22. 'dès que l'on décentre le regard des seuls agents de l'appareil central pour observer la mobilisation communiste dans ses milieux d'actualisation, le monolithisme supposé de l'organisation "stalinienne" éclate.' 'les formes de l'action collective, les répertoires symboliques mobilisés, et les personnels militantes sont loin d'être identiques dans les différents territoires.'

⁹² Julian Mischi, *Servir la Classe Ouvrière*, p.23.

unstable edifice when confronted with the sheer diversity and complexity of Communist practice in the interwar period.⁹³

Conclusion

Placing Communist politics in its wider context of competition for power and influence within railway industrial relations allows for a fuller understanding of the complexities of Communist political culture in the interwar period. In a triangular study of state, management and labour strategies clearer light is shed upon the strategies which Communists developed in this period and the considerable tensions which existed within the French Communist movement. Workers drawn to Communism were not isolated from the concerns and ambitions current within late Third Republic society; nor could Communists fail to engage with these wider debates. In the case of the railway industry, positioned as it was at the centre of national political, economic and social debates, Communist *cheminots* were thus deeply entwined in national French conversations. Weitz dates the transformation of the party's position within French society to the emergence of the Popular Front strategy, 'by conquering political space that it had not itself mapped, the PCF became enmeshed by its own success.' The Party's engagement in the trade union work of collective bargaining and negotiations, in corporative bodies such as the *Conseil National Economique* or in municipal politics, enmeshed the PCF within the existing structures of power, rather than challenging them.⁹⁴ As this thesis demonstrates, however, though acting within such structures Communists were not without agency. In their practice upon bodies such as railway industry management committees, Communists mapped out an oppositional engagement which demonstrated the distance of Communist militants from company conceptions. However, as Vidal and Weitz have noted, the political structures of the Third Republic proved extremely adaptable and able to incorporate Communism into its political culture.⁹⁵ As Irwin Wall has noted of the PCF, even in its most 'Stalinist' periods, it remained 'first, foremost and fundamentally French.'⁹⁶

⁹³ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste*, p.12.

⁹⁴ Eric Weitz, *Popular Communism: Political Strategies and Social Histories in the Formation of the German, French, and Italian Communist Parties, 1919-1948* (Ithaca, 1992), p.23.

⁹⁵ Eric Weitz, *Popular Communism*, p.23; Georges Vidal, 'Violence et politique dans la France des années 1930', p.919.

⁹⁶ Irwin M. Wall, *French Communism in the Era of Stalin: The Quest for Unity and Integration* (London, 1983), p.3.

Chapter Two: *En Marche vers L'Avenir*: The Railway Industry and the Politics of 'Modernization'.

Introduction

Addressing the *Conseil du réseau* of the state-owned *État* railway in late December 1934, its chairman, Henri Chadron, sought to rally the committee. The year had been a difficult one for France as well as for its railway industry. It began with the shocking news of the December 1933 Lagny railway catastrophe still fresh in people's minds and was quickly followed by the right-wing riots and left-wing counter demonstrations of February. The course of the year thereafter had been deeply affected by the ever-worsening national economic picture within which deteriorating railway finances were an important element. Faced with this gloomy balance sheet Chadron searched for words of comfort for his audience, 'It is sometimes said "be strong". It would be better to say: Be strongly organized; give not only the impression, but the certitude of a nation marching towards the future.'¹ Chadron's emphasis upon the importance of organization is revealing of a current of thought that was widespread, not simply within the railway industry but more generally within French business and industrial circles at the time. It is this which this chapter will investigate. Faced with enduring perceptions of cultural and political crises during the interwar decades that were most acute throughout the 1930s, engineers, business leaders and intellectuals sought to articulate in theory and in practice a response to the crisis of civilization that France was thought to be suffering. Faced with the apparent failure of liberalism on the one hand, and the threat of Communism and potential labour disorder on the other, French thinkers attempted to define a third path towards modernization.²

The railway industry represents an important lens through which to view both the ideas and practices that underpinned this approach. As suggested by the Chadron quote above, an emphasis upon greater organization was an antidote to the perceived ills facing not just the railway industry but French society more widely. In the realm of

¹ AN : 307AP71, Fonds Raoul Dautry, Conseil du Réseau d'Etat, PV. 28/12/1934, p.3. 'on dit parfois; soyons forts. Il vaudrait mieux dire: soyons fortement organisés; donnons non seulement l'impression, mais la certitude d'une nation en marche vers l'avenir.'

² Jackie Clarke, 'Engineering a New Social Order in the 1930s: The Case of Jean Coutrot', *French Historical Studies*, 24, 1 (Winter, 2001), 63--86.

industrial relations, the railway companies attempted to foster an *esprit de maison*, emphasizing shared interests between employers and employees. Managers utilized the metaphor of the industry as a family with company engineers cast as ‘bons pères d’enfant’. In this fashion, railway elites sought both to define and restrict the terms of political discussion within the industry. Managers adopted an ‘organicist’ vision of railway industrial relations founded upon an intricate web of relationships. Reflecting what Jackie Clarke has identified as a key element in Fayolism, the organizational theory of management developed by Henri Fayol, this style of management emphasized leadership, central direction and the subordination of individual interests to the business.³

Yet railway companies did not define the terms of their ‘modernization’ agenda in isolation. Railway managers and directors competed with parliamentary and state analysts of the railway industry in attempts to define a politics of modernization, one which would maintain a pre-eminent role for private capital and profit as against the statist or nationalization agendas of politicians such as Édouard Daladier or Jules Moch. The rhetoric of organization and renewal was drawn upon by distinct and competing visions for the future of France and was intimately tied up in broader relationships of power. For railway directors such as Raoul Dautry, ‘modernization’ and ‘organization’ meant a revitalized society, and, more to the point, a revitalized railway industry liberated from the threat of national ownership.

State, Parliament and the Railways

The railway industry and the state in France were closely linked. From the arrival of the railways in France in the mid-nineteenth century the French state had taken an important role in directing the planning and building of the railway network. The French experience of state involvement fell almost exactly between the two poles set elsewhere in early railway history -- in Britain a *laissez-faire* approach dominated with private companies given free reign, while in Belgium the state took the leading role in planning, building and operating the railways.⁴ In the French case, the government played an important role in railway construction from the 1840s onwards. As one

³ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, pp.28--29.

⁴ Christian Wolmar, *Blood, Iron and Gold: How Railways Made the Modern World* (London, 2009), pp.94-96.

historian has noted, 'The government had designed and laid out the trunk lines, built the roadbeds, insured dividends for investors controlled rates and shared in overall management.'⁵ However, the day-to-day running of these lines was left to private railway companies, operating under long-term concessions. From the nineteenth century this relationship aroused considerable debate. Many Radicals, from Gambetta onwards, suspicious of the power of 'trusts' and monopolies, argued for a greater role for the state. Railways, they argued, should be run in the national, rather than private, interest. In championing the nationalization of the bankrupt Western Railway Company in 1908, Georges Clemenceau insisted that it was that 'it was private trusts and cartels which menaced individual liberty, not the state.'⁶

In the aftermath of World War One the parlous state of railway finances called for a renewed engagement on the part of government with the railway industry. The stresses and strains of keeping the vital logistical arteries of the French nation open during a period of total war had run the railway network into the ground. The post-war transport crisis was not confined to France, nevertheless the damage wrought by four years of war on French soil made it particularly acute. Nationalization proposals were put forward by SFIO politicians Albert Thomas and Léon Blum on behalf of the CGT.⁷ Similarly, the Radical and wartime armaments minister, Louis Loucheur, too argued strongly in favour of nationalization.⁸ The *Bloc National* government elected in 1919, however, was not inclined to support any moves against private property. Minister for Public Works, Yves Le Trocquer, made clear the government's intention to 'leave to the companies a certain autonomy.'⁹ Yet arguments in favour of greater national organization and coordination had gained considerable ground. The eventual outcome of post-war debates, the 1921 railway statute, saw the French state guarantee company debts as well as undertaking to pay the interest on future obligations incurred in the course of investment. A common fund was created as a kind of current account into which all companies were to pool their profits and from which they could draw funds for investment in their networks. The richer companies would thereby support their

⁵ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State*, p.9.

⁶ 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 France*, p.17. On Clemenceau's 1906-1909 ministry see D. R. Watson, *Georges Clemenceau: A Political Biography* (London, 1974).

⁷ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p.689.

⁸ AN: C//14712, PV. 21/7/20, p.87. 'si donc on me suggérait demain une formule qui permit d'arriver à ce régime nouveau sans passer par le rachat, je déclare que je l'accepte volontiers.'

⁹ AN: C//14712, PV. 1/07/1920, p.117. 'laisser aux compagnies une certaine autonomie.'

colleagues operating in less profitable areas of the country.¹⁰ The statute also aimed to put an end to *séparatisme* through the creation of a *Conseil Supérieur* or High Council. This body grouped together government representatives with those from the railway companies, passenger groups, the business community and a small number of members drawn from the workforce. The *Conseil* played only an advisory role, however. A separate national Committee of Directors was also created which retained the ultimate say over policy and was under no obligation to take account of recommendations from the *Conseil Supérieur*. Following an intervention by the Socialist Léon Blum, the original decision for the personnel representatives to be nominated by the companies was amended so that delegates would be elected by the workforce.¹¹ At a time when the legacy of state intervention and worker participation from the *union sacrée* years was being rapidly dismantled, Pierre Rosanvallon has identified the railway industry as one of the few sectors of the economy where this experience persisted.¹²

The promulgation of the statute, however, did not put an end to reflections upon the future of the railways. While the gradual, though uneven, recovery in railway finances during the 1920s largely removed speculation about the status of the railways, the arrival of the Great Depression in France from 1931 re-opened the debate. As the French economy became firmly mired in crisis and stubbornly immune to recovery, the fortunes of the railway industry plummeted.¹³ In 1932 Édouard Daladier, the then Minister for Public Works, laid bare the scale of the crisis. From a nadir of 2 billion (milliard) francs in 1921 the position had improved somewhat to 214 million in 1929. In 1930 the deficit had stood at 1793 million francs. With the coming of the depression in 1931 this number had tripled and by 1932 it had reached 4400 million.¹⁴ Daladier proposed a radical reorganization of the railway industry, with the sinking of sectional and competing interests into a national *Société Nationale Française des Transports*.¹⁵ Such proposals were strongly attacked by railway directors and ultimately came to nothing as the fall of the Herriot ministry removed Daladier from his post.

¹⁰ Kimon A Doukas, *The French Railroad and the State* (New York, 1945), pp131--136.

¹¹ AN: C//14712 PV. 9/11/1920, p.440.

¹² Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France*, p.229.

¹³ On the impact of the depression see Kenneth Mouré, *The Gold Standard Illusion: France, the Bank of France, and the International Gold Standard, 1914-1939* (Oxford, 2002); Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France*. On the railways see Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport in France*, p.36.

¹⁴ CAMT: 202AQ5, Effort du réseau devant la crise, *Le Réseau du Nord devant la Crise* (1936), p.16; AN: C//15045, Tome 1, PV. 26/10/1932, p.7.

¹⁵ AN: C//15045, Tome 1, PV. 26/10/1932, p.15. 'une société unique de tous ces chemins de fer rassemblés sous une direction commune et suivant des règles commune.'

Similar pressure for change came from the Socialist Left as the SFIO transport spokesman, Jules Moch, argued for a complete overhaul of the railway network with nationalization being depicted as a means of achieving a major advance for French society and for French economic modernization. In his draft legislation, published in 1931 as *Le rail et la nation*, Jules Moch attacked the railway companies as the *fermiers généraux du rail*. Moch thus linked rail company practice and, as he saw it, their enduring conservative attitudes with the archetypal symbol of *ancien régime* venality. Where the revolution of 1789 had been symbolized by the explosion of anger against the Farmers General, argued Moch, the coming economic revolution would be similarly marked by the removal of this modern impediment to national development. Moch's plan aimed at 'the deposing of the major companies and by the destruction of the numerous links which today permit the exploiting of a public service with a view to private interest and, consequently, the exploitation of the masses to the profit of a privileged group.'¹⁶

A central element to Moch's critique of the railway industry was its failure to adapt to new technology to assure the safety of its passengers and workforce. He attacked employers' apparent unwillingness to adapt to modern safety measures, such as automatic coupling procedures, widely in use in America and Japan.¹⁷ Looking back at this element of railway safety, Moch later noted how the failure to adopt new technology meant that each year 'around forty cheminots were crushed, and a hundred injured'.¹⁸ Above all he attacked the 'inertia' of rail companies for failing to update their methods. There existed, he argued, 'a spirit of routine which opposes itself to any idea of modernization, to change in method.'¹⁹

Neither Moch nor Daladier saw their proposals enacted into law, yet their interventions played an important role in defining the terms of the railway debate. National interests were contrasted with the limited goals of private profit. Moreover, the language and

¹⁶ Jules Moch, *Le Rail et la Nation*, p.17. 'la déchéance des grandes compagnies et par la destruction des liens innombrables qui permettent aujourd'hui d'exploiter des services publics en vue d'intérêts privés et, partant, d'exploiter la masse au profit de quelques privilégiés.'

¹⁷ AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 27/2/1929 p.3 and PV. 13/3/29 p.37.

¹⁸ Jules Moch, *Rencontres avec Léon Blum*, p.73. 'quarantaine de cheminots étaient écrasés, et une centaine blessés.'

¹⁹ AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 13/3/1929, p.37. 'un esprit de routine qui s'oppose à toute idée de modernisation, de changement de méthode.'

imagery of 'modernization' projects, especially the Socialist vision of Jules Moch, were employed in an attempt to demonstrate the distance between the motivations of the railway industry and the interests of the French people.

Railway Public Relations

The rail companies refuted any inference that they represented a threat to the order and stability of the Third Republic or that they in any way presented an obstacle to the creation of a 'modern' France. Indeed, they strongly critiqued Moch's ideas as presented in *Le Rail et la Nation* which cast railway capitalists as a venal and backward-looking drag upon the French national community. Railway industry spokesman attempted to turn Moch's analysis against him, the industry casting Moch and his nationalization plan in the role of existential threat to French society. In a pamphlet issued in the name of all the privately owned rail companies it was argued that Moch's vision would unleash forces of chaos into the economic, political and social life of the nation. A nationalized industry representing workers, travellers and state would be unworkable, it was claimed. It would create conditions in which 'all would compete [...] to the ruin of the network. Agents represented would claim the largest possible salaries; consumers the maximum advantages.' The result would be 'deficits, the worsening of taxes, and serious social conflicts.' The rail companies presented themselves as a bulwark against such turmoil, providing decisive leadership against the chaos of competing interests. Disorder, they suggested, was in fact the true aim of Moch's thinking: his revolutionary ethic requiring the engineering of the *choc final* to allow the complete overthrow of capitalism. Railway nationalization would be the thin end of this wedge, 'a first step towards the absorption by the state of the nation's major industrial enterprises.'²⁰

Informed by presentiments of the disorder which it was feared would be unleashed via the chaos of competing interests in plans such as Moch's, the *Compagnie du Nord* underlined that its services united the disparate elements of the Northern region. In an early exercise in public relations, *Le réseau du nord devant la crise*, the company celebrated the economic life of northern France and gloried in the human traffic passing

²⁰ *Observations des compagnies de chemins de fer sur la proposition de loi de M. Jules Moch* (Paris, 1932), p.348. 'Tout concourrait dans cette organisation à la ruine du Réseau. Les agents représentés réclameraient les plus gros salaires possibles; les usagers le maximum d'avantages.' 'le déficit, l'aggravation de l'impôt, de graves conflits sociaux.' 'un premier pas dans le sens de l'absorption par l'Etat des grandes entreprises industrielles du pays.'

through the Paris *Gare du Nord*. While possessing none of the glamour or fashionableness of those heading south to skiing in the mountains or the sun of the Côte d'Azur, northerners, nonetheless, distinguished themselves by their stoicism and solid, realistic approach to life. These were characteristics with which the *Compagnie du Nord* sought to identify itself in troubled economic times:

A dense crowd, thoughtful, patient, methodical, faces accustomed to care and modelled by effort, the clothing, sombre and serious [...] A land of work above all but also of repose and charm, a land of variety and complexity [...] All of this is reflected in the *Gare du Nord* and by the *Compagnie du Nord*.²¹

The land of 'complexity and variety' was given a common identity in the crowd of the *Gare du Nord* and, more importantly, was represented through the *Compagnie du Nord*. As Robert Le Besnerais, a key figure in the company hierarchy and future director of the SNCF, noted in a letter to Dautry, the *Nord* had found a journalistic populariser for their cause, 'skilful in wielding the pen to trace words accessible to the public at large.'²²

In the face of the crisis of the 1930s, the rail companies strongly refuted Moch's depiction of their response as one marked by 'inertia'. The *Compagnie du Nord* argued that it had pursued an extremely proactive response to the economic situation. Between 1930 and 1935, it argued, economies of 548 million francs had been achieved, while at the same time productivity had increased by 11% against 1913 levels.²³ Key to these positive results, argued the company, was the close collaboration which the network had been able to foster between management and workforce. Countering their depiction as an anti-modern element in the French national community, the rail companies self-consciously placed themselves at the forefront of interwar discourses and practices of rationalization. These included the adoption of 'scientific' methods of management and work study as well as company *cit  jardini re*. For all their depiction in parliament and the press as a drag on modernization, rail company managers saw themselves as part of a modernizing, technocratic elite.

²¹ CAMT: 202AQ5, Effort du r seau depuis la crise, *Le R seau du Nord devant la crise* (1936). 'Une foule dense, r fl chie, patiente, m thodique, des visages habitu s   l'attention et model s par l'effort, des v tements sombre et s rieux...Pays du Travail surtout, mais aussi du repos et du charme, pays tout de vari t  et d'oppositions...C'est tout cela que r sume la gare du Nord, et, tout cela, c'est le R seau du Nord'.

²² CAMT: 202AQ5, Effort du r seau depuis la crise, Le Besnerais   Dautry, 24/4/1936. 'habile   manier la plume qui trace les mots accessibles au grand public.'

²³ CAMT: 202AQ5, *Le R seau du Nord devant la Crise* (Paris, 1936), p.85.

Raoul Dautry

Dautry is a key figure in narratives of French modernization during the interwar years. An engineer on the *Nord*, he was named as Director of the state railway network (the *État*) in 1928 by André Tardieu. He served in this capacity until resigning over the decision to nationalize the French railways in 1937. He would later take up an important role at the heart of French war preparations as Minister for Armaments in 1939.²⁴

Dautry had entered the *École Polytechnique*, Paris, in 1900. He began working for the *Compagnie du Nord* in 1903, becoming a sector manager in Saint-Denis in 1906. It was at this point that he discovered the work of Marshall Lyautey.²⁵ He developed a theory of railway management from Lyautey's writings. The railway network came to symbolize for Dautry, as for many of his young companions in rail company management, 'the nerve centre, guaranteeing the correct working of the country.' The railway network covered France, uniting its diverse regions in 'an immense spider's web, of which the heart would be the capital.' This was a language which conceptualized both the French nation and its railway network in terms of a complex organic system, 'the basis of a theory of organization that emphasized both unity and functional hierarchy.'²⁶ Dautry's early visits to America prior to World War One were important in his intellectual development, he viewed at first hand the US railway network, widely considered 'one of the most modern sectors of the American economy, founded upon innovation and technical performance.'²⁷

In his book *Métier d'Homme*, Dautry published a collection of his writings and speeches delivered through the course of the 1930s. Key themes stand out, the need for discipline and order in French society, linked to an ideal of collective purpose. The embracing of these themes would allow France to avoid the decline of its civilization which, for

²⁴ Rémi Badouï, *Raoul Dautry: Le Technocrate de la République* (Paris, 1992); Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*.

²⁵ Michel Avril, *Raoul Dautry, La passion de servir* (Paris, 1993), p.39.

²⁶ Rémi Badouï, *Raoul Dautry*, p.36, 'le centre nerveux directionnel garant de bon fonctionnement du pays.'; 'une immense toile d'araignée dont le cœur serait la capitale.'; Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.31.

²⁷ Rémi Badouï, *Raoul Dautry*, p.39. 'un des secteurs les plus modernes de l'économie américaine, le premier à s'organiser dans une stratégie économique fondée sur l'innovation et la performance technique.'

Dautry, was a process already well underway. Dautry saw his role as an engineer and as a manager as serving to encourage and to define an organic community of interests, the testing ground for his philosophy was the French railway network. Such a philosophy has been linked by his biographer, Rémi Badoüï, with wider intellectual currents of thought in the immediate post-World War One era. A key figure in this regard was Georges Duhamel, author of several works on the impact of Americanization in France. Duhamel had written in 1923, that ‘if Civilization is not to be found in the hearts of mankind, then very well! It is nowhere.’ Dautry, writes Badoüï, particularly identified with the words of the medievalist Joseph Bedier for whom ‘the most effective form of action, is the action on the soul.’²⁸ Mentalities, as Jackie Clarke has argued, were an important area upon which France’s rationalizers sought to act.²⁹ Dautry aimed to move French society beyond sectional divisions over narrow individual interests. He called on French people to ‘glorify [...] the virtues of order, of discipline and of sacrifice which have formed the vigour of our race and the grandeur of France.’³⁰ ‘La vie nationale,’ he wrote on another occasion, ‘is not created through the egotistical development of each individual, from the defence of all interests, of the consolidation of all privileges. It calls for absolute submission to the general interest.’³¹

Dautry was arguably the most widely known figure within the railway industry and enjoyed a high national profile. Readers of the *Petit Journal* in a poll of November 1934 voted him, along with Pétain and Laval, as their preferred choice as a future French dictator.³² An engineer and technocrat, he was at the heart of both industry and government, being part of Pierre Laval’s ‘brains trust’ in 1935. For Dautry, as Philip Nord has argued, the elite of tomorrow would be the engineers, ‘skilled in the “science of man” who had the skills and authority necessary to bring harmony to labor relations. What was true of business was true *a fortiori* of the modern state which now more than ever needed the engineer’s mix of technical competence and decision-making authority.’ Dautry’s debt to the intellectual legacy of Lyautey was important, but in

²⁸ Rémi Badoüï, *Raoul Dautry*, p.58. ‘Si la Civilisation n’est pas dans les cœurs de l’homme est bien! elle n’est nulle part!’; ‘la plus belle forme d’action, c’est l’action sur les âmes.’

²⁹ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, pp.41--42, pp.44--45.

³⁰ Raoul Dautry, *Métier d’Homme* (Paris, 1937), p.244. ‘exaltons...les vertus d’ordre, de discipline et de sacrifice qui ont fait la vigueur de notre race et la grandeur de la France.’

³¹ Raoul Dautry, *Métier d’Homme*, p.6. ‘n’est pas faite du développement égoïste de chaque individu de la défense de tous les intérêts, de la consolidation de tous les privilèges. Elle réclame la soumission absolue à l’intérêt général.’

³² Rémi Badoüï, *Raoul Dautry*, p.9.

Métier d'Homme this legacy was transformed, 'melded with a vocabulary of science and expertise the whole wrapped in a statism of corporatist coloration.'³³

Creating an *Esprit de Maison*: Organicist thought within the railway industry

In 1931 the *Compagnie du Chemins de Fer du Nord* organized a conference exploring the relationship between employers and employees on their network. New managers received instruction on modern management techniques. The trainees were invited to reflect upon the *Chef Moderne et Sa Mission Sociale*, 'the epoch of unearned authority is past' noted the instructor, 'we are in an era where authority must be merited.' It was necessary for a *chef* to be at once a director and an educator 'in the noblest sense of the term, able to found his ascendance on the prestige of a superior mentality.'³⁴ Emphasis was placed upon the importance of the collective and the role of the leader as the head of a team. The modern leader was compared to the manger of a football team, as well as with the conductor of an orchestra whose aim was to 'lead with vigour his musicians mixing their playing into a harmonious ensemble.'³⁵ The emphasis throughout was upon harmony, unity, but also hierarchy founded upon order. Addressing his managers in July 1936 as the Popular Front strike wave was beginning to recede, Raoul Dautry underlined the importance of discipline. Railway managers, he noted, must lead with justice but also with *fermeté*, *chefs* must never 'abdicate their authority to ensure strict discipline, to not tolerate laziness, negligence or disorder.'³⁶ The idealization of unity, harmony and order were central to railway managers' conceptions of industrial politics on the railways. Henri Chadron, Chairman of the *Conseil du réseau d'État* reflected in 1933 upon the pain it caused him to witness some cheminots 'attempt to bring down on themselves, their wives and their children the house within which they live.'³⁷ The equation of the railway company with a home in which all worked together for the

³³ Philip Nord, *France's New Deal*, p.33.

³⁴ *Des Rapports entre Employeurs et Employés: Chemins de Fer du Nord, Conférence de M. Le Grix* (Lille, 1931-1932), p.107. 'l'époque de l'autorité qui se confère est passé'; 'nous en sommes à l'autorité qui se mérite.'; 'au sens le plus noble du terme – sache asseoir son ascendant sur le rayonnement d'une mentalité supérieur.'

³⁵ *Des Rapports entre Employeurs et Employés: Chemins de Fer du Nord, Conférence de M. Le Grix*, p.108. 'entraîner avec vigueur ses musiciens en fondant leur jeu dans un ensemble harmonieux.'

³⁶ AN: 307AP/67, Fonds Dautry, Conférence de Direction (Etat), PV. 3/7/1936, p.8. 'abdiquer leur autorité, de veiller à la stricte discipline, de ne tolérer ni paresse, ni négligences, ni désordre.'

³⁷ AN: 307AP/71, Conseil du Réseau d'Etat, PV. 10/2/1933, p.2. 'essayer de faire crouler sur eux, leurs femmes et leurs enfants la maison dans laquelle ils vivent.'

general interest captured in metaphor this idealized vision of railway work. Disagreement and discord, it was argued, would bring the edifice tumbling down.

The importance of such approaches in fostering a corporatist identity among the cheminots was regularly highlighted approvingly by rail industry and state elites. Henri Chadron, again in 1933, underlined that, among the workers elected to the *Conseil de Réseau*, 'he had always found...a loyal, useful and fruitful collaboration.'³⁸ Chadron reiterated the point in December 1934 in the context of increasing tensions in the French political and social community. He announced how 'he is happy to note, once more, that the country can rely on the solid support of the mass of the cheminots, honest and sound people', railway workers were, he added, 'une élite de travailleurs.'³⁹ Dautry summed up the attitude in July 1936. In the context of the recently negotiated Matignon accords, he dwelt upon the demands of labour in these discussions, noting how, 'the moral conditions of collaboration' were those which, for many years had been the standard in railway management. In a meeting with the Conference of Directors of the *État*, Dautry placed the apparent new dawn in French labour relations into a longer tradition of railway industrial politics, 'relations with trade union representatives and delegates; the exchange of views with agents has, for a long time, been the rule in this *maison*.'⁴⁰ Dautry went on to voice what were for him, the foundations of assuring healthy industrial relations:

the conditions which create the happiness of men are eternal: work in a sympathetic atmosphere, a salary which assures a decent life, the stability of employment which guarantees the future, a pleasant home which permits the bringing up of a family medical care which ensures the lot of the family and the education of the children which allows for all hopes.⁴¹

³⁸ AN: 307AP/71, Conseil de Réseau Etat, PV. 10/2/1933, p.2. 'il a toujours trouvé...une collaboration loyale, utile et féconde'.

³⁹ AN: 307AP/71, Conseil de Réseau Etat, PV. 28/12/1934, p.4. 'il est heureux de constater, une fois de plus, que le pays peut trouver un appui solide dans la masse des cheminots, gens honnêtes et sains'.

⁴⁰ AN: 307AP/67, Conférence de Directeurs (Etat), PV. 3/7/1936, p.7. 'les conditions morales de collaboration'; 'les relations avec les représentants syndicaux et les délégués, les échanges de vues avec les agents sont depuis longtemps la règle de cette maison.'

⁴¹ AN: 307AP/67, Conférence de Directeurs (Etat), 3/7/1936, p.8. 'les conditions qui font le bonheur des hommes sont éternelles: le travail dans une atmosphère de sympathie, le salaire qui assure une vie décente, la stabilité de l'emploi qui garantit l'avenir, l'habitation attrayante qui permet d'élever une famille, les soins médicaux qui rassurent sur le sort de la famille et l'instruction des enfants qui autorise toutes les espérances.'

Dautry had been working to implement his vision, first on the *Nord* and then on the *État*. His most high profile action was the massive undertaking to improve and extend the provision of cheminot housing during the 1920s.

Housing the cheminots

The aftermath of World War One saw a mushrooming of company attempts to extend the social benefits of railway work. The massive impact of the 1920 general strike served as an important impetus in this direction. A study of the economic situation of the railway workers by the *docteur en droit* Roger Lazard, published in 1923, drew attention to the vital importance of assuring the co-operation of the cheminots in the running of the railways. With 450,000 people employed in the industry, Lazard argued that the standard of living of the cheminots immediately affected some one million French people.⁴² More than this, ‘the good will of the agents is indispensable to the economic life of the nation’, he continued, ‘the railways run above all upon the morale of the cheminots: If coal is lacking one uses oil, automobiles, electricity...nothing can ever replace the good will of the employees.’⁴³ This attitude was particularly apparent on the part of the *Compagnie du Nord* who, in the early 1920s, invested heavily in the creation of company housing for sections of their workforce. Other networks too followed suit, with the *Est*, the PLM and later the *État* under Dautry making significant efforts.⁴⁴ In the context of the Longwy industrial basin, the historian Gérard Noiriel has been strongly critical of the creation of worker housing. The policy, argued Noiriel, aimed at ‘total control’ and a policy of enclosure, ‘control and isolation, such are the two principles at the basis of urbanism.’⁴⁵ Indeed, a desire for order had been at the heart of Louis Renault's support for company housing schemes in the automobile industry. Having been impressed with examples he had seen in America in 1919, Renault called for a major project to build extensive networks of *cités-jardins* in the wake of the Popular Front strikes in the summer of 1936. Extolling the benefits of fresh

⁴² Roger Lazard, *Etude de la Situation Economique des Agents de chemin de fer* (Paris, 1923), p.7.

⁴³ Roger Lazard, *Etude de la Situation Economique des Agents de chemin de fer*, p.8. ‘la bonne volonté des agents est indispensable à la vie économique nationale’; ‘les chemins de fer marchent avant tous avec le moral des cheminots: Si le charbon manque, on utilisera le mazout, la traction automobile, l’électricité...rien ne remplacera jamais à la bonne volonté des agents.’

⁴⁴ Georges Ribeill, ‘Politiques et pratiques sociales de logement dans les Compagnies de chemin de fer’, in Susanna Magri and Christian Topalov (eds), *Villes Ouvrières, 1900-1950* (Paris, 1989), pp.155--170, (161--162).

⁴⁵ Gérard Noiriel, *Longwy: Immigrés et Prolétaires, 1880-1980* (Paris, 1984), p.198. ‘contrôle et isolement, tels sont donc les deux principes de base de l’urbanisme.’

air, exercise and family life, with new roads and automobiles connecting families to local amenities, Renault's position captures for one prominent historian of this period the ambiguities present in French business practice. Featuring social traditionalism with a heavy accent on order, the aspiration of the return to the land was mixed at the same time with a pronounced modernizing ethos which, for Patrick Fridenson, strongly prefigured Vichy politics.⁴⁶

The biographer of Raoul Dautry too has emphasized the ideological project of railway company housing. Constructed close to depots, often bordered by the rails and away from established population centres, the *cités* 'constituted islands, protected from the risks of ideological pollution.'⁴⁷ An introduction to the 1924 *Compagnie du nord rapport sur la vie des cités en 1923 et 1924* made plain the importance of the housing project, not simply in terms of improving the wellbeing of the employee, but as part of a wider social undertaking. It was necessary to preach 'a crusade in favour of this "social solidarity", which in our society, today so divided, can be the ideal of all.' The author quoted warmly the response of a 'militant Communist' who had informed him that such efforts would ' "appease the torment" of those who did not have faith.'⁴⁸

Dautry had been at the forefront of the move to improve and extend company housing.⁴⁹ The *Compagnie du Nord* was at the head of such developments due to the intense housing shortages occasioned by the devastation caused by four years of trench warfare in the region, together with the considerable damage wrought by the retreating German armies in 1918.⁵⁰ The supply and availability of affordable housing had long been a major problem in France as urban populations grew during the early twentieth century. The problem was particularly acute in Paris where workers were often forced to resort to small, dark and dingy *garnis* (furnished rooms). World War One had a severe negative effect upon the housing situation. Many housing projects underway in 1914

⁴⁶ Patrick Fridenson, 'L'idéologie des grands constructeurs dans l'entre – deux – guerres', *Mouvement Social*, 81 (oct.-déc. 1972), 51--68, (65--66).

⁴⁷ Rémi Baudouï, *Raoul Dautry*, p.63. 'constitueraient des îlots protégés des risques de pollution idéologique.'

⁴⁸ AN: 307AP/61, *Rapport sur la vie des cités en 1923 et 1924*, 15/1/1924, p.2. 'une croisade en faveur de cette "solidarité sociale", qui dans la société actuelle si divisée, peut-être l'idéal de tous'; "apaiser le tourment" de ceux qui n'ont pas de foi.'

⁴⁹ Ludivine Broch, 'Le rôle social du technocrate: Raoul Dautry and the Compagnie du Nord Cité of Tergnier' paper delivered at the Society for French Historical Studies Annual Conference, Charleston S.C., (February 2011).

⁵⁰ On reconstruction see Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War* (Exeter, 1996).

remained unfinished at the end of hostilities. The war years saw ‘Parisians, especially those with limited resources, crowding into smaller living spaces; the number of people in the Department of the Seine living in *garnis*...rose from 295,000 in 1914 to 390,000 in 1921.’⁵¹ The housing shortage was a major problem facing cheminots, indeed, the war had caused enormous dislocation to the whole infrastructure of the Northern railway network. The destruction had been considerable. A company report summed up its extent, ‘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.’⁵² Yet despite this destruction the *Nord* had fully restored traffic to its network by April 1919.⁵³ The practical challenges of the period were the opportunity for Dautry to implement his political vision.

Dautry had been inspired by the work of the Garden City theorist Ebenezer Howard.⁵⁴ Work on Lechlade, the first of the Garden Cities, had begun in 1903, motivated by the examples of Port Sunlight and Bourneville. In France the concept of the Garden City was imported by Georges Benoît-Levy, attached to the *Musée Social* from 1903 onwards. Indeed, the influence of the *Musée* was crucial, Dautry himself becoming head of the organization's Housing and Urbanism Commission in 1913.⁵⁵ Following the end of World War One, argues Tyler Stovall, soldiers returning from the front regarded housing as a key issue, ‘having sacrificed for their country, they and their families deserved something better out of life; now was the time to think seriously about acquiring that long-desired dream house in the country.’⁵⁶ Cheminots would not have been isolated from these aspirations. Work was begun by the *Compagnie du Nord* on Dautry's *cités* from 1919. By 1924, 35 *cités* had been built housing 33,727 people. The largest centres were at Tergnier with a population of 4321 and Lille Délivrance with 3053. Sites at Lens and Arras had populations of 2858 and 1978 respectively.⁵⁷ Dautry

⁵¹ Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt*, p.38.

⁵² ‘rapport sur l'exercice 1918’ also quoted in Arnaud Gaboriau, ‘Aux Origines de la cité de cheminots de Lille – La – Délivrance (1921-1926)’, *Revue d'Histoire des Chemins de Fer*, 31 (automne, 2004), pp.101--138, (102). ‘le réseau se trouve, sur 2 123 kilomètres, sans un seul pont ou tunnel existant, sans un seul dépôt de locomotives, sans un seul gare, grande ou moyenne, qui n'aient pas été à peu près complètement détruites.’

⁵³ Arnaud Gaboriau, ‘Aux Origines de la cité de cheminots de Lille – La – Délivrance’, p.102.

⁵⁴ Ludivine Broch, ‘Le Rôle Social du Technocrate’ Paper presented to the Society for French History Annual Conference, Charleston S.C. (February 2011).

⁵⁵ Arnaud Gaboriau, ‘Aux Origines de la cité de cheminots de Lille-La-Délivrance’, pp.113--114. On the early history of the Musée Social see Janet Horne, *A Social Laboratory for Modern France: The Musée Social and the Rise of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC., 2002).

⁵⁶ Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt*, p.39.

⁵⁷ AN: 307AP/61, *Historique des cités*, p.103.

wrote in his work *Métier d'Homme* that rent levels in the *cités* was set in 1926 at 750 francs per year with electricity provided free of charge.⁵⁸

A *Musée Social* report of 1935 was laudatory in its analysis of the social efforts of the railway networks. In particular the role of the rail companies in promoting family life through the *cités-jardins* was applauded. Drawing upon the new science of urbanism, noted the report, ‘the modern *cités* have been conceived as far as possible according to an agreeable plan, with sinuous roads, varied perspectives, roundabouts, views of the surrounding countryside and, because the cheminot lives in union with the railway, of the station and the depot, so long as the aesthetic is not too offensive.’⁵⁹

The running of all the estates was overseen by the *Nord's Comité de Gestion*. This body supervised the operation of the *Conseils d'Administration* operating in each *cité* . Each comprised three company representatives as well as elected male cheminots, with one council seat for every 50 households. Only male heads of households had a vote in these elections.⁶⁰ This emphasis upon households and families was an important element in company thinking. It was a key aspect of the means by which cheminots were selected by the company for a place in the housing scheme. A detailed inquiry into the personal life of the cheminot applicant including the nature of his work and the number of children in the family decided who did and did not get a house.⁶¹ Through the selection criteria the company could keep a close reign on the social composition of the *cités* . Houses, when they were awarded, were loaned. The *Musée Social* noted the social desirability of home ownership but such concerns were secondary to assuring a ready supply of housing stock.⁶² In the context of the Lorraine steel industry, Gérard Noiriel has noted the propensity in company housing policy which saw established workers with families securely housed while those judged ‘*celibataires*’ were housed in second

⁵⁸ Raoul Dautry, *Métier d'Homme*, p.285; Ludivine Broch, ‘French Railway Workers during the German Occupation, 1940-1944’, University of Oxford, Unpublished PhD Thesis, pp.7--10.

⁵⁹ Musée Social, *L'Effort Social des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer en Faveur de leur Personnel* (Paris, 1935), p.12. ‘les cités modernes ont été conçues, autant que possible sur un plan agréable, avec des rues sinueuses, aux perspectives variées, des ronds-points, des échappées sur le paysage avoisinant et aussi-car le vrai cheminot vit en union avec le chemin de fer-sur la gare, sur le dépôt, dans le mesure où l'esthétique n'en était pas trop offusquée.’

⁶⁰ Musée Social, *L'Effort Social des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer en Faveur de leur Personnel*, p.14.

⁶¹ Musée Social, *L'Effort Social des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer en Faveur de leur Personnel*, p.14.

⁶² Musée Social, *L'Effort Social des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer en Faveur de leur Personnel*, p.14.

rate, poorly constructed housing. Immigrant labour too was marginalized by housing schemes.⁶³

The *Compagnie du Nord* spent large sums of money encouraging cheminots to have large families. Family allowances were granted for each child under eighteen (or twenty-one if in full-time study) and were paid directly to the head of the family. The sums available varied from region to region, beginning at between 705 and 1005 (in 1935) for the first child, climbing to as much as 2040 francs for the second with 2160 francs for each of the subsequent children.⁶⁴ For non-permanent staff, including foreign workers, support was only available for children up to the age of thirteen, or sixteen if they were still in education. In *Métier d'Homme*, Dautry boasted strongly of the immediate advances observed in *natalité* figures among cheminots housed in the *cités* which, in 1923, reached 3.9% among the cheminots, a figure superior to the 3.1% figure for the Northern departments and the 2% figure for the rest of France.⁶⁵

Dautry was far from the only figure in the interwar period to extol the positive benefits of employer intervention aimed at raising the birth-rate of French families. Of considerable tenor in the late nineteenth century, demographic concerns concerning France's low birth-rate relative to both historic French and contemporary German levels reached a high pitch in the decades after 1918. Founded in May 1896 the *Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française* was the 'spearhead of the French pro-natalist movement.'⁶⁶ In 1920 a major coup was achieved by pro-natalists when the French parliament voted overwhelmingly to outlaw abortion and contraception, imposing stiff penalties on transgressors. However, Sian Reynolds has argued that the 1920 law was ineffective and has emphasized the lack of impact which such punitive policies had upon the birth-rate, evidence which suggests that concern over the crisis of *dénatalité* was not widely shared across French opinion.⁶⁷ Whatever the case, the *Alliance Nationale* reached a peak of 40,000 members in the late 1920s, its influence extending into the highest echelons of French society. Key members included

⁶³ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française*, p.139, p.152.

⁶⁴ Musée Social, *L'Effort Social des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer en Faveur de leur Personnel*, p.23.

⁶⁵ Raoul Dautry, *Métier d'Homme*, p.285.

⁶⁶ Richard Tomlinson, 'The Disappearance of France, 1896 – 1940: French Politics and the Birth Rate', *Historical Journal*, 28, 2 (Jun., 1985), 405--415, (405).

⁶⁷ Sian Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London, 1996), p.22.

leading generals; politicians such as Raymond Poincaré and Paul Reynaud and the industrialists André and Édouard Michelin.⁶⁸

The Michelin brothers were firmly committed to pro-natalist politics, indeed they bankrolled the *Alliance Nationale*. They argued strongly in favour of family allowances paid by businesses to workers, similar to those paid to the cheminots, as a means of encouraging the workforce to have larger families. Susan Pedersen has explored how Michelin paid ‘very generous’ allowances to employees with three or more children, claiming that this led to a birth-rate between 50% and 250% higher among its employees than for other inhabitants of Clermont Ferrand, where the Michelin factory was based.⁶⁹ Michelin’s figures were contested by government labour inspectors as being wildly inaccurate. The Michelin brothers were seemingly unconcerned, and ‘continued to defend their study and to urge extension of the family allowance funds as a cure for under population.’⁷⁰

While French industrialists and engineers such as Dautry framed their policies in the language of *dénatalité*, Pedersen argues convincingly of the need to treat such motives with caution. Family allowances, for Pedersen, were employed ‘in the service of a broader vision of economic reconstruction and rationalization’ they allowed employers to pursue a twin strategy of recruiting and stabilizing their workforce and as a means of wage restraint during the ‘boom years’ of the 1920s.⁷¹ They could prove equally effective in combating union organization.⁷²

Both Laura Downs and Laura Frader have emphasized how employer strategies in the interwar period served to break down the ostensible divisions between private and public spheres. This was particularly marked in employers’ concern to extend their supervision into the domestic lives of women workers. Employers in a variety of industries employed *surintendantes*, female work inspectors, whose role was to oversee women in both the workplace and the home. For Downs it was part of a strategy to gain access to workers’ ‘motivational core’:

⁶⁸ Richard Tomlinson, ‘The Disappearance of France’, p.405.

⁶⁹ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914-1945* (Cambridge, 1993), p.233.

⁷⁰ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, p.234.

⁷¹ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, pp. 225--227, (225).

⁷² Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, p.288.

Practitioners of this ‘modern paternalism’ saw the relationship between home and work as clearly reciprocal, especially in the case of women. Their strategies for control thus centred on the regulation of women’s values and behaviour, not only on the shop floor but in the notionally domestic sphere as well. At the heart of this new strategy stood management’s emissary to the proletarian home, preaching order, cleanliness, and thrift in the household as a means of promoting those same values on the shop floor.⁷³

For French industrialists the expanded role of the *surintendantes* into the domestic sphere was in large measure inspired by traditional elite anxiety over the low birth rate of working people.⁷⁴ However, both Downs and Frader equally emphasize the wider ambitions of French employers in this period, conceptualizing their strategies in Gramscian terms as a strategy of ‘manufacturing consent [...] by providing a range of social services unheard of in most contemporary workplaces and by extending regulation of the worker into the domestic sphere.’⁷⁵ Employers were ‘no longer content simply to prod individuals with wage incentives, employers sought to implant in each worker an inner principle of self-discipline that would make her an ideal complement to [...] swift and powerful American machine tools’.⁷⁶

The French railway industry was equally involved in the employment of *surintendantes*. One of the first actions undertaken by Raoul Dautry upon becoming director of the *État* was to create a team of *surintendantes* under the management of one Mlle Umbdenstock. In 1933 this team undertook some 19,000 home visits. *Surintendantes* were a common feature across all networks by the end of the 1920s.⁷⁷ The *Musée Social*, in its report on the social efforts of the railway companies regarding their employees, dwelt on company involvement in the domestic lives of its employees and their wives. In particular the report emphasized the emphasis upon prenatal medical attention, help with childcare and nursery education.⁷⁸ Clarke too has noted the importance of organization in the domestic sphere as a form of re-education, a means of bringing the ‘self-management’ techniques of industrial organization associated with Fayol, Taylor and particularly industrial psychology into the home lives of women and

⁷³ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, p.273.

⁷⁴ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, pp.259–260; Laura Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens*, p.94, p.96.

⁷⁵ Laura Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens*, p.100.

⁷⁶ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, p.260.

⁷⁷ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p.845.

⁷⁸ Musée Social, *L’Effort Social des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer en Faveur de leur Personnel*, pp.24–28.

men.⁷⁹ For Dautry, however, company social benefits were one more element in his organic, familial reading of railway industrial politics, the policies conceptualized as realizing a ‘communion’ between the business and its employees.⁸⁰

Roger Lazard, in 1923, made clear the ideological direction of travel, ‘the public interest of the agents and the companies is the same. The class struggle does not correspond to an economic reality.’ Above all, argued Lazard, ‘it is through assuring for the personnel the situation which best approaches the formula of “bon père de famille” that the companies will ensure the best operation of the service.’⁸¹ The family metaphor, with its emphasis upon unity of purpose but also the hierarchical imagery evinced by the equation of the companies with the father figure, were important tropes within the industry’s attempts to forestall political militancy or class based antagonisms among railway employees. The focus was to stress the burying of sectional interests within the rhetoric of common purpose.

The Scientific Study of Work in the Railway Industry

Rail companies were strongly attracted to the new ‘science’ of organization and rationalization which were very much in vogue during the interwar years. As Aimée Moutet has noted, ‘the railway companies had adopted two new mechanized production methods necessitating an intensive organization of labour. In the maintenance workshops, production line techniques were introduced. Track maintenance was also mechanized.’⁸² The *Compagnie du Nord* provides an example of this ideological commitment to a modernizing agenda. In December 1927, the *Compagnie du Nord* created a *Commission d'Organisation* after the Director of the network, Javary, expressed an interest in ‘applying on the Northern railway methods of rational

⁷⁹ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, pp.79--80.

⁸⁰ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p.844.

⁸¹ Roger Lazard, *Etude de la Situation Economique des Agents de chemin de fer*, pp.8--9. ‘l’intérêt public des agents et des compagnies est le même. La lutte des classes ne correspond pas à une réalité économique.’ ; ‘c’est en assurant au personnel la situation qui se rapproche le plus d’un “bon père de famille” que les compagnies assureront la meilleure marche du service.’

⁸² Aimée Moutet, *Les logiques de l’entreprise*, p.239. ‘les compagnies de chemins de fer ont utilisé deux nouveaux modes de production mécanisée impliquant une organisation intensive du travail. Dans les ateliers d’entretien, le travail à la chaîne a commencé à être mis en œuvre. L’entretien des voies a lui aussi été mécanisé.’

organization'. Early key figures in this commission were Robert Le Besnerais, future *chef* of the SNCF, and Raoul Dautry.⁸³

The importation of 'rationalized' working practices into France had begun prior to World War One. The efforts of the Renault company to introduce the time motion studies of FW Taylor into their factories leading to strike action in 1912.⁸⁴ Taylor's work was disseminated in France by Henry Le Chatelier from 1906.⁸⁵ Moves toward rationalization and the scientific study of labour had limited impact in France prior to 1914, even so.⁸⁶ From the beginning, the Taylor method was subject to criticisms from French engineers and those with an interest in 'work science'. Henri Fayol developed an alternative approach published in 1916. Also in that year the first major criticism in French of the Taylor method of work science was published by the expert in psychotechnics Jean-Marie Lahy.⁸⁷ Andreas Killen has described psychotechnics as emerging 'as a more or less natural extension of the scientific management movement launched by Frederick Winslow Taylor.' Yet the psychotechnic movement was founded upon an important critique of Taylor, in particular 'the belief that Taylorism tended to neglect considerations such as workers' aptitude and satisfaction.' The application of Industrial Psychology was seen as a means of 'integrating the diverse aspects of the human factor into the equations of modern labour power.'⁸⁸

Lahy, sympathetic to Socialism, saw in the science of work a neutral instrument which could be used to the advantage of the worker. Anson Rabinach has argued that for Lahy, 'Taylor did not perceive the worker as anything but a "perfectly adaptable machine" whose "only goal was to increase output".'⁸⁹ A member of the PCF until 1923 and later a member of the anti-fascist movement in interwar France,⁹⁰ Lahy became 'the founder and leading proponent for the "humanization of work".'⁹¹ According to his early

⁸³ CAMT: 202AQ1166, Rapport sur les travaux de la commission d'organisation en 1928, Mars 1929. 'l'intérêt qu'il y aurait à appliquer au réseau du nord les méthodes d'organisation rationnelles.'

⁸⁴ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.15; Aimée Moutet, 'Les Origines du Système Taylorien en France: Le Point de Vue Patronal 1907-1914', *Mouvement Social*, 93 (1975), 10--45.

⁸⁵ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.15.

⁸⁶ William Schneider, 'The Scientific Study of Labor in Interwar France', *French Historical Studies*, 17, 2 (Fall, 1991), 410--446, (410--411).

⁸⁷ William Schneider, 'The Scientific Study of Labor in Interwar France', p.426.

⁸⁸ Andreas Killen, 'Weimar Psychotechnics between Americanism and Fascism', *OSIRIS*, 22 (2007), 48--71, (50).

⁸⁹ Anson Rabinach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley, 1992), p.250.

⁹⁰ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.19.

⁹¹ Anson Rabinach, *The Human Motor*, p.253.

critique of Taylorism, far from reducing social conflict, Taylor's relentless emphasis upon technical perfection without regard for the human element, caused workers to group together to oppose it, resulting in serious conflicts.⁹² From 1931 onwards, Lahy had a laboratory at the *Compagnie du Nord*. A January 1932 report by the *Nord* extolled the potential benefits of the application of psychotechnic testing among their employees. The report noted how this branch of industrial psychology, allowed for 'the application of experimental psychology to the problem relative to the rational employing of the human faculties in diverse branches of work.' The reactions of individuals could be tested under laboratory conditions 'appropriate to each nature of work in a way as to determine the aptitude to a given task.' Noting in particular the role such experiments could play in rooting out accident prone staff and therefore improving safety levels, the company report envisaged testing not simply new applicants but also routinely checking current staff members.⁹³ The importance of psychological testing in increasing productivity was also emphasized.⁹⁴ Moutet has emphasized the fact that the railway industry was almost alone among French industries in the face of economic depression in its enthusiasm for psychotechnics. On the *État* exams were used principally to select autorail drivers, (81% of exams), while only 17% could be considered to have direct implications for improving safety levels.⁹⁵

The Director of the *Compagnie du Nord*, Javary, was a driving force behind the creation of the *Commission d'Organisation*. He offered an insight into his thinking in a letter to a subordinate in January 1928. The application of rationalized working practices would be 'more complex for the railways than for all other industries' due to the diversity of the work; the variations in the volume of work from one period to another; the administrative impediments of the railway statute and the relative inflexibility of regulations concerning the role of the workforce. Javary was, however, convinced of the need to proceed in the search for solutions 'which the economic and financial situation of the networks and the country places upon us, to a greater extent than ever,

⁹² Jean-Marie Lahy, *Le Système Taylor et la Physiologie du Travail Professionnel* (Paris, 1916, 1921), p.14.

⁹³ CAMT: 48AQ3551, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. Le Président du Comité de Direction des Grands Réseaux, 4/7/1932, Accidents individuels survenus à des agents. Note Complémentaire: La Psychotechnique envisagée comme instrument de prévention.' pp.1--2. 'l'application de psychologie expérimentale au problème relatif à l'emploi rationnel des facultés humaines dans les divers branches de l'activité. ; 'appropriées à chaque nature de travail de manière à en déduire l'aptitude à telle tâche déterminé.'

⁹⁴ CAMT: 202AQ217, B221/13, Conference de M. Soulez, 26/11/1930, p.11.

⁹⁵ Aimée Moutet, *Les logiques de l'entreprise*, p.334.

the onus to realize.⁹⁶ Under the aegis of Javary, the *Compagnie du Nord* collected a number of documents on the subject of the implementation of Taylorist organization practices in the workplace. The Company observed the 1929 *IV Congress International sur l'Organisation Scientifique du Travail*, held in Paris. Papers were collected on the utility of psychoanalysis in the workplace and 'Human Relations in the Scientific Study of Work'. A paper was also saved on the 'L'Organisation scientifique dans la construction et l'aménagement des cités, projet d'une cité rationalisée', a subject of interest to the company given their pioneering efforts in the early 1920s to construct employee housing communities. This report by E. Paulet, a delegate to the BIT, and resolutely 'Modernist' in its ambitions, proposed the idea of a 5000 inhabitant skyscraper as the rationalized community of the future, noting the benefits of such a building in facilitating air transportation, 'radiations' and offering shelter against gas warfare. Such skyscrapers were also recommended as a form of biosphere for 'Whites' to 'live and work advantageously in the tropics.'⁹⁷

Of particular interest for railway managers were papers by an engineer from Poland on the rationalization of depots and a similar paper from an engineer of the *Compagnie de l'Est* who claimed that the scientific organization of services had doubled the efficiency of railway installations on that network.⁹⁸ The *Nord* also collected information on the rationalization efforts which had taken place at Michelin though the early 1920s, a brochure had been published by the Clermont Ferrand based company in 1927 titled *Comment nous avons taylorisé notre atelier de mécanique d'entretien*. Michelin also produced a brochure for its French workforce, retained by the *Compagnie du Nord*, comparing living conditions of Michelin workers in Milltown, New York, with employees' lives in Clermont. *Prospérité ou Sam et François* did not concern itself with subtleties. French workers were informed of the wealth of 'Sam' and urged that 'François would become as rich as Sam if he produces a lot and at low prices.'⁹⁹ The

⁹⁶ CAMT: 202AQ1166, Javary à Moyrand, 4/1/1928, p.1. 'plus complexe pour les chemins de fer que pour toute autre industrie' 'et les règles d'organisation du travail mettent à l'adaptation du personnel.' que la situation économique et financière du réseau et du pays nous fait un devoir plus impérieux à jamais de réaliser.'

⁹⁷ CAMT: 202AQ1166, *L'Organisation scientifique dans la construction et l'aménagement des cités : Projet d'une cité rationalisée* by E. Paulet (International Labour Organisation). On 'High Modernism' in architecture and town planning see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), pp.103--146.

⁹⁸ CAMT: 202AQ1166, Dossier sur L'Organisation Scientifique du Travail.

⁹⁹ CAMT: 202AQ1166, *Prospérité ou Sam et François* (Clermont Ferrand, 1927), pp.4--5. 'François deviendra aussi riche que Sam s'il produit beaucoup et à bon marché.'

means proposed by Michelin to achieve such working practices was pithily summed up as ‘War on lost time, War on waste.’¹⁰⁰

On the *État* network Raoul Dautry was once more at the forefront of the modernization drive. Appearing before the National Assembly’s Public Works Commission in 1937, Dautry claimed that in eight years at the head of the *État* he had overcome historical and geographical impediments to modernize the business which, he noted, lacked the potential sources of income available to the *Nord*, *Est* and PLM railway companies. Above all, he had concentrated upon reforming working practices and replacing expensive steam locomotives with alternative forms of transport, notably diesel powered autorails.¹⁰¹ The *État* network had been among the first, Dautry claimed, to turn to the use of autorails, practical need had been the driving force behind such moves as these engines had replaced steam locomotives both on lines which had low levels of traffic and on suburban routes. By 1937 the *État* possessed 198 of these autorails.¹⁰² Meanwhile, the numbers employed on the rail network had been sharply reduced. By 1 June 1936, Dautry claimed to have reduced the 1928 levels of Commissioned staff (statutory workers) by 15,000. He had also considerably reduced the levels of non-commissioned workers, those who were employed on a monthly or daily basis.¹⁰³ Despite such economies of 350 million a year, Dautry claimed that he had been able to keep the workforce onside.¹⁰⁴ Key to Dautry’s claim was the emphasis upon the relationship between managers and staff and his interpretation of the social role of the technocrat.

Company readings of social harmony were profoundly political and served particular goals, as outlined above. The rhetoric of social harmony and modernization served the companies in their public debates with political parties, the state and in their responses to attacks upon them in the popular press. However, the companies were themselves aware of the gap between their collaborative rhetoric and the realities of economic pressure. At the height of the economic and social crisis facing France in 1936, the *Nord*’s brochure *Le réseau du nord devant la crise* presented the public face of such collaborative attitudes. The drop in receipts by 40% between 1930 and 1935 placed the

¹⁰⁰ CAMT: 202AQ1166, *Prosperité ou Sam et François*, p.12. ‘Guerre aux temps perdus, guerre aux gaspillages.’

¹⁰¹ AN: C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, pp.2--11.

¹⁰² AN: C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, pp.5--6.

¹⁰³ AN: C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, p.10.

¹⁰⁴ AN: C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, p.11.

company under pressure to reduce its workforce by an equivalent amount, but, announced the writer, ‘in a sentiment of humanity which honours them, and conforming to a highly social tradition which has always guided the *Grands Réseaux*, the *Compagnie du Nord* is endeavouring to conserve all its employees.’¹⁰⁵ The brochure was far from honest regarding company thinking in this regard, however.

In March 1935 the *Nord*'s ‘Special Commission on Reform and Organization’ had reported on the measures necessary to return the network to a secure financial footing. Economies of 500 million francs were considered necessary, two thirds of which to be found from among the personnel. Figures were employed to highlight the growth in cheminot numbers. 1930 had seen the highest number of employees across all networks, 509,000 people being employed on the railways. By 1934 this figure had dropped significantly but still stood at 409,000. Compared with the 1913 figure of 355,000 (and excluding Alsace Lorraine from the calculation), this meant an increase of 7% where traffic volume had only increased by between 2-5%. A reduction of 20,000 in cheminot numbers would save the industry 150 million francs.¹⁰⁶ The report also analysed how the companies had been able to reduce cheminot numbers significantly down to 1935. It was noted that, ‘the numbers of casual staff (*journaliers*), important prior to the crisis, have been extremely reduced.’ Facing any future need to increase staffing levels the report noted that, ‘it is necessary to appeal to casual workers in a very large proportion and to limit progressively the benefit of commissioning to specialised agents and the *cadres*.’¹⁰⁷ While presenting a public face of solidarity, the *Compagnie du Nord* was envisaging a significant restructuring of its workforce and an equally important reduction in the benefits and security traditionally accorded by railway employment.

Competition and the Coordination of Transports: The question of Corporatism

Corporatism, according to Robert Paxton, seemed to hold for French business the opportunity for a double escape from both the seemingly damaging effects of on the one

¹⁰⁵ CAMT: 202AQ5, *Le Réseau du Nord devant la crise*, p.21. 'dans un sentiment d'humanité qui l'honore et conformément à une tradition hautement sociale qui a toujours guidé les Grands Réseaux, la Compagnie du Nord s'est efforcée de conserver tous ces agents.'

¹⁰⁶ CAMT: 202AQ4, A0041, Commission Spécial, Réformes et Organisation, 8/3/1935, p.7.

¹⁰⁷ CAMT: 202AQ4, A0041, Commission Spécial, Réformes et Organisation, 8/3/1935, p.8. 'les effectifs de journaliers, important avant la crise, ont été extrêmement réduits'. ; 'il faut s'adresser aux journaliers dans une très forte proportion et limiter progressivement le bénéfice du commissionnement aux agents spécialisés et aux cadres.'

hand, labour militancy and market forces on the other. In the trough of the Great Depression, corporatism seemed to offer French industrialists a refuge, ‘behind corporatism’s defensive earthworks, French business could escape from both the class struggle and merciless competition.’¹⁰⁸ Arguing how, for such elites, Liberalism seemed dead, Paxton contends that corporatism seemed to offer ‘a third way’ ‘between the two competing statisms: fascism and socialism.’¹⁰⁹ Both Richard Kuisel and Charles Maier have downplayed the importance of corporatist thought in the French experience. Maier did not see France developing the same corporatist institutional framework as, for instance, took root in Germany. For Kuisel, corporatism remained an academic theory which animated some thinkers but hardly moved the wider French business community.¹¹⁰ Richard Vinen, while acknowledging that corporatism did play a role in French business thinking in the 1930s, emphasizes that it was far from representing a coherent intellectual position. It did, however, serve as a tool facilitating ‘reorganization of the business movement and the mobilization against the Popular Front.’ This, argues Vinen, signified a defensive position aimed at countering the threat of *étatisme* and greater intervention by the state.¹¹¹ This position has in turn been strongly refuted by Kevin Passmore in his work on the French Right in eastern France. Passmore argues that corporatist theory was of considerable interest to French business leaders. Moreover, its adoption was symptomatic of a wider breakdown in the confidence of business leaders in the political structures of the French Republic. Corporatism was, in some instances, a path to authoritarianism, even fascism.¹¹²

Yet such a reading receives considerable nuance in the work of Jackie Clarke. Approaching the problem from the wider analysis in favour of organization in the interwar period, Clarke moves discussions regarding the promotion of corporatist thought beyond the limits of French business defending their narrow short-term interests. In a nuanced reading, corporatist thinking is placed within a wider contemporary debate which envisioned greater social organization coupled with

¹⁰⁸ R. O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order* (London, 1972), p.210.

¹⁰⁹ R. O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order*, p.211.

¹¹⁰ Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany and Italy in the Decade after World War One* (Princeton, 1975), p.14, p.591; Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State*, pp.102--104.

¹¹¹ Richard Vinen, *The Politics of French Business, 1936-1945* (Cambridge, 1991, 2002), p.59.

¹¹² Kevin Passmore, ‘Business Corporatism and the Crisis of the French Third Republic. The Example of the Silk Industry in Lyon’, *Historical Journal*, 38, 4 (1995), 959--987, (1960); see also idem, ‘The French Third Republic: Stalemate Society or Cradle of Fascism?’; idem, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province*.

economic solidarity as a means of putting an end to wasteful conflicts or frictions within the economic sphere. *Redressement Français* leader Ernest Mercier urged all business leaders, within their industries, to conceive of themselves as elements within a whole system, emphasizing solidarity and co-ordination over ‘individualism and the free play of competition.’¹¹³ For Mercier such an approach was about more than simply the insulation of one or another of France’s industrial sectors from market forces. It was an element in a wider cultural reading of economic organization. Critiquing the ‘individualism’ of French business, Mercier argued that they had failed ‘to conceive of their interests in terms of the organization of the economy as a whole. This was seen as a retrograde habit, an outlook ill-adapted to the age of organization’. Far from corporatism representing a refuge from risk and innovation, Mercier argued that, according to Clarke, ‘the true entrepreneurs and risk-takers [...] were those with a willingness to embrace a new order based on collective self-discipline.’¹¹⁴ Such a reading emphasizes the forward looking ambitions of corporatist thought as a part of a wider ‘modernizing’ project, aimed at overcoming sectional interests in favour of constructing a coordinated, national culture. The question of the coordination of road and rail transport during the 1930s reveals the complexities regarding the motivations behind co-operative thought in the period.

Competition between road, rail and to a lesser extent canals, had become firmly entrenched during the 1920s as automobile technology and reliability quickly progressed. 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.¹¹⁵ One element of the problem, passenger services, was in part met by the operation of bus services run by the rail companies themselves.¹¹⁶ During the 1920s rail companies attempted to meet the challenge of road haulage through 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, this during the period when railway finances were at their most secure.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.44.

¹¹⁴ Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization*, p.44.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport*, p.29.

¹¹⁶ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport*, p.33.

¹¹⁷ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport*, p.32.

The coming of the depression and the precipitous drop in industrial output significantly aggravated the problem. The mounting railway deficit made this a national concern.

On 19 April 1934 a decree law was published on the coordination of transports in France. The decree marked the first step in a long process, which would continue throughout the decade, aimed to institute general regulations for the transportation of goods but, as one historian has noted, had the implicit aim of insulating the railways from the effects of road competition under the guise of realising a negotiated coordination of transports.¹¹⁸

In February 1934 the *Conseil Nationale Économique* (CNE) was in the process of putting the finishing touches to the report which would form the basis of the ministerial interventions of April and May of that year.¹¹⁹ The relative regulatory freedom of the automobile industry was contrasted with the obligations with which the railways were faced. The latter was compelled to offer a regular service across the whole of France and to carry certain freights at low costs in pursuance of government policies, notably agricultural produce. In his evidence to the CNE, one M. 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 tax payers, would have to meet the bill.¹²⁰ Joffe'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.' Joffe'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.¹²¹ This position was not supported by Dautry. Reporting to the CNE, the Director of the *État* network made his position clear. He argued that

¹¹⁸ Nicolas Niertz, 'La coordination des transports des années trente' *Revue d'histoire des chemins de fer*, 9 (automne, 1993), 130--143, (135).

¹¹⁹ On the CNE see Alain Chatriot, *La démocratie sociale à la française: l'expérience du conseil national économique, 1924-1940* (Paris, 2002).

¹²⁰ Service Historique de l'armée, Vincennes (Hereafter SHA), 2N148, Conseil National Economique, Compte Rendu (CR.) 16/2/1934, pp.10--11.

¹²¹ SHA: 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p15. 'même déficitaire, même à faible rendement.'

Joffe had failed to realize the real purpose of the CNE's deliberations, '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 organizing 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.'¹²²

Dautry distanced himself from his colleague and former mentor, the director of the *Compagnie du Nord*, Emile Javary, who had called for an end to railway regulation so as to compete more effectively with road transport.¹²³ As the depression had begun to bite in France, Javary had proposed an immense reorganization of the *Nord's* network. Were the railways to have been invented in the current era, argued Javary, they would by necessity be limited to a quarter of the present size. He thus proposed that railway traffic be concentrated on main lines, with the vast majority of the *Nord's* 700 stations to close leaving between 70 to 80 major stations. The difference would be made up by road transport. All this could only be achieved through releasing the railway companies from their obligations under law to provide a guaranteed service to all areas of the network at a guaranteed price, set by parliament.¹²⁴ Dautry opposed the broad direction of Javary's thinking. In even the most liberal of regimes, he argued, the momentum was in favour of increasing regulation, not removing it. Britain and America had been moving in this direction, '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.'¹²⁵

In the course of his speech, Dautry alluded to the deep divisions which had opened up in French society over the perceived impact of competition in the sphere of transport. He addressed himself directly to those who opposed attempts by the railways to limit competition. Rhetorically he asked representatives of passenger groups and the Chambers of Commerce if they were prepared to see the railways fail and therefore to

¹²² SHA: 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p.37. 'Le problème n'est pas dans une plus ou moins grande liberté, il consiste à mettre fin à une situation d'anarchie. Il ne s'agit pas d'organiser des transports insuffisants ou trop nombreux et trop puissants...il s'agit de supprimer un déficit, celui des chemins de fer, qui pèse sur l'économie nationale et ne profit personne.'

¹²³ SHA: 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p.43.

¹²⁴ Joseph Jones, *The Politics of Transport*, pp.41--42.

¹²⁵ SHA: 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p.43. 'aucun pays n'est actuellement partisan de la liberté des chemins de fer et tous prennent mesures pour empêcher l'anarchie des transports. Nous ne demandons pas la liberté parce que nous n'y croyons pas, mais simplement l'ordre.'

pay through their taxes the full consequences of such an outcome.¹²⁶ In addition, firmly eliding the railway interest with the national one, Dautry quoted evidence from a representative of the Defence Ministry. This further emphasized the need to ensure the health of the nation's railway network above all other considerations, 'the railways will be called upon in time of war to play an essential role, it is necessary, therefore, that its stock of steam locomotives and wagons of all categories be in a condition to play the role which is reserved for them. For this, it is necessary that the railways prosper.'¹²⁷

Dautry's position before the CNE reveals the complex strains within French transport policy in this period. Facing declining revenues, increasing deficits and determined competition from automobile transport, the railway industry looked to defend and maintain its position. Dautry's push for the railways to be safeguarded from the damaging effects of competition could in part be read as being symptomatic of a wider elite French response to the challenges raised by 'modernization' which aimed at withdrawing from them and building defences against its encroachment. Dautry's language and argument, however, also suggest a more complex reading of interwar motivations in favour of coordination over competition. Liberalism was equated with the anarchic competition of differing interests, represented in Dautry's speech by the narrow concerns of the agricultural and business groups who understood the transport question only in terms of their own short-term profit margins. In opposition to this, Dautry highlighted their position as participants in a broader national community of interest, emphasizing their role as tax-payers. The railway industry was conceptualized by Dautry as above individual concerns, it was a fundamental element in the national economic system, a centrality which he re-emphasized through his close elision of the railways with the defence of the nation in times of war. Dautry's position is thus revealed as a complex interweaving of motivations. His appeals to a national interest had the outcome first and foremost of serving the interests of the railway companies, though not it should be noted as much as Javary's call for a massive reduction in regulation and railway obligations might have transformed the railway's fortunes. Ultimately, Dautry's view of the problem is important as read as part of a wider organizational cultural project as outlined by Dautry's colleague within *Redressement*

¹²⁶ SHA: 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, pp. 41--42.

¹²⁷ SHA: 2N148, Conseil National Economique, CR. 16/2/1934, p. 42. 'Les chemins de fer sera appelé en temps de guerre, à jouer un rôle essentiel, il convient donc que son parc de locomotives de vapeur et de son wagons de toute catégorie puisse être en mesure de jouer le rôle qui lui est dévolu. Pour cela, il faut qu'il soit prospère.'

Français, Ernest Mercier. This approach sought to engender economic solidarity, spelling an end to the conflict and competition which this key group within French society saw as retarding France's development as a truly 'modern' nation.

Conclusion

Railway management were strongly critical of their depiction in popular discourse as a backward looking clique acting as a break upon French modernization. Rather, key figures within the industry presented themselves as leading the charge toward the modern, rational and organized economy and nation. As historians have underlined, discourses of economic rationalization served a purpose beyond that of a neutral increasing of productivity in the workplace or, as Marxist historians have depicted it, as a means of gaining tighter control over the productive process through the systematic de-skilling of the workforce. The embracing of discourses and practices of rationalization and modernization by railway industry elites served as a means of responding to the perceived social and cultural crises afflicting France at various stages of the interwar decades, most notably during the early to mid-1920s and in the depression benighted 1930s. Facing the apparent breakdown of social relations in the face of 'Taylorized' working practices and increasing class and sectional interest groups, engineers like Jean Coutrot attempted to define organic productive communities which would form the basis of a renewed collective purpose. Railway engineers and managers played an important role in these national debates and, unlike many thinkers in X-Crise and elsewhere, were in a position to turn thought into action.

The aim of railway industry managers in pursuing rationalization was to see class conflict nullified, with the emphasis placed upon shared interests aimed at the elimination of waste conceptualized both in terms of reduced productivity in the workplace and as social conflict in the public sphere. At the same time as trying to define an organic community of interest, however, the railway industry pursued its own interest in muscular fashion with the target of safeguarding the future of the industry as well as keeping it in private hands. This was as true of Dautry as of anyone who, although running the state owned *État* and as minister of armaments would appeal for national interest above all, continued to argue down to 1937 that the railways should remain in private hands as a guarantor against the chaos of competing interests which he saw as compromising French national interests in this period.

The policies of Raoul Dautry and other leading figures within the railway industry have been widely credited with containing the political militancy of cheminots following the explosions of general strikes in 1910 and 1920, not least by Dautry himself. The implications of Dautry's analysis, in the context of a railway industry which had largely been spared the disruption of the Popular Front strike wave of May-June 1936, was that rail industry social policy had successfully moulded a workforce with a collaborative, constructive spirit, immune from the siren calls of the forces of social disorder in the form of trade union or political militancy. Historians have taken Dautry's analysis that militant practice was in large measure expunged by company policy on trust. The most vehement critic has been Gerard Noiriel; by contrast, Chevandier, a historian alive to the agency of railway workers in the construction of a cheminot identity has, through his concentration upon strike action as the key crucible of identity formation, too failed to break out of company concepts.¹²⁸ Chapters Five and Six will demonstrate how cheminot trade unionism was affected by the particular structures put in place by companies and state, this did not, however, mean that cheminot militancy was non-existent, merely that it adapted itself to its environment with the Communist-led union in particular becoming adept at translating Communist rhetoric into the railway sphere. Prior to this discussion, however, it is necessary to investigate how a further dimension of state and railway company strategy defined the contours of railway industrial relations, Chapter Three explores the role of anti-Communism within the railway industry.

¹²⁸ Gérard Noiriel, *Les Origines Républicaines de Vichy*, p.74, p.88; Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en Grève*.

Chapter Three: Red For Danger: Anti-Communism and the Railway Industry

Introduction

This chapter explores anti-Communism as an unspoken assumption shared by members of France's political elite during the interwar period. With regard to the railways, a key strategic sector of the economy, fears over the political reliability of *cheminots* took two forms. The first concerned the potential for armed insurrection or disruption of the national rail network. The perception of this threat was inspired by a certain reading of Communist political rhetoric and the links which the authorities drew between the organizational structure of both the Communist Party and railway trade unions. Most importantly the mobility of railway workers, their access to the entire network and thus their capacity to bring the entire country to a standstill through direct action stoked the fears of bureaucrats, politicians and managers on the rail network. The second manifestation of elite anti-Communism was the manner in which incidents occurring on the rail network invariably came to be read as evidence of the malevolence of extremist political groups with the capacity to sabotage the country's rail network.

The perceptions of Communist action maintained by railway company directors, politicians and administrators, to say nothing of certain sections of the press, played an important role in defining the terms of interaction of Communists with railway industrial relations, particularly during the 1920s. Acting upon their assumptions which conceptualized Communism as an essentially violent, quasi-military ideology, the authorities reacted to the Communist presence on the railways in a firm, even heavy-handed manner. This played strongly to Communists' own perceptions of elite attitudes regarding working-class politics, serving to reinforce victimization as a central tenet within French Communist identity. Above all, the persistent efforts undertaken to attribute incidents occurring on the railway network to sabotage attempts undertaken by a militant and anti-French coterie of railway Communists served to anger more moderate opinion, as the 1930 incident at Montereau, discussed below, demonstrates. The threat posed to the Republic by Communists operating on the railways was repeatedly overstated by the authorities. While the 1921 Railway Statute aimed to engender a more corporatist approach into railway industrial relations, this chapter

demonstrates how suspicions remained rife on both sides of the management-union divide, acting as a break to the collaborative relationship which many in the industry, and the workforce, sought to achieve.

Anti-Communism and the Interwar Republic

Levels of anti-Communism did not remain at the same pitch throughout the interwar period. Indeed, three distinct peaks can be identified. The key period in French anti-Communism falls during the 1920s, which Frédéric Monier identified as a decade in which fears of Communist plots and insurrection formed a significant element in French political culture.¹ First is the early to mid-1920s, covering the formation of the PCF, the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 and the military engagement with the forces of Adb el-Krim in the Moroccan Rif War from April 1925, most particularly during Camille Chautemps's first term at the Interior Ministry (1924-1925). Second is the late 1920s and early 1930s, the period of the Comintern's 'revolutionary' 'class against class' strategy which coincided in France with Raymond Poincaré's tenure as Prime Minister and brought still more influential figures to the Interior Ministry such as Albert Sarraut (1926-1928) and André Tardieu (1928-1930). Finally, the third key high point in French government anti-Communism was the era of the Phoney War between September 1939 and May 1940 when, following the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the PCF denounced the war as an imperialist adventure and was declared an illegal organisation. During this time, as Talbot Imlay has noted, anxieties over the Communist threat almost took the form of a national pathology.²

Few ideas united the political and media classes in interwar France more effectively than the perceived threat posed to the Republic, with its idealized emphasis upon unity and order, by the forces of the Communist International in France, the PCF and the Communist-led trade union the CGTU. Olivier Forcade has pointed to the central role which anti-Communism played within French society in the period after 1919, noting that 'the fight against Communism had practically become one of the basic values of

¹ Frédéric Monier, *Le Complot dans la république*.

² Talbot Imlay, 'Mind the Gap: The Perception and Reality of Communist Sabotage of French War Production During The Phoney War 1939-1940'.

Republicanism³, though Sophie Cœuré notes that, while anti-Communism formed a central uniting element for the Bloc National government (1919-1924), it served as a major source of disunity between the Radicals and the SFIO.⁴ Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker underline the gravity of the situation which French policy makers faced during the early 1920s. From 1921 onwards, they note, 'a completely unprecedented situation seemed to confront French public opinion faced with the Communist phenomenon. In a nation in which there existed a strong cohesion, there appeared a foreign body which affirmed, without equivocation, their refusal to accept commonly held values, the rules of the game which were the cement of a society.'⁵ Of course, prior to 1921 the French nation was far from presenting a united social front, the increased labour militancy of the pre-war era and the presence of anti-republican groups on the far right are testament to this. However, the image of the nation united in wartime, symbolized by the *union sacrée*, was an important reference point for many in the high echelons of French society. The events of the immediate post war period, the labour unrest and the strike waves of 1919-1920, culminating in the formation of the French Communist Party and the CGTU, seemed to announce the death of consensual politics on elite terms. So concerned were the authorities with the potential contagion of Bolshevism that all information on events in Russia were censored until 1919.⁶ Running in tandem with these developments were anxieties among elites regarding what was viewed as the destabilizing impact of high immigration levels upon social relations in France.⁷ Following the end of World War One, French authorities moved to act against the high numbers of workers from the non-white colonies. These workers were rapidly removed from the labour market, the resulting labour gap filled through encouraging white European immigration, considered a more reliable and less destabilizing source of manual labour. Those colonial workers who did remain, largely those from North Africa, suffered constant surveillance, discrimination and extremely poor working and

³ Olivier Forcade, *La république secrète: histoire des services spéciaux français de 1918 à 1939* (Paris, 2008), p.352.

⁴ Sophie Cœuré, *La Grande Lueur à l'Est*, p.36.

⁵ Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme en France, tome 1, 1917-1940* (Paris, 1987), p.111. 'A partir de 1921, c'est une situation totalement inédite que doit affronter l'opinion publique française face au phénomène communiste. Dans une nation où existe une puissante cohésion, voici qu'apparaît un corps étranger qui affirme sans ambages son refus d'accepter les valeurs communément admises, les règles du jeu tacitement respectées, tout ce qui fait le ciment d'une société.'

⁶ Olivier Forcade, *La République Secrète*, p.352.

⁷ On immigration and the Republic see May Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940* (Stanford, 2007).

living conditions.⁸ Communism was seen as fermenting discontent and disorder in these milieus. As the period progressed the authorities were faced not simply with French Communists in their midst, but also the arrival of large numbers of Italian and later Spanish and eastern European militants fleeing authoritarian regimes, in addition to increasingly large numbers of Jewish refugees through the 1930s.⁹

Communism as an Insurrectionary Threat

Central to anxieties over the Communist presence was the relationship in the mind of French elites between Communist ideology and violent political action. This liaison reached into the heart of French culture. 'Bolshevik' was frequently translated into French terms as 'maximalist': 'a false but opportune translation to suggest an extremist danger.' The Larousse dictionary of 1928 elaborated the definition, a Bolshevik being someone who 'carries to the extreme Socialist and revolutionary demands.' The dictionary also posited a false shared etymology between the words 'Bolshevik' and 'Boche', suggesting both the violence and the alien nature of the idea.¹⁰ Such an analysis seemed to flow naturally from the clear ideological and organizational liaison between the PCF and the Russian Bolsheviks, as well as the wider international revolutionary movement symbolized by the Comintern. Lenin's Bolsheviks had, after all, come to power by means of a revolution and through the early 1920s were engaged in a ferocious war with anti-revolutionary forces for control of Russia, a conflict in which French, along with British, armed forces were involved. During the 1920s, Communism was understood in terms of a military, insurrectional threat. Particularly following the Bolshevikization of the Comintern and the European parties from 1923 onwards, which aimed to move cell organization away from localities and towards workplaces, the Comintern emphasis upon tight, secretive organization raised concerns among the high echelons of French society. In 1925 the *Petit Parisien* summed up wider thinking when

⁸ On French efforts to remove colonial workers from the Metropole see Tyler Stovall, 'National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor After World War One', *Representations*, 84, (2004), 52--72' On the surveillance of North African workers see Clifford Rosenberg, *Policing Paris: The Origins of Modern Immigration Control Between the Wars* (Ithaca, 2006), pp.109--198.

⁹ Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933 – 1942* (Stanford, CA., 1999).

¹⁰ Sophie Cœuré, *La Grande Lueur à l'Est*, p.38. 'celui qui porte au maximum les revendications socialiste et révolutionnaire.'

it noted how, 'there is in the Bolshevik camp a rigorous military organization.'¹¹ Through 1924 and 1925 a considerable press campaign raged against the PCF, denouncing the imminence of a Communist coup. There was wild speculation of a tightly organized 'garde rouge' of some 2000 combatants, 10% of whom were understood to be armed.¹²

Following the creation of the Communist-led railway workers' union, the FNCU, in 1921, the authorities kept the cheminots under close observation. In an era when mass automobile ownership was still in its infancy and the vast majority of freight was still moved overland by rail, the railways were the major economic arteries of the French nation. In addition, they were also the key means of transporting troops and logistics, so playing an important role in military planning: the parliamentary Finance Committee's commission on National Defence created in 1936 included the railways within its remit.¹³ The French military had assumed the running of the railways during World War One and, following the mobilization of 1939, cheminots were once more under military control. The high importance which the railways played in the strategic thinking of this period is captured by Ian Fleming in his first James Bond novel *Casino Royale*. Set during the early years of the Cold War, a key reason for the intelligence service's concern regarding the novel's villain, Le Chiffre, is this individual's links with the Communist-led railway union in Alsace.¹⁴

Of primary concern to the authorities was the presence of a tight, seemingly militaristic organization with full access to the major arteries of the French nation. A 1927 report on Communist propaganda emphasized the conspiratorial nature of Communist politics. In order to facilitate covert communications between separate groups, the report noted how a secret code language had been developed by the National Federation, thereby seeming to confirm suspicions of a developing conspiracy on the railway network. Individual railway networks were assigned code names, the PLM being rechristened 'Roussillon'; the *Nord*, 'Rouge'; Paris-Orléans was 'Fayonnaise'; *Est*, 'Mancéenne' and

¹¹ Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme en France*, p.132. 'il y a dans le camp bolchévique une rigoureuse organisation militaire.'

¹² Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l'anticommunisme en France*, p.212.

¹³ AN: C//15189, (No records relating to the railways are however extant in the minutes of this committee).

¹⁴ Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale* (London, 1953). (My thanks to Jeremy Black for drawing my attention to this). The 2006 film version replaced the Communist-led union with international terrorists and African guerilla forces.

the *État* was named 'Lazarus'. The PCF's 'Comité des Chemins de fer' was reported to have been given the title 'Le Globe'.¹⁵ Only the 'Nord' could really be said to draw upon any 'revolutionary' imagery (the system perhaps being drawn up by a member of the Northern union). The reference to 'Lazarus' might refer to the state's ownership of the former 'Western' rail network and its subsequent 'resurrection'. It is worthy of note that these code names are not to be found in any Communist discussion of the railway companies. No documentary evidence has been identified for a 'comité des chemins de fer' within the PCF. This may be evidence for the close conspiratorial nature of its existence, on the other hand it could suggest that it either did not exist or was not a particularly formal group.

The report in question gives the impression of a wide ranging and highly developed network of Communist cells across the country, a potentially troubling development given the necessary high mobility of railway workers compared to other sectors of the workforce. A picture is painted of pockets of Communists meeting in towns and villages across France, 'in depots, workshops, stations, offices and on the lines, the cheminots must assemble' forming 'sous-comités techniques' and 'comités de gare' - a nationwide network of committed Communists ready to act.¹⁶ These were, argued the report, the 'listening posts of the Party'.¹⁷ Reports from these 'Comités de gare' would be delivered to the CGTU headquarters and thence on to the Soviet Embassy's 'Section des chemins de fer'.¹⁸ Focussing on the Parisian area, the report highlighted the dramatic nature of the Communist presence on the railways: Communist strength within the FNCU was reckoned at between 780 and 788 committed and active members on the *Nord* network; 815-831 members on the *Est*; 1015-1041 on the *État*; 2412-2426 on PLM and on the PO between 1263 and 1280 active Communist cell members were estimated. This suggests an upper estimate of 7792 active cell members; the FNCU's own frequent complaints about the commitment of their members (or lack thereof) suggest that such an analysis should be treated with caution.¹⁹

Having presented the numbers available to the Communists on the railways, the report goes on to discuss the stockpiling of weapons at key locations, both at depots within

¹⁵ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, p.7.

¹⁶ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, p.5. Dans le dépôt, dans l'atelier, dans la gare, dans le bureau, sur la voie les cheminots doivent se réunir'.

¹⁷ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, p.3. 'les postes d'écoute de parti'.

¹⁸ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, p.16.

¹⁹ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, p.16.

Paris and in the banlieue. As of 1 October 1926, fourteen depots within the Paris region were estimated to be concealing around 7000 firearms from Belgium or Germany, financed with Moscow's money.²⁰ Plans for a general strike and widespread sabotage of the rail arteries were thought to be afoot.²¹ The insurrectionary potential of Communists and the vulnerability of the rail network to committed activists with intimate knowledge of the system were further highlighted by a report of May 1928. On 15 May 1928, M. Renard, 'Directeur du cabinet et de la sûreté générale', wrote to the Minister for Public Works, enclosing a copy of a report of 4 May entitled 'Cheminots Communistes'.²² At a meeting of 3 May, the PCF had voted to re-launch the Party's plans for 'l'action conspirative', although this was reasoned to be 'as much in view of the negative election results for the Party as the dictates of the Communist International'.²³ The conspiracy network would operate without the knowledge of the broad mass of the Communist Party and would be directed by leading figures within the national PCF, including Vaillant-Couturier, Sellier, Doriot, Sémard, Midol and Monmousseau. The presence of the last three names, all former railway employees, seeming to clearly demonstrate the direction in which Communists could be expected to move. The group was to plan and execute 'offensive efforts' both in France and in the colonies. In the metropole, such actions would be directed 'in the vital branches of the country [...] the lines and communications of all types, ports, the army, industrial establishments working for the national defence, mining industries and aviation.' 150,000 francs had arrived from Moscow to fund the group's activities.²⁴

This 1928 report echoed earlier inquiries into the revolutionary aspirations of Communists on the railways. 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, paralyzing all traffic in an attempt to impede military communications with the capital. An arms and munitions depot was reported to

²⁰ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, pp.30--31.

²¹ AN: F/7/13671, October 1927, note 174, p.33.

²² AN: F/7/13670, 'Paris, 4/5/28, 'Cheminots Communistes' enclosed within '15/5/28 M. Renard à M. le Ministre des Travaux Publics'.

²³ AN: F/7/13670, 'Paris, 4/5/28, 'Cheminots Communistes' enclosed within '15/5/28 M. Renard à M. le Ministre des Travaux Publics', p.1. 'tant en vue du résultat négatif des élections pour le Partie que pour les raisons dictées par L'International Communiste.'

²⁴ AN: F/7/13670, 'Paris, 4/5/28, 'Cheminots Communistes' enclosed within '15/5/28 M. Renard à M. le Ministre des Travaux Publics', pp.1--2. 'dans les branches vitales du pays...les voies et les communications de tous genres, les ports maritimes, l'armée, les établissements industriels affectés à la défense nationale, les industries du sous – sol, les communications aérienne et l'industrie aéronautique.'

have been created in the Paris area.²⁵ A 1923 document marked 'très secret' reported on plans developed regarding Communist organization in the case of insurrection. In essence, it concentrated on the need for greater strength among the cheminots, leading to a general strike and thence to a Communist occupation of the railway network.²⁶

Even at this moment of heightened anti-Communism within the French establishment, credence had its limits. The source of the 1928 report was identified as being one Victor Darras, an 'agent indicateur du Comité de Direction des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer', who had for a number of years played a similar role for the *Sûreté*. Darras was recorded as being a very mediocre informant, one who 'had never been short of imagination'. It was emphasized that his reports were often of a very vague and general nature and had been called into question on earlier occasions.²⁷ The document on Darras noted the serious implications should his findings be proved correct but, it was underlined, 'the reports of the *Sûreté* staff are completely silent regarding this subject.' *Sûreté* professionals seemed unhappy with the amateur efforts of a foreign informant (Darras the report noted was of Polish origin).²⁸

Despite the scepticism with which the Darras report was met, concern with the potential threat from Communist inspired and directed networks operating freely on the railways was a source of genuine anxiety for the authorities. Important railway centres, depots and workshops, grouping large numbers of workers whose role was vital for the efficient operation of the network, were kept under close scrutiny. In Northern France, for instance, Lille was a key railway hub with two important cheminot centres, the large workshop at Hellemmes, which in 1925 employed over 2000 workers, and the newly created depot of La Délivrance in the commune of Lomme, on the outskirts of the city. The workshops at Hellemmes were a centre marked by very high levels of unionization among the cheminots. Of the 2,000 employees in 1925, 1,759 were members of either the CGT or CGTU federations. The *confédérés* were by far the larger of the two with 1,469 members. Despite this, the authorities remained nervous of the potential for

²⁵ AN: F/7/13688, 'Parti Communiste Français: Plan d'Occupation Communiste des Chemins de Fer, (d'un Correspondent), 14/11/1925, p.1.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ AN: F/7/13670, A/S d'information relative à l'activité communiste auprès des cheminots 18/5/28, p.1. 'n'a jamais été à court d'imagination.'

²⁸ AN: F/7/13670, A/S d'information relative à l'activité communiste auprès des cheminots 18/5/28, pp.3--4. 'les rapports de service des fonctionnaires de la Sûreté Générale sont d'un mutisme absolu à ce sujet.'

agitation, especially as it was noted that Communists were very active in the area.²⁹ In response to the perceived potential threat the *Sûreté* noted that they were in constant contact with railway management in the Lille area, and particularly with company engineers at the Hellemmes workshop. The least example of propaganda, boasted a *Sûreté* official, was flagged to the authorities, with suspect workers subject to particularly close surveillance. All the principal militants in the workshops were recorded on the Carnet B and the authorities stood ready to move immediately to arrest them in case of strike action. 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. No details are given in the *Sûreté* report of 1925, though given the involvement of the army in the planning of the strategy it is likely to have involved troops acting to ensure the railway service, perhaps resembling the role played by the military during the general strike of 30 November 1938.³⁰

Of even greater concern in the Nord was the railway hub of Somain, a small town just to the east of Douai. In a population of 12,000 people some 2,000 were cheminots, of whom at least 700 were members of the Communist-led FNCU. Indeed, so important was the area that the FNCU's regional leadership was headquartered in this small commune between 1921 and 1927, prior to its relocation to Paris. Somain's passenger and freight stations were among the largest in terms of the volume of traffic on the *Nord's* entire network. All this was spelled out by the *Sous-Préfet* of Douai in a report to the Prefect in 1926. The *Sous-Préfet* underlined that Somain was, 'un foyer d'agitation communiste' with the entire municipality and administration of the commune firmly in the hands of the Communist Party.³¹ Reports continued to point to the Communist presence. FNCU leaders, it was noted in 1930, were actively focussed upon recruitment, 'even during the course of their work' and more worryingly appeared to be gaining support among the more 'reasonable' elements of the workforce.³² Communist

²⁹ Archives Départementales, Nord (hereafter AD Nord): 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, pp.1--2.

³⁰ AD Nord: 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 ; On the 1938 strike see Chapter Seven of this thesis.

³¹ AD Nord: M595/90, Généralités 1906-1927, Enquête 1926, Rapport du Sous-Préfet de Douai, 27/3/1926.

³² AD Nord: M595/91, 1930, Rapport du Commissaire Spécial de Douai, 10/7/1930, p.2. 'même au cours de leur travail'; 'même auprès de cheminots raisonnables.'

strength was on the rise in Somain, according to the *Sous-Préfet* the local Communist Party enjoyed considerable influence, typically gaining between 20-25% of the vote in the first round of elections. Local Communist cells, headquartered in the *Mairie*, were dominated by cheminots.³³

Strike Action and Migrant Labour on the Railways

As in other sectors of the economy the threat of strike action led by militant workers toward political ends was an important source of concern. Throughout the 1920s the memory of the General Strike of May 1920 which had shut down large parts of the national rail network loomed large in the minds of both cheminots and, importantly, in the calculations of the authorities. Particular concern was focussed upon workers in the *ateliers*, or workshops, whose work resembled more closely that of the *métallo*, or metalworker, than cheminots employed on the railway network. In the aftermath of the 1920 railway strikes, a ‘distance in temperament’ was noted between workers in the company workshops and the rest of the cheminot workforce. ‘Workshop employees’, noted an investigation of 1923, ‘form, among railway employees, a heterogeneous element.’ Such workers were only distantly involved in ‘la vie des chemins de fer’ and most significantly, ‘they bring to the interior of the networks a foreign *état d’esprit* which is a cause of trouble.’³⁴ It had been in such areas, noted the analyst, that calls for ‘revolutionary’ strikes in 1920 had found a particularly intense reception. Following the defeat of the strike the rail companies were moved to take action, ‘it was decided to discontinue a certain number of workshops which could, without inconvenience, be transferred to the control of private industry.’³⁵

Framed as an important measure for increasing security on the railway networks such measures also served to ameliorate the financial position of railway companies. Employment in these private contractor companies was marked by low pay and poor working environments, as their employees were not covered by the railway statute which protected cheminot conditions. Though strike action among the cheminots was

³³ AD Nord : M/154/191, 1930, Sous-Préfet de Douai au Préfet du Nord, 'union locale unitaire de Douai'.

³⁴ Roger Lazard, *Situation économique des agents des chemins de fer*, p.84. ‘Les agents des ateliers forment parmi le personnel des chemins de fer, un élément hétérogène.’ ; ‘ils apportent à l’intérieur des réseaux un état d’esprit étranger, qui est une cause de trouble.’

³⁵ Roger Lazard, *Situation économique des agents des chemins de fer*, p.84. ‘on a [...] décidé de supprimer un certain nombre d’ateliers qui peuvent sans inconvénient être remis à l’industrie privée.’

largely absent in the interwar period, the Ministry of the Interior continued to receive reports of strikes taking place in such private contractors related to the railways. These largely consisted of strike actions taken by workers in private firms fulfilling contracts with the national railway companies. Private companies could hire foreign workers, who were barred from working for the railway companies directly as employees had to be either born or naturalized French -- a measure introduced following concerns over the national security of the railways in the nineteenth century.³⁶ In many cases workers were hired on short term contracts, even by the day. Such was the case at Gare d'Austerlitz during the summer months. Labourers would be hired for night shift work, to help deal with the seasonal influx of goods into Paris, between 10 p.m. and 11.30 p.m. on the evening itself; the numbers employed varying each night. When these workers went on strike for a twenty-five centime an hour increase in their wages, the *Sûreté* officer attached to the station took the opportunity to inform his superiors of his concerns regarding the working conditions of these employees. The uncertainty of the work and its occurrence through the night were having a serious effect upon productivity. The officer also raised concerns from the 'point de vue [...] de la moralité.' He noted that he consistently had to deal with criminals who were being hired by the company, considered to be imputable to the late-night hiring practice.³⁷ In contrast to cheminots, whose rights, benefits and pay were to a certain degree protected by the 1921 statute, these more casual, and in many cases migrant workers, offered a perplexing challenge to authorities seeking to maintain social order and ensure the economic operation of the rail network.

Two strikes among workers at the *Ateliers de wagons de Brignoud*, just north-east of Grenoble in the department of Isère, in April 1929 and May/June 1930, demonstrate what was for the authorities, the often troubling mix of labour militancy, Communist agitation and the presence of migrant workers in an important industrial centre. The strike which broke out in 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

³⁶ Gérard Noiriel, *Les Origines Républicaines de Vichy*, p.74; Georges Ribeill, *Les Cheminots*, p.28.

³⁷ AN: F/7/13925, 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.

population. Secondly, the ‘cosmopolitan element which comprises the working population of the region’, considered the *Sûreté* report, added to the potential for trouble. It was estimated that roughly 70% of the workers were of non-French origins.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.’⁴⁰ 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, strongly calling upon them to join the strike. From the outset local law enforcement had been mobilized, with a heavy police presence in the commune during the day. By night, 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.⁴¹ 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 pelotons to be lodged at the pit.⁴² 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

³⁸ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 22-25/4/1929, Préfet Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieure, 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. 'élément cosmopolite qui forme la population ouvrière de la région'.

³⁹ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 22-25/4/1929, Préfet Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieure, 24/4/1929, p.2.

⁴⁰ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930-5/6/1930, Préfet d'Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 5/6/1930, p.1. 'mis tout en œuvre pour s'efforcer de l'aggraver et de l'étendre aux usines environnantes.'

⁴¹ 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. 'enrayer et étouffer ce mouvement d'agitation'.

⁴² Service Historique de la Gendarmerie, Vincennes, (Hereafter SHG): 59E461, Brigade Territoriale d'Ostricourt, pp.41--42.

not conformed to the laws of French hospitality.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ The shifting of work and workers from rail companies to private contracted companies removed a significant financial burden from the networks and was conceptualized as reinforcing the security of the rail network. However, for the authorities, the working conditions and employment practices within private companies and, importantly, the composition of the workforce, occasioned significant additional concerns.

In Somain, Lille or Grenoble, the very presence of trade union organizations and above all the existence of Communist networks caused considerable alarm among railway management and *Sûreté* officials. Such groups were discussed in terms of the threat they posed to security in the locality and to the wider network, indeed, the necessary mobility of certain cheminot occupations was recognized as a potential source of disorder. Just as the railway network served as an economic artery for the nation, it had the potential also to act as a conduit for radical ideas, plugging 'red' centres such as Somain and Lille, to say nothing of Paris, into the rest of the region, indeed the whole of France. In the Nord, for example, the case of the Communist employed as a conductor by the *Compagnie du Nord* is recorded who, it was alleged, used his time on the trains to spread propaganda among travelling workers.⁴⁵ The fear of a highly organized, motivated and highly mobile group of workers with access to all four corners of France and specialized knowledge of both how to keep the railway network operational and, more to the point, how to disable it, was a recipe for considerable angst in governing circles. It was a threat to which the authorities responded with considerable firmness.

Repression and Victimization

Anxieties over the disorder, disruption and violence which the authorities viewed Communism to threaten, both to the railways and across French society more widely, justified the use of repressive means in the minds of French elites. This is most clearly

⁴³ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930-5/6/1930, Préfet d'Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 3/6/1930, p.1. 'minutieuses enquêtes dans les milieux étrangers, aux fins de découvrir ceux d'entre eux dont l'attitude, au cours de ce conflit, n'auraient pas été conforme aux lois de l'hospitalité française.'

⁴⁴ AN: F/7/13925, Isère 26/5/1930-5/6/1930, Préfet d'Isère à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 27/5/1930, p.1.

⁴⁵ AD Nord: M/595/90, Généralités 1906-1927, Enquête 1926, Commissaire spéciale de Hazebrouck, 30/3/1927.

the case with the administration of Édouard Daladier from 1938 to 1940 during which time the social legislation of the Popular Front period was rolled back, the French Communist Party was declared illegal and large numbers of Communists were arrested. Important too were the heavy handed police actions undertaken against Communists during the administrations of 1926-1930. A key figure in this early anti-Communist reaction at the highest levels was Paris Prefect of Police, Jean Chiappe, who, from 1927 to 1934, ensured that left-wing militants remained a high priority for the political police.⁴⁶ Yet anti-Communism was not confined to right-wing figures, indeed it was a key component of political thinking across the political spectrum. It is particularly associated with the Cartel de Gauche government of 1924-1926. Becker and Berstein present a relatively benign view of the impact of Prime Minister Herriot and Interior Minister Chautemps during this period. While the police administration went into overdrive finding Communist conspiracies across France, encouraged by a virulent hyperbolic campaign in the press, Chautemps and Herriot are depicted as ‘conciliant.’⁴⁷ Sophie Cœuré complicates this interpretation, however, noting that the Cartel des Gauches felt able to leave the anti-Communist initiative to Chiappe.⁴⁸ Such passivity is disputed by Clifford Rosenberg who describes how Camille Chautemps, as well as Albert Sarraut, ‘were so worried about immigrant criminality, foreign agitators and Communists, that they were willing to make common cause with the avowed anti-republicans who controlled local government in the capital.’⁴⁹ Sarraut in particular is well known for his stance. His famous speech made at Constantine in 1927, in which he declared ‘le communisme voilà l’ennemi’, serves as shorthand for mainstream anti-Communism.⁵⁰ During the tenure of Sarraut, followed by André Tardieu, at the Interior Ministry, governments went onto the offensive against the PCF. Considerable use was made of preventative arrests, 300 members of the Communist Party being arrested on 1 May 1927 alone. 168 were arrested in Paris during 1928.⁵¹ On the Paris-Orléans railway network, the Communist-led union at Juvisy came in for particular surveillance. In 1929, the *Sûreté* saw in the prevalence of Communist propaganda among the ‘imposing

⁴⁶ On Chiappe see Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l’anticommunisme*, pp.220--224.

⁴⁷ Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l’anticommunisme*, p.212.

⁴⁸ Sophie Cœuré, *La grande lueur à l’est*, p.76.

⁴⁹ Clifford Rosenberg, *Policing Paris*, p.7.

⁵⁰ For the role anti-communism played in Albert Sarraut's political thinking, particularly in the colonial sphere, see Martin Thomas, 'Albert Sarraut, French Colonial Development, and the Communist Threat, 1919-1930', *Journal of Modern History*, 77, 4 (2005), 917--955; see also Clifford Rosenberg, 'Albert Sarraut and Republican Racial Thought', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 20, 3 (Fall, 2002), 97--114.

⁵¹ Serge Berstein and Jean-Jacques Becker, *Histoire de l’anticommunisme*, p.213.

mass of cheminots' a serious threat to public security.⁵² Communist militants, it was reported, had created among the wider cheminot population an atmosphere of fear and terror, however, 'the real danger resides above all in the fact that the members of the cell are called upon to provide certain information of a technical nature regarding the sensitive points of Juvisy station, notably to study the means and measures necessary to hinder and interrupt the normal functioning of the Orléans network, in the case of strikes, insurrections or mobilization.'⁵³ To remedy the situation at Juvisy, the Director of the *Sûreté* instructed management at the Paris-Orléans railway company, 'in the interests of public order', to remove seven of the leading Communist agitators from their positions and have them 'displaced, and sent to posts and regions where they will no longer be able to exercise their demoralizing actions.'⁵⁴ As well as ensuring that suspect cheminots were dispersed across the country away from sensitive areas, the Poincaré government also sought to isolate the party from its constituency among unionized French workers. In a suitably mechanistic metaphor, the Cheminot Federation was viewed as the wheels of the Communist movement, driven by the Moscow motor via the transmission of the CGTU. In line with this analysis, which conceptualized Communist cheminot trade unionism as the servant of a foreign power, the Poincaré government took action to exclude the union from the everyday business of government/union relations.

In June 1927 André Tardieu, as Minister for Public works in the Poincaré government, issued a circular order disallowing Ministry personnel from receiving delegations from any union affiliated to the CGTU. Tardieu noted how, 'the government has defined, before the Chamber, its policy with regard to the Communist Party, executer of foreign orders upon French soil.' It was impossible, wrote Tardieu, 'to doubt that the CGTU is under the direct and permanent direction of the Communist Party, to which its leaders are affiliated', receiving in turn their orders from the Communist International.⁵⁵ The

⁵² 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, pp1--2.

⁵³ 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, p.3. 'le véritable danger réside surtout dans ce fait que les membres de la cellule ont été appelés à fournir certains renseignements d'ordre technique sur les points sensibles de la gare de Juvisy et notamment à étudier les moyens et mesures propres à entraver et empêcher la marche normale du réseau d'Orléans en cas de grèves, troubles insurrectionnels ou de mobilisation.'

⁵⁴ 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, p.4. 'déplacé et envoyés dans des postes et des régions où ils ne pourront plus exercer leur action démoralisante.'

⁵⁵ AN: F/7/13669, Le Ministre des Travaux Publics à MM. les Chefs de Service du Ministère des Travaux Publics (Service des Travaux Publics), Circulaire Série B numéro 30, 9/6/1927. 'Le gouvernement a défini,

union response to this decision, however, surprised the Minister. In August 1927 Tardieu wrote to the Interior Ministry for clarification regarding the Cheminot position. He had received an extremely strongly worded letter from the FNCU leadership, claiming that the government's actions were illegal and threatening the Minister with legal action.⁵⁶ The Minister of the Interior (Sarraut) agreed that 'it seems strange [...] that such an extremist group should draw arguments from legislative texts and to threaten judicial action to maintain with your department the same relations which are customarily held with the CGT and CFTC unions.' The FNCU's insistence in guarding its rights of contact with the state seemed to stand in stark contrast to the anti-system violence which both Tardieu and Sarraut perceived to be at the heart of Communist agitation. Nevertheless, the Interior Minister continued to strongly affirm the revolutionary danger posed by the Federation, demonstrated through the 'collusion entre la CGTU, le Parti Communiste Français et l'Internationale Syndicale Rouge.'⁵⁷ The surprise of both Ministers at the FNCU response may be evidence that of all the CGTU affiliates organizing workers in the public sector, only the Cheminot Federation were pursuing such a strategy.

Sabotage and the Railway Network

The response of the FNCU to the Poincaré ministry's attempt at marginalizing them, particularly their emphasis upon pursuing their case through the legal and legitimate structures of the republican state, may ironically, have served only to heighten government suspicions. Despite the response of the Communist-led union, the authorities continued to equate railway Communism with violence, both rhetorical and physical. The close liaison of opposition to the political regime and violent action within the thought of key government figures such as Tardieu and Sarraut, as well as members of the *Sûreté* and Prefectural corps, is demonstrated in the responses of the French authorities to incidents occurring on the railway network. Perceived acts of

devant la chambre, sa politique à l'égard du Parti Communiste, exécuter en territoire français d'ordres venus de l'étranger,; 'de douter que la CGTU est sous l'action directe et permanente du Parti Communiste auquel ses dirigeants sont affiliés'.

⁵⁶ AN: F/7/13669, Fédération Nationale Unitaire Cheminot à M. Le Ministre des Travaux Publics, 4/8/1927.

⁵⁷ AN: F/7/13669, Ministre de l'Intérieur à Ministre des Travaux Publics, à sujet de la Fédération Nationale Unitaire des travailleurs des Chemins de Fer, 3/10/1927. 'il semble étrange...qu'un tel groupement extrémiste en vienne à tirer argument des textes législatives et à menacer d'une action judiciaire pour entretenir avec les services de votre département les mêmes relations dont il fait habituellement grief aux syndicats confédérés et autonomes.'

sabotage upon the railways were investigated by the French authorities, concerned with the potential endangerment of lives and property but also, importantly, with the threat such actions posed to national security. Many of these investigations survive in the *Archives Nationales*, Paris. What is particularly striking is that in no example that has been identified were the authorities able to conclude that the sabotage attempt, whether interfering with the track, signals or obstructing work in the workshops, was attributable to Communist trade unionists. This was not always a question of lack of evidence. In many cases the investigating magistrate was able to conclude either in favour of an accident or an isolated incident bearing no relationship to revolutionary activity. Yet despite this lack of evidence, as Talbot Imlay has noted for the Phoney War period, Communist sabotage remained an important element in the mental maps of interwar French elites.⁵⁸ Information sent out by the Head of the *Sûreté* to *Commissaires* across France emphasized the strength of this connection in the minds of elites. Ahead of the Communist organized ‘Day of Action’ of 1 August 1929, *Commissaires* received lists of known or suspected Communist agitators who were likely to either take part in demonstrations or ‘se livrer à des actes de sabotage.’⁵⁹

While sabotage of the railways did not feature in the FNCU’s repertoire, police surveillance of Communist meetings provided some evidence of nefarious intentions. Ahead of the Communist ‘day of action’ of 1 August 1929, a member of the Paris-Orléans union of the FNCU in Paris was reported to have proposed organizing a ‘signalling error’ to disrupt traffic for several hours.⁶⁰ Officers kept a close eye on all meetings of the PCF and FNCU to identify any potential Communist actions planned against the railways. In July 1925, during the colonial Rif War in Morocco, a report of a meeting of the PCF’s *Comité Central d’Action* was sent by the Director of the *Sûreté* to the Director of the Paris-Orléans railway company. The report noted that the PCF aimed at organizing a twenty-four hour general strike to impede the transportation of war material and troops by train. It was envisaged that women and children would be employed to block the tracks. One member of the committee emphasized the need to

⁵⁸ Talbot Imlay, ‘Mind the Gap: The Perception and Reality of Communist Sabotage of French War Production During The Phoney War’.

⁵⁹ See documents in AN: F/7/13697 for the PLM network.

⁶⁰ AN: F/7/13692, Ministère de l’Intérieur à Ministère des Travaux Publics, 28/6/1929, p.1.

move toward a policy of direct action, announcing that he and seven of his colleagues 'are ready to sabotage signals on the railway lines.'⁶¹

Involvement of some cheminots in interfering with the correct functioning of signals and with sabotage of tracks was not without precedent. During both the 1910 and 1920 general strikes, the historian Georges Ribeill has noted the acts of sabotage which were reported to have taken place.⁶² During the 1910 general strike, reports abounded of instances of low-level violence, sabotage of the rails, pistol shots and even bombs.⁶³ Moreover, Ribeill notes the means by which, following the 1910 general strike, French parliamentarians sought to introduce a broad definition of sabotage into French political culture. By tying the question to concerns over safety, the authorities aimed to make it a criminal offence for engine staff to leave their post, thereby encoding as sabotage any strike or non-violent disruption to the normal workings of the railway.⁶⁴ Involvement in political action could also result in cheminots losing their jobs. Following the general strike of 1920 estimates place the numbers sacked at between 18,000 and 25,000.⁶⁵ In September 1920 the *Sûreté* at Périgueux informed the Interior Ministry of the threat posed by certain 'ouvriers révoqués' to sabotage the railways over the winter unless they were reintegrated into their former employment. Two former cheminots in particular were heard to threaten to set fires in the workshops and to threaten that 'derailments will not be lacking this winter.' The officer reminded his superiors of the many sabotage acts and derailment attempts which, he claimed, had been carried out during the general strike.⁶⁶

The Darras report of 1928 and the unattributed one of 1927 both drew attention to Communist plans for sabotage campaigns on the railways, though the 1927 report discussed these schemes in terms of action to be taken to immobilize traffic in the

⁶¹AN: F/7/13961, Directeur de la Sûreté Générale à M. le Directeur de la Compagnie de chemins de Fer Paris-Orléans, 28/7/1925. 'sont prêts à saboteur les appareils des signaux sur la ligne du chemin de fer.'

⁶²Georges Ribeill, 'Répressions dans les Chemins de Fer Français: Une Mise en Perspective, Des Compagnies à la SNCF (1938)' V Congrès Història Ferroviària, Palma (14 – 16 October 2009), pp.1--16 (12). accessed through:

http://www.docutren.com/congreso_palma/pdfs/com/Ses31/030109_Ribeill.pdf (accessed 25/07/11).

⁶³J. M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France', p.445.

⁶⁴ Georges Ribeill, 'Répressions dans les Chemins de Fer Français: Une Mise en Perspective, Des Compagnies à la SNCF (1938)', p.12.

⁶⁵ Georges Ribeill 'Répressions dans les Chemins de Fer Français: Une Mise en Perspective, Des Compagnies à la SNCF (1938)' p.1.

⁶⁶ AN: F/7/13689, Commissariat de Périgueux, 14/9/1920. 'les déraillements ne manqueraient pas cet hiver.'

specific context of a general strike. The threat of sabotage to the railway network was taken extremely seriously by the law enforcement authorities of the Third Republic. An annual dossier on 'sabotage sur les voies de chemins de fer' exists within the BB/18 Ministry of Justice files at the *Archive Nationales*, Paris. Included within these dossiers are numerous investigations by local gendarmeries and reports by magistrates into reported 'sabotage' cases on the railways. However, almost universally, these cases involve incidents of children throwing stones at passing trains or leaving material on the lines which could have led to derailments.⁶⁷

Despite this, incidents involving damage to the line were routinely considered to follow from malevolent motives. When, in 1934, cheminots working on the line near Douai noticed damage caused to the tracks, the *Procureur Général* wrote to the Minister of Justice that an attempt to derail a train transporting the *gardes mobiles* was suspected.⁶⁸ In 1929, an attempt at derailing a train was reported by the *Procureur Général* of Bourges. A man named M---, a Russian, was arrested and identified as the author of the vandalism of the tracks. However, the *Procureur* wrote, 'it does not seem that this sabotage act, despite the nationality of its author, can be ascribed to Communist plotting.' The accused was judged to 'not enjoy the fullness of his mental faculties.'⁶⁹ The previous year an unrelated anonymous note had arrived at the desk of the *Procureur Général* in Orléans. Fearing 'la vengeance de bandits' the author preferred not to reveal their identity but urgently wished to draw attention to a threat against the lines between Trouville and Dieppe. The author urged the reader to 'watch these two lines and if you want to find those who are behind it search among the Communist leaders of St. Pierre des Corps and especially those of Sotteville, Saint-Etienne and Quevilly [...] They are murderers [...] It isn't *chemineaux* who are responsible but the agitators from these places.' The author also urged the authorities to watch 'their' Deputy 'Gauthier'.⁷⁰ This is an intriguing message. The word 'Chemineaux' can be translated as 'vagabond', though according to the *Académie Française* dictionary this is an older or

⁶⁷ For a representative example see for instance Dossier 9A 38 in AN: BB/18/3114.

⁶⁸ AN: BB/18/2908, 9A 34, Le Procureur Général près la Cour d'Appel de Douai à M. le Garde des Sceaux, Ministre de la Justice, 13/11/1934.

⁶⁹ AN: BB/18/2815, 55A 29/9, Procureur Général de Bourges à Monsieur la Garde des Sceaux, 2/8/1929. 'il ne semble résulter que cet acte de sabotage, malgré la nationalité de son auteur, soit susceptible d'être rattaché aux menées communistes.'; 'ne jouirait pas de la plénitude de ses facultés mentales.'

⁷⁰ AN: BB/18/2776, 55A, Rouen Attentat Contre des Trains, Procureur Général d'Orléans à Monsieur la Garde des Sceaux, 9/9/1927. 'surveillez ces deux lignes et si vous voulez trouvez ceux qui organisent cela, cherchez dans les chefs communistes de St. Pierre des Corps et surtout ceux de Sotteville, St. Etienne, et Quevilly [Seine- Inférieure] [...] Ce sont des assassins [...] ce n'est pas les chemineaux qui sont coupables mais des agitateurs de ces endroits.'

literary usage, one perhaps unlikely to have been current in the 1920s. Equally, it could be a misspelling of its homophone 'cheminots'. Given the future career path of Gauthier, who was to be expelled from the PCF soon after the date of this letter, one cannot rule out the possibility of a Communist ploy to smear an unpopular deputy, spelling mistakes perhaps adding to the authenticity of the worker's concerns for a reader from the upper echelons of French society. At the 1926 PCF congress at Lille, Gauthier had led criticisms against both the PCF leadership and Russian interference in French politics, protesting against 'the imposition by the Comintern of decisions which "do not accord with the state of mind of the French proletariat"'.⁷¹ Such criticisms had led Pierre Séward to attack the deputy for his 'nationalism' and 'anti-Russian tendency.'⁷² He would finally be expelled in 1929. In addition to the Gauthier episode, inter-union rivalries should not be discounted, nor the extent of anti-Communism amongst the cheminot workforce. The lack of additional evidence in the Justice Archive dossiers suggests that little further action was occasioned by the letter.

Nonetheless, the authorities continued to explore possible links between railway sabotage and revolutionary or extremist groups. Following acts of vandalism on the PLM network in the Paris region, the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut, wrote to the Paris Prefect of Police on 25 May 1934 asking for surveillance to be carried out on 'the milieus from which the authors of such crimes may have originated.' Despite the lack of explicit prompting, the Prefect, nevertheless, understood completely in which 'milieus' the Minister expected him to focus his investigation. His response, however, was clear: enquiries had been unable to establish any link between sabotage attempts and revolutionary or libertarian groups, whether French or foreign. Such acts, noted the Prefect, 'persist in being the work of isolated individuals rather than of those acting on behalf of extremist organizations.'⁷³ The seriousness with which cheminots of all political persuasions and none viewed safety on the railways is an argument developed at length later in the thesis,⁷⁴ the implication that cheminots might be in any way

⁷¹ Quoted from E. H. Carr, *The Foundations of a Planned Economy, vol.3, part 1*, (London, 1976), pp.467-468 (468).

⁷² E. H. Carr, *The Foundations of a Planned Economy, vol.3, part 1*, p.468.

⁷³ Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris (Hereafter APP): DA866, Le Préfet de Police à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 27/6/34. 'les milieux où peuvent se recruter les auteurs de pareils méfaits.'; 'aucun renseignement n'a pu être recueilli dans les milieux révolutionnaires et libertaires, tant français ou étrangers de la région parisienne au sujet des auteurs de ces tentatives de sabotage. Ces actes persistent d'être le fait d'individus isolés plutôt que d'individus agissant pour le compte d'organisations extrémistes.'

⁷⁴ See Chapter Six on railway safety.

responsible for causing, or threatening to cause, damage to the network or provoke railway accidents was a source of considerable friction in railway industrial relations. The incident of a derailed train at Montereau near Melun in June 1930 is an example of just such a case.

On 2 June 1930 the *Quotidien* newspaper carried the story of the derailment of the Paris-Marseille express which had occurred near Montereau station on the outskirts of Melun, in the department of Seine-et-Marne, during the night of the 31May/1 June. The paper reported that the incident had killed seven and injured fifteen, eight of whom seriously. Quoting PLM sources, the paper reported that the incident had been provoked by a collision between the express and a light wagon which had been suspiciously left on the tracks in the path of the train. The inquiry launched by the Minister for Public Works reported that a criminal act was suspected.⁷⁵ The *Commissaire Spécial* at Melun reported to the Prefect of Seine-et-Marne the outcome of initial investigations. Suspicion had fallen upon an Italian working for a private contractor on the rail network who had been spotted alone in the area on the morning of 1 June. It was considered as being of equal significance for the inquiry that several known Communists had been identified as working for the Drouard contractors in the area of the incident. Four men, including a municipal councillor, were noted to be 'fervent militants.' Rogier, a local politician, it was noted, was known to express his political opinions with extreme violence.⁷⁶ The response of the authorities to the events suggests an element of farce. *L'Humanité* on 7 June, denouncing the pantomime of the government efforts, reported that three navvies had been detained by police in connection with the incident at the Swiss border. In addition an Italian worker, Bruno G., had been detained.⁷⁷ The *Petit Parisien* of the same day reported that police were investigating an Italian and a Spaniard employed on the railways near Melun.⁷⁸ *L'Humanité* attacked the government response to the accident and the willingness of the press to follow the orders of Tardieu to the effect that 'the Communists are guilty.'⁷⁹

A police report of 7 June noted the general reaction towards the accident among the 'milieux libertaires' in the Paris region. It was widely felt in these circles that the crash

⁷⁵ *Quotidien*, 30/6/1930.

⁷⁶ AN: F/7/13688, Commissaire Spécial de Melun à M. le Préfet de Seine et Marne, 5/6/1930, pp. 1--2, (2).

⁷⁷ *L'Humanité*, 7/6/1930.

⁷⁸ *Petit Parisien*, 7/6/1930.

⁷⁹ *L'Humanité*, 7/6/1930.

was an accident, caused either by the poor state of the rails or the excess speed of the train. Writing in the journal *Libertaire*, one Louis Raffin concluded that the incident was almost certainly the result of a tragic accident, but noted how, 'The (sabotage) version satisfies the PLM rail company (who are sufficiently cynical to offer a bonus to those who discover, or help in discovering the criminals) and the government, who see in the incident the opportunity to launch a vast police operation against extremist groups.'⁸⁰ No group it should be noted is recorded as having claimed responsibility for the incident.

The local FNCU were incensed by the accusation that either their members or their political strategy might be to blame for the accident. A meeting attended by 550 cheminots was organized for 11 June to 'denounce the campaign which has been led against the Communist Party, trade unions and particularly against the cheminots following the catastrophe.'⁸¹ The chair of the meeting noted how the cheminots present 'know something of the railways. We have learnt it by heart on the rails, through coupling wagons.' This specialist knowledge was compared to the position of the press who had merely parroted the assertions of the authorities. Two particularly vocal attackers of the Communist cheminots were invited to the meeting to provide any evidence they possessed inculpating railway workers in the incident. Neither was forthcoming.⁸²

Both the FNCC and unorganized workers were equally angry at the suggestion that a cheminot could have deliberately caused any rail accident, opinion in these quarters believed deficient maintenance and the policies of the PLM were to blame for the incident.⁸³ The secretary of the local FNCU made clear his anger at the accusations made in the press. He underlined that '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

⁸⁰ AN: F/7/13688, rapport, 7/6/1930. 'la version de l'attentat satisfait et la compagnie PLM (qui pousse le cynisme jusqu'à offrir une prime à ceux qui découvriront ou aideront à découvrir les criminels) et le gouvernement, qui voit là l'occasion de se livrer à une vaste opération policière sur les milieux d'extrême gauche.'

⁸¹ AN: F/7/13688, Commissaire Spécial Tardiven à M. le Contrôleur Général des Services de Police Administrative, 11/6/1930, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p.1. 'dénoncer la campagne qui a été menée contre le Parti Communiste, le syndicat ouvrier et plus particulièrement contre le syndicat ouvrier des cheminots à la suite de la catastrophe.'

⁸² AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p.2. 'nous savons quelque chose du chemins de fer. Nous l'avons appris par cœur sur les voies, en accrochant les wagons.'

⁸³ AN: F/7/13671, Commissariat spécial de Bordeaux à M. le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 16/6/1930.

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 county, that of Work.'⁸⁴ Lucien Midol and Marcel Cachin also addressed the meeting. Midol linked the recent company response to a broader narrative of repression stretching back to the mass sackings in the wake of the 1920 strike and beyond. He noted his own previous experience with the PLM, arguing that over thirteen years of service prior to his sacking in 1920, as well as following it, he had seen 'how the companies, the PLM in particular, defy their agents and the public who use the trains.'⁸⁵ He catalogued the wide failings of the PLM in the area of track maintenance and the fear with which all locomotive drivers felt when approaching notorious sections of the line. He drew attention in particular to an apparent inconsistency in the PLM account of events supplied to the press. The speed limit on the Montereau section had been raised from 30 KpH to 90 KpH prior to the incident. The company had announced to the press that trains had been running at this speed since the middle of April. This point was key. If true it meant that trains had been covering the section of track at the higher speed for weeks prior to the accident without incident. Midol, however, flatly contradicted the company version. Locomotive footplate staff had only been informed of the new rules on 30 May, the day prior to the derailment.⁸⁶ Midol also dealt sarcastically with the small wagon which was central to the company sabotage story. In front of his knowledgeable audience, the FNCU General Secretary cast doubt on the company story which argued that the wagon had provoked the derailment. Noting with incredulity that the debris of the wooden wagon had been found alongside the stricken locomotive at some distance from the point of impact, he sarcastically expressed the wish that his cheminot comrades could be as disciplined as the wagon had proved:

'There you have a mass of 150kg, which is hit by a mass of 120 tonnes and which loyally follows the locomotive [...] Once the locomotive has finished on its travels [...] we find next to it this tiny object,

⁸⁴ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, pp.3--4. 'au syndicat unitaire des cheminots de Montereau, comme dans notre Fédération Unitaire, comme à la CGTU, comme au Parti Communiste, nous avons un seul programme: lutter pour avoir des meilleurs salaires. '; 'on a tenté aussi de salir nos camarades qui font partie des cellules communistes et qui sont étrangers. Qu'ils soient étrangers ou français ils ont le devoir de défendre leur salaire et de se défendre contre le patronat qui les exploite [...] Nous n'avons qu'une patrie, la patrie du travail.'

⁸⁵ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p.5. 'comment les compagnies, la compagnie PLM en particulier, se jouent à la fois de leurs agents et du public qui monte dans les trains.'

⁸⁶ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p.9.

which has not deviated an inch and which has followed the huge weight of the engine like a little dog follows its mistress in the park.'⁸⁷

Midol suggested the presence of the wagon was a useful means to draw attention away from company failings in track maintenance and irresponsible expectations regarding speed. Indeed, Midol went so far as to suggest that it had been planted by company managers, 'is it not easier' he asked, 'to carry the debris of a wagon following the derailment and to place it in the desired location then to transport a wagon in order to provoke an accident?'⁸⁸

The Montereau episode is instructive, both in what it reveals about the role anti-Communism played in interpreting accidents among railway company elites and sections of the press, but also for the light it sheds upon anti-Communism as an important element in the FNCU's own identity. Victimization played a central role within wider Communist culture, with periods in prison worn as both badges of honour and also emphasized as examples of the intransigence and arbitrariness of state and employers in their relationship with workers. When Midol spoke of his long experience of the PLM railway company his entire audience would have been aware of the state's pursuit of him into exile in Switzerland following his role in the 1920 general strike, an exile he remained in until 1923.⁸⁹ Speaking at the meeting at Montereau following the accident, Marcel Cachin rhetorically addressed himself directly to the police spies he either knew or assumed to be there, again emphasizing the Communist view of the nature of the relationship between the French state and a large part of its population.⁹⁰ Above all, it demonstrates the means by which Communists drew upon elite discourses and refashioned them into narratives which played a key part in their identities. Such a response is well demonstrated in the Communist appropriation of the anti-Communist imagery of the early 1920s, symbolized by the notorious motif of the *couteau entre les dents* posters of the 1919 Bloc-national election campaign. The image of the

⁸⁷ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p.12. 'Voilà une masse de 150kg qui est butée par une masse de 120 tonnes et qui suit servilement la locomotive, passe avec elle à travers les bois, le ballast, sur les traverses. Lorsque la locomotive a fini ses pérégrinations à travers le ballast, on trouve à côté d'elle cette petite masse qui n'a pas dévié d'un pouce et qui a suivi la grosse masse de la locomotive comme un petit chien suit sa maîtresse à travers les rues de Montereau.'

⁸⁸ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau, p.12. 'n'est-t-il pas plus facile de porter un débris de lori après déraillement et de le mettre à l'endroit voulu que de transporter un lori avant pour provoquer la catastrophe?'

⁸⁹ Lucien Midol *La voie que j'ai suivie, un ingénieur au cœur des batailles sociales*, pp.107--117.

⁹⁰ AN: F/7/13688, Compte Rendu de la Réunion du 11/6/1930 à Montereau. p.2

Communist militant with a knife clasped between his teeth became an important symbol in Communist self-depiction, used both to mock the caricature and serving as a badge of honour.⁹¹

Anti-Communism was an important element in defining the contours of railway industrial relations, particularly during the most virulent periods of its manifestation during the 1920s. It also demonstrates the complexity of management/employee relations on the railways in the period. Hand in hand with the paternalist politics of Dautry and others went a considerably more antagonistic conception of these relations in the minds of the companies. The 1930s by contrast appear to have witnessed a lessening of the anti-Communist rhetoric, even as the French economy entered into depression and French society seemed to be entering into a period of protracted 'Franco-French' conflict, many fewer examples of sabotage investigations are recorded. There was for instance no suspicion that the major accidents of Saint-Elier or Lagny were imputable to malevolent motives. This marries with the findings of Donald Baker who noted how, during the 1930s, cheminot militants disappear from Carnet B lists extant at the Paris Prefecture of Police.⁹² This may be due to a number of causes. Firstly, the receding of memories of the 1920 general strike may have encouraged the authorities to take a more benign view of railway trade union militancy. Secondly, the promotion of a new generation of railway managers such as Raoul Dautry and Robert Le Besnerais into key positions of power in the industry may have been significant. Finally, the 'turn' made by the Communist-led FNCU in the late 1920s which saw them engage firmly in railway industrial politics, seemingly at the expense of their former revolutionary and militant stance, could have encouraged the authorities to rethink their perceptions regarding railway Communism. Anti-Communism nevertheless did not disappear from 1930s France and in the sphere of the railway industry it made a strong return during the Phoney War period.

Phoney War

The advent of war caused anti-Communist fears and concerns over the threat of railway sabotage to augment. On 15 November 1939, an inspector of the *Police Spéciale* wrote

⁹¹ See the study by Philippe Bouton, *Le Couteaux entre les dents*, (Paris, 1989), pp.18--23.

⁹² Donald N. Baker, 'The Surveillance of Subversion in Interwar France, The Carnet B in the Seine, 1922-1940', *French Historical Studies*, 10, 3 (1978), 486--516, (504--505).

to the *Commissaire Divisional* of Nantes informing him of the outcome of initial investigations into an incident at Nantes station of 31 October. A piece of wood had been found between the points thereby blocking their operation. For the inspector, there was no question but of an act of sabotage. For over a week, he remarked, a piece of wood ‘de forme et de dimension bien reconnaissables’ had been sitting upon a table in the nearby signal box. The block had now been removed but the piece discovered blocking the points was, the officer was certain, the very same wooden block. Indeed, the officer reported the exact moment that the piece of wood had disappeared, it had, he assured the *commissaire*, been in its place at 7 p.m., and at half past seven it was allegedly found lodged in the points.⁹³ The officer underlined the potential implications which such an action could have occasioned. An incident caused by the blocked points could have shut down the entire station, which would have significantly interfered with the transportation of materials and provisions passing through the station from Britain.⁹⁴ This, to the mind of the investigators, suggested an action aimed at disrupting France’s war effort.

The idea of sabotage having been accepted, attention quickly focussed upon the night maintenance team. Previous to the incident, this group were reported to have been animatedly discussing politics, syndicalism and cafés.⁹⁵ Seven of the night staff had refused to attend an 8 a.m. meeting with the police, under the ‘pretext that they had been working over night from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m.’⁹⁶ Such non-cooperation was sufficient to place all seven upon the list of police suspects. By 22 November, the police had arrived at a clear analysis. It was noted that among the night workers, ‘a movement of discontent’ had been engendered by ‘certain agents having sympathies with parties of the extreme left.’ This discontent was focussed upon the extension of shift hours which had occurred following the mobilization, rising from eight to twelve hours.⁹⁷ An individual suspect had been identified, a known Communist sympathizer who had refused to give testimony to the police. He was suspected despite the inability of the

⁹³ AN: F/7/14834, sabotage dans la gare de Nantes, Inspecteur de Police Spéciale à M. le Commissaire Divisionnaire Spécial, Nantes, 15/11/1939, p.1.

⁹⁴ AN: F/7/14834, sabotage dans la gare de Nantes, Inspecteur de Police Spéciale à M. le Commissaire Divisionnaire Spécial, Nantes, 15/11/1939, p.2.

⁹⁵ AN: F/7/14834, sabotage dans la gare de Nantes, L’inspecteur de Police Spéciale Audibert à M. le Commissaire Divisionnaire Spécial, Nantes, 20/11/1929, p.1.

⁹⁶ AN: F/7/14834, sabotage dans la gare de Nantes, L’inspecteur de Police Spéciale Audibert à M. le Commissaire Divisionnaire Spécial, Nantes, 20/11/1929. p.2.

⁹⁷ AN: F/7/14834, Sabotage gare de Nantes, Commissaire Divisionnaire Spécial à M. le Directeur Général de la Sûreté Nationale, 22/11/1939, p.1. ‘un mouvement de mécontentement’; ‘certains agents ayant sympathisé avec les partis d’extrême gauche.’

inquiry to link any member of the night team to the incident.⁹⁸ Following an enquiry lasting two months, the case was dismissed by the *Procureur Général* at Rennes (*un ordonnance de non-lieu*). The police investigators had been unable to provide any proof that the obstruction of the points had been a criminal act, rather than the result of negligence or accident.⁹⁹ Furthermore, the *Procureur* noted, ‘no-one from outside the network was present on the scene and all the workers in question appear to be above suspicion.’¹⁰⁰

In his study of anti-Communism among French elites during the phoney war, Talbot Imlay posed the question of what the pervasiveness and virulence of such an ideology could reveal about French political culture during the Third Republic’s final years. For Imlay, it pointed to a lack of confidence in the high echelons of French society in the political-economic bases of the French war economy, Communist sabotage becoming an all-encompassing explanation for poor industrial production figures and wider labour discontent. Such conceptual frameworks formed a prism through which elites viewed economic and social performance and occluded the wider systemic failings in French preparations for war.¹⁰¹ The widespread anti-Communism of the interwar period was a function of the diffuse insecurities which permeated French elites. While anti-Communism was a constant presence in French elite thinking, it did not remain at the same pitch of intensity throughout the period. There were certain peaks at which it played a significant role in French political culture. Roughly, these were the early 1920s from the creation of the PCF down to the opposition to both the Ruhr incursion and the Rif War; the late 1920s during the Poincaré ministry and the period following the declaration of war and the outlawing of the PCF in 1939 to the defeat and collapse of the Republic in 1940.

⁹⁸AN: F/7/14834, Sabotage gare de Nantes, Commissaire Divisionnaire Spécial à M. le Directeur Général de la Sûreté Nationale, 22/11/1939, pp.1--2.

⁹⁹AN: F/7/14834, Sabotage gare de Nantes, Procureur Général de Rennes à M. le Garde des Sceaux, 7/12/1939.

¹⁰⁰AN: F/7/14834, Sabotage gare de Nantes, Procureur Général de Rennes à M. le Garde des Sceaux, 7/12/1939. ‘aucun étranger au réseau n’était pas présent sur les lieux et tous les hommes des équipes en cause...paraissent à l’abri des soupçons.’

¹⁰¹ Talbot Imlay, ‘Mind the Gap: The Perception and Reality of Communist Sabotage of French War Production During The Phoney War 1939-1940’. For an analysis of French preparations for war in comparative focus see Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*.

Conclusion

The presence within the railway sector of a large and well-organized Communist-led union tended to provide the prism through which the railway companies viewed the difficulties they faced during the interwar years. In an industry which habitually blamed its poor financial position on its workforce, it was but a short step to placing the blame for safety breaches on the shoulders of rank-and-file workers, a tendency which became evident in the blame placed on the individual failings of employees in specific accidents.¹⁰² Accusatory management fingers were also pointed at the FNCU, as well as at another marginalized group within the wider workforce, immigrant workers. The presence of Communist militants working on the railways added a wider dimension to the situation, the centrality of the railway network to France's economy and security logistics leading the authorities to take a closer interest in FNCU organization. Managerial and wider societal dread of Communism had an important impact upon the FNCU itself. In broad terms, it provided the context in which union leaders and militants came to think of themselves and their role and place within French society. The cycle of arrests, accusations, sackings and surveillance had a considerable impact upon the operation and organization of the union as militants faced punishment or discrimination because of their political opinions and the actions they took in fulfilment of them. Victimization became a recurrent theme in the FNCU narrative, lending tangible expression to the abstract language of class conflict and the repression of the working classes by the combined forces of bosses and state that predominated in PCF and Comintern pronouncements. Such were the perceptions. Their cumulative weight helped convince the vast majority of the cheminots not to take an active part in the wave of Popular Front strikes in the summer of 1936.¹⁰³ Employers' groups, successive French governments, Interior Ministry personnel and the police consistently linked Communist sympathy with a propensity toward violent political actions.

¹⁰² See Chapter Six on railway safety.

¹⁰³ On this absence see Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en Grève*.

Chapter Four: The Path to Participation: Communists and Industrial Relations, 1919-c.1928

Introduction

This chapter explores the developments in Communist trade unionism on the railways in the crucial early years of the FNCU's independent existence following the split in the National Cheminot Federation (FdC) in 1921. Tensions ran high within the cheminot trade union in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, as elsewhere in the French and wider European labour movements. Increasingly, pressure mounted for a fundamental break with the collaborationist politics of the FdC as epitomized by Marcel Bidegaray, an advocate of the *Union Sacrée* strategy of the Great War. Coalescing around Gaston Monmousseau and Pierre Sémard, this strand of thought gained significant ground among railway workers and, in the wake of the defeat of the general strike of May 1920, the overwhelming majority of the cheminot rank-and-file came to identify with the radical 'minority' position. This Monmousseau/Sémard union emerged from the schism as the larger of the two cheminot trade unions and adhered, first to the CGTU following the formation of this body, and then to the Profintern in 1923. From the outset, its leading figures were active militants within the French Communist Party at both local and national levels.

Following the schism, the FNCU worked to differentiate itself from its FNCC rival. Anything which resembled the collaborationist politics of the *Union Sacrée* was strongly condemned. As a result, the FNCU initially boycotted the newly created personnel committees inaugurated by the 1921 railway statute. More specifically, the union rejected any involvement by its members in the railway *Conseil Supérieur*. The presence of these committees within railway industrial relations ranging up company hierarchies from the local to the national level did, however, significantly complicate Communist trade union activity in the railway sphere. These committees were almost without precedent in French industrial politics, at least in peacetime. There was, thus, little to guide trade union militants whether *confédérés* or *unitaires* as to the correct approach to take towards them. In this formative early period, both the FNCC and the FNCU continued to evaluate engagement with reference to preceding *Union Sacrée* experience. While the FNCC could point to successes achieved thanks to their 'politics

of presence' strategy (notably the concession of the eight-hour day), the FNCU attacked the bureaucratization of the union movement and its absorption within the capitalist order. Events through the early 1920s appeared to confirm the FNCU reading of events. The post-war Bloc National government (1919-1924) devoted itself to reversing concessions made to the labour movement. In 1922 Yves Le Trocquer, as Minister for Public Works, allying himself with the railway companies, effectively ended the application of the eight-hour day on the railways. From 1925 onwards, a major campaign for significant salary increases, led initially by the FNCC, failed to gain satisfactory results even following the intervention of André Tardieu in his capacity as Minister for Public Works. Repeatedly, the *confédéré* strategy proved incapable either of advancing cheminots' interests to the satisfaction of the rank-and-file or of defending the gains made following the cessation of hostilities in 1918.

The FNCU's more hostile approach proved to be more applicable to this confrontational atmosphere than the FNCC's now discredited tactics, and the *unitaires* gained support accordingly. For all that, closer involvement in long-running pay disputes compelled the FNCU executive to elaborate its own policy regarding pay levels. They responded by adopting the FNCC demand regarding salaries, while differentiating themselves from the *confédérés* by pushing the case more aggressively than their rivals. The pay dispute, which lasted roughly from 1924 to 1928, served to move the Communist leadership of the FNCU closer to the cheminot rank-and-file. Police reports demonstrate a significant upsurge in cheminot militancy during this period while, conversely, the FNCU leadership began to base their actions and pronouncements more firmly upon the immediate demands and concerns of the workforce. The anti-system approach was gradually nuanced until, in 1927, the FNCU announced that it would be participating in elections to the *Conseil Supérieur* and if elected its delegates would serve on this committee. The rank-and-file responded by overwhelmingly backing FNCU candidates in the personnel elections of 1928. Communism had firmly entrenched itself among the railway workers. This process of insertion is one which has broader echoes within the wider Communist experience.

Communism: Centre and Periphery

In his study of the Parisian metalworkers, Michael Torigian highlights an important tension running through French Communist trade unionism in the interwar period. This was the interplay between political militancy and the desire to ferment revolution on the one hand, and, on the other, the 'economistic' emphasis of day-to-day trade union work. This latter current prioritized the immediate and limited factory concerns of workers placing the defence of working conditions and the advancement of wage demands at the heart of CGTU activism. Long-term strategic objectives were, in practice, obscured, if not nullified, by the short-term requirements of union representation. In their position as a 'guinea pig' federation for the Communist Party, the Parisian metalworkers swung back and forth between these two conceptions of radical trade union activity. It was only upon adopting a fully 'economist' approach after 1931 that Communists began to dominate the workplace taking the lead in worker organization.¹ The same phenomenon is explored in the work of Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schweitzer in their study of Communist militancy in the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt.² Such accounts run counter to an important vein in the historiography of French Communism, which attributes greater importance to Communism as a counter-culture within French society. It identifies Communists as adopting a sect-like identity, isolating themselves from the concerns of French workers and from national political debates, in this reading the Soviet Union and the International Communist movement providing the key points of reference.³ Such an analysis may continue to hold some relevance for those in the party's high echelons. However, it makes little sense of Communism or Communist attachments as the great majority of its members, supporters and voters understood them at the time. Indeed, as several historians of Communist practice in the interwar period have noted, Communist militants were adept at tailoring the abstract political messages emanating from Moscow and Paris to the particular conditions in which they operated. In these circumstances, Communists gained the support of local communities and occupational groups by firmly engaging with the immediate concerns of those people,

¹ Michael Torigian, 'From Guinea Pig to Prototype: Communist Labour Policy in the Paris Metal Industry, 1922-1935', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32, 4, (1997), 465--481.

² Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schweitzer, *Communisme à l'Usine*.

³ Annie Kriegel, 'The French Communist Party and the Problem of Power, 1920-1939'; idem, *Aux origines du communisme français, 1914-1920*.

while relating such limited struggles to wider Communist tropes of class struggle and worker solidarity.⁴

The CGTU affiliated to the Profintern in 1923. Contemporaries, as well as subsequent historians, have viewed this as a key moment, one which saw the *unitaire* trade union movement amalgamated into the wider international Communist movement with trade union work from that point on subordinated to the political control of the PCF, just as the Profintern was ultimately subordinated to the control of the Comintern in Moscow. Michel Dreyfus has suggested a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship between Profintern and Comintern, however. He argues that there existed discrete periods, most notably between 1924 and 1927, in which the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU, Profintern) was able to develop policy independently of the political wing of the international Communist movement.⁵ In the context of Czechoslovakia, Kevin McDermott has convincingly demonstrated that the 'Red Unions' advanced their own independent conceptions of trade union work in a manner which was unimpeded by the requirements of the Czech Communist Party or the Comintern during the 1920s. Czech trade unionists thus adapted Communist-inspired ideas to the local concerns of the country's industrial workers. Czech Red Unions 'were not merely subordinate organs of the Party and Moscow, but on the contrary were able to preserve a degree of independence and national specificity in the face of growing pressure from the Bolshevists.'⁶

The space which existed for Communist trade unionists to develop Communist practice in conformity with local requirements, not necessarily in strict accordance with the edicts from national party or Moscow has been a theme of recent scholarship. Nina Fishman in her study of Communist activism within British trade unionism through the 1930s and 1940s pointed to the importance of the daily experience of workplace politics as a key component which guided militant actions, a process which Fishman discussed as the impact of 'Life Itself.'⁷ Similarly, in the post-1945 period, a study of three prominent activists in various international settings indicated that Communist activism

⁴ Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt*; Laird Boswell, *Rural Communism in France*; Julian Mischi, 'Etre Communiste en milieu rurale'; idem, *Servir la classe ouvrière*.

⁵ Michel Dreyfus, '1924-1927: un mouvement privilégié de l'histoire de l'Internationale rouge', in Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojhan (eds), *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp.89--101.

⁶ Kevin McDermott, *The Czech Red Unions*, p.xi.

⁷ Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions*.

was more strongly conditioned by local contexts than by Soviet ideological diktat. In each case, historians have posed challenging questions about the extent to which Moscow or even national Communist parties could control their activists on the ground. The result has been a shift towards subtler, more locally diverse readings of Communist Party structures and culture.⁸ Such an interpretive turn raises important conceptual points concerning the development of Communist culture. Historians have long drawn attention to the vagaries within Communist strategy, alternating between periods of sectarian fervour and a more pragmatic engagement in national politics, such developments often attributed to interior Russian politics. The year of 1926 for instance, has been identified as a moment when Communist politics in France appeared to be opening up, policies became more flexible, marked by instances of electoral alliances with Socialists and a trade union policy which was more adapted to social realities. Time would be called upon this experiment from the beginning of 1927 as the party began to move into the more sectarian era of 'class against class'.⁹ Yet the concentration upon the party centre masks an important element within Communist politics, the extent to which, on the peripheries of the party hierarchy, political pragmatism could be the hallmark of Communist identity. It also paints an overly schematic, one-dimensional picture of the relationship between Communist leadership and the rank-and-file, one which places too much emphasis upon the ability of Communist militants to set and control an agenda which ordinary workers then followed. As the remainder of this chapter -- indeed this thesis -- will argue the relationship between Communist trade union leaders and the rank-and-file was more reminiscent of a dialogue, with rank-and-file expectations weighing substantially upon Communist thought.

Competing Currents: The Split in Railway Trade Unionism

In February 1920 the sacking of a trade union militant at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges for attending a local branch meeting led railway workers in the town to declare a strike. The action spread quickly and was enthusiastically taken up by cheminots on the PLM network. Inside of four days, work had ceased in the PLM workshops in Paris, by the

⁸Nina Fishman, Anita J Prazmowska and Holger Heith, 'Communist Coalmining Union Activists and Post-War Reconstruction, 1945-1952, Germany, Poland and Britain', *Science and Society*, 70, 1 (January, 2006), 74--97; the point is also strongly argued in the French case by Julian Misch, *Servir la classe ouvrière*, pp.15--24.

⁹ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, p.97; Philippe Robrieux, *Histoire Intérieure du Parti Communiste, 1920-1945* (Paris, 1980), p.249.

next day traffic across the entire PLM network had ground to a halt and all Parisian stations barring the Gare du Nord were shut. The rank-and-file actions outpaced both the National Federation leadership and the increasingly vocal militant 'minority' grouping. On the 27th, the still unified national *Fédération des Cheminots* (FdC) declared a general strike and cheminots from across France joined the action, only on the *Compagnie du Nord* network was anything resembling a normal service operating. The cheminot action forced the companies to the negotiating table and an offer to ensure that trade union rights were respected ensured that railway workers returned to their posts on 2 March 1920. Tensions remained high; a further general strike was called for May Day. This time, however, the government was prepared and stockpiles of coal and key goods had been accumulated at centres across France. Key cheminot militants were sacked and arrested, the general strike effectively ended on 8 May when workers in the building, metal industries and dock workers began returning to work. The national CGT called a halt to the strike on 22 May and though the cheminots remained out until the 28th, the strike movement ended in total defeat.¹⁰

Radicalized by the failure of the leadership, cheminots turned to the minority faction led by Pierre Sépard and Gaston Monmousseau as the best defenders of their interests. In June 1921 the National Federation was split into majority and minority factions with the Sépard group in the ascendancy. From this moment, until reunification in 1935, the cheminots would be split into two largely equal and opposed trade unions. The very month of the schism in the FdC, the government and the rail companies agreed a new railway statute which guaranteed the financial position of the industry but also had important implications for the working conditions and benefits of the cheminots.

Following the armistice of November 1918, the leadership of the FdC attempted to ensure that the cheminots would be firmly established as an engaged and powerful voice in railway industrial relations. In pursuit of this course, the high echelons of the Cheminot Federation, under the leadership of general secretary Marcel Bidegaray, were enthusiastic supporters of the move within the wider CGT towards the 'politics of presence' strategy. This had been elaborated in large part by the head of the Confederation, Léon Jouhaux, and was outlined in the CGT's 1919 Minimum

¹⁰ Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January-May 1920', pp.537--538; Annie Kriegel, *Grève des Cheminots*.

Programme.¹¹ In the immediate aftermath of World War One, the leadership of the National Federation became fully identified with the personality of Bidegaray, increasingly ‘sure of himself.’¹² Conscious of the strength of the revolutionary tradition within the French labour movement, CGT leaders such as Jouhaux and Alphonse Merrheim situated the new CGT orientation within the anarcho-sindicalist language of revolutionary upheaval. The strategy remained the same, the replacement of capitalism, however, the short term tactics had been altered by wartime experiences of the benefits and changes which Labour could win through tactical engagement with employers and state. Jouhaux even defended the idea of workers serving on management committees in revolutionary terms: they were serving an apprenticeship in preparation for the time when they would be assuming control over the levers of industry.¹³ The implementation of the CGT programme would certainly have been a transformative moment, and it may be that the revolutionary imagery of CGT leaders was more than simple window dressing or attempt at dissimulation. However, for key figures on the Left such as Albert Thomas it is clear that the extension of the wartime industrial relations structures into the peace was not about revolutionary change, understood in terms of the overthrow of capitalism, but rather with the question of the place of Labour within capitalism. For Thomas, the challenge was to ensure the continuation of worker representation and the extension of the position of Labour, through trade union organizations, within the French economy and national politics. For the future progress of society and industry in France, Thomas argued that it was necessary to extend the ‘spirit of war’, the *Union Sacrée*, into peacetime.¹⁴

In the context of the railway industry, Bidegaray echoed the aims of Albert Thomas. Indeed Bidegaray was a contributor to Albert Thomas’s journal *Information Ouvrière et Social*.¹⁵ Bidegaray's actions during the war years demonstrated his commitment to the politics of the *Union Sacrée* and strongly in favour of pursuing its logic into the peace. In 1917, Bidegaray had argued in a work which strongly condemned railway company policies in a number of areas, of the pressing need for nationalization of the rail

¹¹ Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy*, pp.116--117.

¹² Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, p.99; Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class*, p.177.

¹³ John Horne *Labour at War*, pp.128--130.

¹⁴ Martin Fine, ‘Albert Thomas : A Reformer’s Vision of Modernization, 1914-1932’, pp.548--549, p.551; Madeleine Reberieux and Patrick Fridenson, ‘Albert Thomas: Pivot du réformisme français’, *Mouvement Social*, 87 (Apr.-Jun., 1974), 85--97, (92--96).

¹⁵ Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p.14.

network. Bidegaray saw this as the best remedy for the transport crisis which France was then facing. Both Marcel Cachin and Léon Jouhaux provided prefaces to this work.¹⁶ The French state, nevertheless, viewed Bidegaray as a moderate voice, an example of a constructive, non-threatening trade union movement which was contrasted to the developing militant grouping within the FdC. The *Sûreté* in a report of February 1919, wrote of him as being 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 Georges Clemenceau. It was noted that during the course of numerous delegations, whether at the Ministry of Public Works or before the President of the Council, Bidegaray and his fellow union delegates had 'demonstrated a certain wisdom.'¹⁷ This report demonstrates the extent of the railway workers' influence in the corridors of power, their delegations being received not simply within the Ministry responsible for the oversight of the railway industry but equally in the Prime Minister's office. Yet Bidegaray was increasingly concerned regarding his position within the FdC as a more militant tendency threatened to overtake his gradualist strategy.¹⁸ Perhaps conscious of the growing swell of opinion moving against his leadership, the *Sûreté* noted that Bidegaray had commented among friends how he was 'ashamed of the role he is obliged to play in the Ministries.'¹⁹ For the General Secretary of the FdC, the realities of the CGT 'politics of presence' were creating serious tensions, and not just within the union organization but personally as well.

The growing minority current within the FdC reflected developments elsewhere in the French labour movement and the Socialist Party. It also mirrored a wider upsurge in militancy among European industrial workers in the immediate post-war period. A number of factors had come together to induce rising levels of radicalism. Economic difficulties facing the economies of Western Europe were highly apparent to those whose wages failed to keep pace with the rocketing cost of living occasioned by inflationary pressures through the war years.²⁰ Despite the high profile of the FdC within the government, however, concessions regarding cost of living allowances were

¹⁶ AN: F/7/13666, œuvres sociales des cheminots, 1883-1923, Marcel Bidegaray, *Contre les compagnies, pour la nation* (Paris, 1917).

¹⁷ AN: F/7/13675, chez les cheminots: la situation, 14/2/1919, p.1. 'au cours de nombreuses delegations, soit au Ministère des Travaux publics, soit à la Présidence du conseil'; 'ont fait preuve d'une certaine sagesse.'

¹⁸ AN: F/7/13675, chez les cheminots: la situation, 14/2/1919, p.3.

¹⁹ AN: F/7/13675, chez les cheminots: la situation, 14/2/1919, p.3. 'honteux du rôle qu'il est obligé de jouer dans les ministères.'

²⁰ John Horne, *Labour at War*, pp.116--117.

only extended to cheminots following a spate of wildcat strike actions. This was a blow to the leadership's attempt to argue that it alone was best positioned to advance cheminot interests.²¹ The war years had placed particular stresses upon the railway industry. Traffic levels had increased enormously, by November 1916 the *État* was operating 46% above its pre-war levels; on the PLM, traffic was 49% higher, reaching 66% on the PO and on the *Nord* traffic levels were double what they had been in peacetime.²² The difficulties were exacerbated by the personnel shortages which the railways faced. From a pre-war level of 355,000 employees, 26,000 had been mobilized into the armed forces with 13,000 cut off in occupied territory and a further 9,000 deceased or having left the service. Railway companies struggled to make up these numbers, turning to women, colonial workers and Belgian labourers. However, by 1917 the companies were still 17% down on pre-war personnel levels.²³ These difficult conditions persisted into the post-war era, Georges Ribeill has noted the large number of younger workers, considered to be more militantly inclined politically than their elder colleagues, who joined the industry following the armistice.²⁴

Upon the signing of the armistice most of the former warring powers entered a short-lived but steep economic depression which lasted until 1921, its effects exacerbated by government insolvency, demobilization and other economic adjustments to peacetime conditions. French workers' real-terms living standards fell sharply.²⁵ Also of lasting significance was the continuing acrimony within and between European Socialist parties over the failure of the leaders of the Second International to prevent the outbreak of war, followed by their precipitous rallying to their respective flags in August 1914. Opposition to the war effort and the class collaboration of leaders and representatives of the Left remained a constant source of recrimination throughout the war years. Important meetings of anti-war militants were held at Zimmerwald and Keinthal in 1915 and 1916.²⁶ The feeling of betrayal coupled with a sense of the bankruptcy of the internationalism which the Second International avowedly represented, continued to be

²¹ Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes of January-May 1920', pp.513--514.

²² Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots de 1920*, p.23.

²³ Annie Kriegel, *La grève des cheminots*, p.24.

²⁴ George Ribeill, *Le personnel des compagnies de chemins de fer: Cheminots en guerre, la métamorphose d'une corporation, 1914-1920*, p.434.

²⁵ Roger Magraw, *History of the French Working Class*, p.159.

²⁶ Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1920*, pp.62--73.

a source of complaint among worker radicals beyond 1918. Their defiance intensified following the events in Russia of February and October 1917.²⁷

Events in France also militated against the CGT's more moderate and nationally-focused political strategy. The election in 1919 of the right-wing Bloc National government dashed leftist hopes of reform. The experience of war had left many with the strong urge to see lasting change in the political and economic organization of France, a desire that is captured in the closing passages of Henri Barbusse's work *Le Feu*, a novel which gained enormous success following its publication in 1916.²⁸ Despite the efforts of the CGT and Socialist Party, French elites sought to reassert their privileged position within the French economic and political domain. A 'return to order' was envisaged which entailed the rapid dismantling of the wartime economy and a rapid return to the idealized stability represented by the pre-war *belle époque*. Elites worked to reassert their primacy during a period [1914-1923] which one prominent historian has characterized as standing out 'in Modern European History as an exceptional moment of general revolutionary upheaval, certainly comparable to the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.'²⁹

Faced with these obstacles, workers came increasingly to reassert the 'workerism' of the pre-war era, emphasizing the need to act independently of the bourgeois capitalist frameworks which were excluding them from power.³⁰ An anti-statist ideology became the hallmark of workers' politics in this period. Suspicion of involvement with the machinery of state and management gained considerable ground among railway workers. From late 1919 into the early months of 1920, a debate raged among cheminots regarding participation in the Exploitation Committees established by the government in October 1919, aimed at formalizing a corporatist element within railway

²⁷ Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making*; Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du parti Communiste*, pp.25--32; Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*.

²⁸ Henri Barbusse, *Le Feu* (Paris, 1916); on this see H. R. Kedward, *La Vie en Bleu, France and the French since 1900* (London, 2005), p.71.

²⁹ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford, 2002), p.220; The key work on the process of re-ordering Western European society is Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany and Italy in the Decade after World War One* (Princeton, 1975).

³⁰ On the pre-1914 French labour movement see Lenard R. Berlanstein, 'The Distinctiveness of the Nineteenth-Century French Labor Movement', *Journal of Modern History*, 64, 4 (Dec., 1992), 660--685; see also Herrick Chapman, Mark Kesselman and Martin Schain, 'The Exceptional Trajectory of the French Labor Movement', in Herrick Chapman, Mark Kesselman and Martin Schain (eds), *A Century of Organized Labor in France* (London, 1998), 1--22.

industrial relations. At a meeting of the *État* section of the FdC in early February 1920, just weeks before the outbreak of the first general strike on the railways since 1910, Marcel Bidegaray argued strongly in favour of participation. The moderate leadership, however, was split on the question of involvement with Le Guen, regional secretary of the *État* Federation and future leading figure within the CGT following the schism, hostile to any participation.³¹ The *Paris-État* branch of the FdC was the powerbase of *minoritaire* leader on the railways, Gaston Monmousseau. He used this meeting to launch a powerful attack on Bidegaray's leadership. The increasing militancy of the rank-and-file within the FdC is emphasized by the passing of the motion proposed by the Monmousseau faction declaring the cheminots would not endorse participation in such committees. Bidegaray responded that he would, 'continue his collaboration in the committees not as a representative of the *État* union but in his capacity as representative of the national Federation'.³² A considerable breach had opened between the Bidegaray leadership and cheminot militants.

Yet, as Adrian Jones has underlined, railway workers held back from completely abandoning their support for the FdC. Though they increasingly embraced the *minoritaire* position, they were not prepared to move decisively against Bidegaray. They wished rather for FdC leaders to adapt to the critiques being voiced by Monmousseau and Sépard. It should be noted that in the space between the end of World War One and the outbreak of the General Strike in February 1920, the FdC had seemingly secured considerable advantages to the cheminot population. An apparently fruitless period of negotiation between the union and management, which had occasioned considerable criticism from the *minoritaires*, had been brought to an end by a government intervention which ensured a favourable wage settlement for cheminots. This proved sufficient to avert a large scale strike action intended for early February 1920.³³ Most importantly, the union had successfully negotiated the implementation of the eight-hour day for workers across the railway network.

International agreement over the implementation of a statutory eight-hour day had been one of the major achievements for labour during the Paris Peace accords following the

³¹ AN: F/7/13675, rapport de réunion d'Union des Syndicats du réseau d'Etat, 4/2/1920.

³² AN: F/7/13675, rapport de réunion d'Union des Syndicats du réseau d'Etat, 4/2/1920. 'continuer sa collaboration aux comités, en qualité non plus de représentant de l'union de l'Etat, mais de représentant de la Fédération.'

³³ Adrian Jones, 'The French Railway Strikes', pp.523--525.

cessation of World War One. This reform was seen in many quarters as due reward for the efforts of the industrial workforce on the various home fronts, who had sacrificed much to keep the armed forces at the front supplied in the first ‘total’ war. For the labour movement, this was the fruition of many decades of campaigning. The call for an eight hour working day had formed a crucial element in the platform of the First International in 1866. It had equally played an important role in the claims of the Second International and in the Socialist revival of the late nineteenth century.³⁴ In France, the legislation quickly passed through chamber and senate, in large part as Charles Maier argues, due to the real fear among the ruling classes of a Bolshevik contagion spreading across Western Europe following the October 1917 Russian Revolution.³⁵ The unprecedented numbers and organization of the French labour movement by the end of the First World War, and the perceived revolutionary potential of these workers should they not be placated, led to speedy assent of the proposals. On the railways, a commission was established to investigate how the legislation was to be applied to railway work. The commission was formed of representatives of the Ministry of Public Works, the rail companies and personnel delegates, including Marcel Bidegaray, leader of the National Cheminot Federation. The commission sat through 1919 and established the rules which governed the working day for all aspects of employment on the rail industry. François Caron has argued that these negotiations mark yet another significant shift in power away from the railway companies, with the industry giving significant ground to the demands of labour.³⁶ Such a reading reveals only part of the story, however. The accords tightened up the rules affecting working routines on the railways and abolished certain cheminot practices. In the workshops for instance, the length of the working day was agreed to commence at the moment when the worker began ‘effectivement le travail’ and ran until the actual physical process of work stopped. This period would not include time spent changing or washing at the start or end of shifts and did not include breaks. It was also established that the ‘lundi de paye’ holidays were to be a thing of the past.³⁷

³⁴ Gary S. Cross, *A Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840 – 1940* (Berkeley, 1989).

³⁵ Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, p.78.

³⁶ François Caron, *L’histoire des chemins de fer en France*, p.670.

³⁷ AN: F/14/14956, Commission chargé des mesures à prendre en vue de l’établissement de la journée de huit heures pour l’ensemble du personnel des chemins de fer d’intérêt général’, Conclusion numéro deux, Séance de 7/5/1919, pp.1--2 (2). ‘les jours de chômage dits “lundi de paye” sont supprimés.’

These negotiations, however, certainly seemed to point to the continued success of the wider CGT tactic of pursuing a 'politics of presence'. It was only with the defeat of the May general strike that the rank-and-file were fully persuaded to break with the CGT leadership. At the fourth annual conference of the FdC in June 1921, a majority of delegates backed the 'rebel' motion proposed by Monmousseau and Sémard.³⁸ In the coming months the schism was formalized on the railways and, at the 1922 congress of the CGT, the cheminots voted overwhelmingly in favour of aligning themselves with the Communist-led group. This witnessed the creation of a new union organization outside of the CGT which, after 1923, would become the CGTU. At the Bourges congress in 1923, the CGTU voted to affiliate to the Red International of Labour Unions, the Profintern.³⁹

In the early years of its independent existence, the FNCU pursued a highly political tactic, serving to differentiate itself with the economist, workplace-centred tendency which marked what remained of the CGT affiliated FNCC. These opposing orientations were most marked in the approach of the two unions to participation in the industrial relations structures which had been created by the passing of the railway statute into law in October 1921. The rejection of cheminot involvement in the committee structures outlined in the 1921 railway statute had been a major element in the campaign of Sémard and Monmousseau against the Bidegaray leadership. In the years prior to the schism in the railway federation, Sémard maintained a regular attack upon this issue condemning ministerial visits, as well as other elements of 'class collaboration'.⁴⁰ On another occasion, he made clear his opposition to any 'commissions paritaires' created to 'give a semblance of satisfaction to workers' grievances'.⁴¹ The strength of feeling against 'bureaucratization' and 'legalism' in railway trade unionism had forced the National Federation leadership to withdraw from negotiations over the statute.⁴² Indeed, the perception of Bidegaray's own enthusiasm for involvement in direct discussions with management and government may have been too much for his own supporters. Following the split within the railway federation, Bidegaray was moved from his position as General Secretary into an assistant role. He was replaced first with Le Guen, who had strongly opposed Bidegaray's line at the 1920 meeting discussed above, and

³⁸ Joseph Jacquet, *Les cheminots dans l'histoire sociale de la France* (Paris, 1967), p.95.

³⁹ Georges Lefranc, *Le mouvement syndical sous la troisième république*, p.270.

⁴⁰ AN: F/7/16005/2, séance 8/7/1921.

⁴¹ AN: F/7/16005/2, séance 6/10/1921.

⁴² Guy Chaumel, *L'Histoire des Cheminots et de leurs Syndicats* (Paris, 1948), p.135.

then, in 1924, the more combative Jarrigion took over the leadership of the CGT affiliated union.⁴³ Jarrigion in many ways shared Bidegaray's conceptions regarding the role of cheminot trade unionism and its need to forge a space for labour within the national political community, significantly, however, he was less tainted than was Bidegaray by involvement in the *Union Sacrée*. Jarrigion would continue to lead the FNCC until reunification with the FNCU took place in 1935; thereafter he occupied the position of joint leader of the FdC with Pierre Sémard until 1939. Bidegaray himself would continue to hold an influential position within the CGT Cheminot Federation. Following his close involvement with Vichyite industrial politics, Bidegaray was arrested at the Liberation. Placed under surveillance and released, Bidegaray disappeared in the company of three Communists, he is understood to have been shot and killed by these Communist militants.⁴⁴

The FNCU made clear their opposition to taking part in the railway *Conseil Supérieur*. At the 1922 elections, the FNCU instructed cheminots who supported them to spoil their ballot by writing out the demands of the union instead of selecting a candidate. Joseph Jacquet claims that three-quarters of those who voted followed these instructions, demonstrating the distance that had opened up between cheminots and the moderate leadership. By the following elections, however, Jacquet writes that the FNCU had become impatient with their self-imposed exclusion from these centres of power. Their stance, it was felt, had resulted in the union leaving the field 'free to elected delegates to lead, without the control of the revolutionaries, activities which could have grave consequences.'⁴⁵ Nevertheless, despite success in the 1922 personnel elections, an article appearing in *L'Humanité*, reported by the *Sûreté* officer in Bordeaux, instructed all FNCU *Conseil Supérieur* delegates to resign their seats.⁴⁶

Michael Torigian has argued persuasively that there was no clear blueprint to guide Communist militants as to what the precise role of a Communist-led trade union within a capitalist economy should entail.⁴⁷ He further argues that due to the importance of unions like the Cheminot Federation within the CGTU, the national and international

⁴³ APP: BA2219, Rapport 10/1926, Rapport de 11/7/1938.

⁴⁴ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, p.224; Lucien Midol, *La Voie que j'ai suivie*, p.93.

⁴⁵ Joseph Jacquet, *Les cheminots dans l'histoire social de la France*, p.100. 'libre aux délégués élus pour mener sans contrôle des révolutionnaires une activité dont les conséquences pour les cheminots peuvent être graves.'

⁴⁶ AN: F/7/13678, Commission spécial de Bordeaux, 'Conseil Supérieur 1923'.

⁴⁷ Michael Torigian, 'Communist Labour Policy in the Paris Metal Industry', pp.465--466.

Communist leadership were loath to interfere overly with the day-to-day running of these bodies, qualms which they did not have when it came, for instance, to the Parisian metalworkers.⁴⁸ In the early years of the 1920s, faced with a hostile government and parliament as well as intransigent railway companies, the political rather than economist orientation of the FNCC seemed to fit the context. The tactic must have seemed all the more apposite as the FNCC encountered increasing difficulties and setbacks in their attempt to maintain the gains made in the immediate post-war period, most notably regarding the eight-hour day agreement.

The Limits of the ‘Politics of Presence’: The *Assouplissement* of the Eight-Hour Day

The eight-hour day on the railways lasted just three years in its original, negotiated form. During this period, legislation introducing the eight-hour day was considered by the rail networks to have cost them in the region of 1.1 billion francs annually.⁴⁹ In 1922, following considerable pressure from the industry, the Minister of Public Works in the Bloc National government, Yves Le Trocquer, rewrote the rules on the cheminot working day. In a decree of October that year, the Minister emphasized that the key element of the eight-hour day was the period of effective work, not merely the time a worker was present at their post. Article 6 of the decree spelt out the implications which, by December 1932, according to the Ministry’s own figures, affected 51,000 members of the workforce. 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 sizable increase was that faced by signalmen and level crossing attendants. For these workers, whose working rhythms involved periods of activity interspersed with less busy periods, the working day was extended to fifteen hours. These interpretations remained in force until the application of the forty-hour week in 1937.⁵⁰ Drivers and firemen were still in theory covered by eight-hour day legislation but this was to be calculated as an average of the number of hours worked between two designated rest periods.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Michael Torigian, ‘Communist Labour Policy in the Paris Metal Industry’, p.466.

⁴⁹ François Caron, *Histoire des Chemins de Fer en France*, p.823.

⁵⁰ AN: F/14/14956, Note de Ministère de Travaux Publics, 20/12/1932, pp. 1--3.

⁵¹ AN: F/14/14956, Note de Ministère de Travaux Publics, 20/12/1932, p.1.

The reinterpretation of the eight-hour legislation by the Ministry in cooperation with the rail companies caused fury in the ranks of the cheminots, not least among the normally conciliatory former leader of the CGT affiliated Federation, Bidegaray. For the historian Joseph Jacquet, it represents the moment of full re-establishment of railway company power over their workforce following the hiatus of the initial post-war era, a process of reassertion which had begun with the strike victimizations and the signing of the railway statute.⁵² Addressing a meeting at Albi in the south of France in November 1922, Bidegaray strongly attacked the ‘illegal’ decree of the Minister and the ‘manoeuvres frauduleuses’ of the railway companies.⁵³ He argued that since 1919 the advantages secured by the union had been worn away by the Bloc National government, dominated as it was by a union of economic interests.⁵⁴ For Bidegaray, the Minister had, through a decree, broken the legally negotiated accords of 1919; the former FdC leader strongly refuted the idea that twelve hours of ‘presence’ was equivalent to eight hours ‘effective’ work.⁵⁵ At a meeting in Castres in March 1923, the leader of the FNCC Jarrigion, echoed Bidegaray’s anger. In language strongly reminiscent of FNCU attacks upon company and state rationalization plans, Jarrigion argued that ‘the abrogation of the eight-hour law is nothing other than the first phase in the capitalist offensive against the proletariat.’⁵⁶

The FNCU were equally active campaigning against the Le Trocquer decree. At Jeumont in the Nord, Pierre Sépard urged his audience to adopt the ‘strict application of the regulations’, that is to say the application of the tactic known as ‘working to rule’. The *Commissaire Spécial* who reported the meeting noted how this was the preferred tactic of the *unitaires* who ‘avoid the principle of strike action, which, on each occasion, creates victims among the cheminots’, suggesting that by the early 1920s, following the failure of the general strike, even Communist trade unionists on the railways had turned against the idea of the political strike as a weapon in their armoury.⁵⁷ Instead other repertoires, such as the practice of ‘working to rule’ and slow-downs were encouraged.

⁵² Joseph Jacquet, *Les Cheminots dans l’histoire sociale de la France*, pp.102--103.

⁵³ AN: F/7/13678, Préfet du Tarn à Ministre de L’Intérieur, 27/11/1922, p.2.

⁵⁴ AN: F/7/13678, Préfet du Tarn à Ministre de L’Intérieur, 27/11/1922, p.1.

⁵⁵ AN: F/7/13678, Préfet du Tarn à Ministre de L’Intérieur, 27/11/1922, p.2.

⁵⁶ AN: F/7/13678, Préfet du Tarn à Ministre de L’Intérieur, 16/3/1923. ‘l’abrogation de la loi de huit heures n’est d’ailleurs...que la première phase de l’offensive capitaliste contre le prolétariat.’

⁵⁷ 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. ‘application intégrale du règlement.’; ‘écarté le principe de la grève, qui, chaque fois, fait des victimes parmi les camarades’.

The Prefect of Aisne wrote to the Minister of the Interior that ‘extremist’ groups among the cheminots at Terngier were threatening to reduce their productivity and to cease work after eight hours.⁵⁸ These repertoires were also taken up by the FNCC. In his speech at Albi, Bidegaray had urged upon his audience a campaign of passive resistance against the proposals. He too had called for the strict application of company rules, noting the various ways through which, in order to ensure the service, cheminots daily, and by necessity, broke working regulations. He singled out the practice of passing between two vehicles in motion as an example of this, and asked rhetorically how many drivers complied with rules which limited engine speeds in stations to walking pace; how many conductors made a thorough inspection of the train before departure as per regulations and how many office staff at small stations left their posts, contrary to regulations, in order to oversee the departure of trains.⁵⁹

Despite the fact that they had split only a few months previously, FNCU and FNCC responses to the Ministerial decree were as one. A joint meeting of the two unions was held at Valenciennes in October 1922. 500 cheminots attended and processed through the town to the offices of the *Sous-Préfet*. Here a letter was read out by the leader of the local section of the FNCU on behalf of all the assembled railway workers, ‘a single man,’ argued the delegate, ‘be he a Minister, does not have the right to modify a law voted by parliament, that is to say by the people.’ The cheminots, he announced, would resist, ‘in order to ensure the respect of our legislation.’⁶⁰ The FNCC branch at Laon voted a resolution in November 1922 declaring how they could not agree that, ‘under the pretext of assuring the prosperity of the companies, the social conditions of railway workers be worsened.’ The cheminots claimed that having demonstrated their devotion to the national cause and sacrificed so much during the war, they would not allow themselves to be sacrificed in turn to private interests.⁶¹ Invoking the sovereignty of the ‘people’ and the symbolism of war-time sacrifice on behalf of the nation, the FNCC and FNCU were as one in opposing in the strongest terms the actions of the state and rail companies.

⁵⁸ AN: F/7/13680, Préfet de l’Aisne à Ministre de l’Intérieur, 14/10/1922, pp.1--2.

⁵⁹ AN: F/7/13678, Préfet du Tarn à Ministre de L’Intérieur, 27/11/1922, p.2.

⁶⁰ AN: F/7/13680, Commissaire spécial de Valenciennes à Préfet du Nord, 16/10/1922, p.2. ‘un seul homme, fut-il Ministre, n’a pas le droit de modifier une loi votée par les chambres, c’est-à-dire, par le peuple.’; ‘pour assurer le respect de notre législation.’

⁶¹ AN: F/7/13680, Préfet de l’Aisne à Ministre de l’Intérieur, 9/11/1922. ‘qu’ils ne sauraient admettre que sous prétexte d’assurer la prospérité des compagnies, la condition sociale des travailleurs du rail soit amoindrie et qu’autant ils ont fait preuve de dévouement et sacrifice dans le passé, lorsque l’intérêt de la nation était en jeu, autant ils entendent de ne pas se sacrifier à des intérêts privés.’

The early 1920s saw a massive reassertion of company power in the sphere of railway industrial relations, fully supported by the Bloc National government. The position of the cheminots had been considerably weakened, the gains of the eight-hour day, the major achievement which the FNCC could claim, had been unilaterally declared void by the state in concert with the companies. The subsequent restructuring of the working day underlined the reality that it was the railway companies who had the final say over working practices. The fury evinced by the normally conciliatory Bidegaray following the Le Trocquer decree speaks volumes as to the negative impact this episode had upon FNCC strategy and the aspirations of its leaders. Faced with these circumstances, the adoption by the FNCU of an anti-system approach appears understandable. It appeared to speak to the realities of the situation as cheminots saw it. In the early years of dual unionism on the French railways it was also an important means of distinguishing the distinctiveness of *unitaire* trade unionism from its *confédéré* rival, an important consideration in the evolving struggle for influence and the legitimacy of speaking on behalf of French cheminots. Events of the mid to late 1920s would continue to affect the dynamic between the two unions. The advent of claims for significant wage increases on the railways significantly altering the relationship between FNCU leadership and their assessment of their role within cheminot trade unionism. However, of significant importance in framing Communist responses to such events were wider developments in international Communism and the national French Communist Party, particularly the Bolshevization episode of the early 1920s.

Party and Union: PCF and FNCU.

In her study of trade unionism in Saint-Etienne and Limoges during the early 1920s, Kathryn Amdur argues for the continued importance of the anarcho-syndicalist current within the CGTU beyond its formal incorporation into the Communist structure. Despite the penetration of the Confederation by the French Communist Party and the emergence of party militants as key leading figures, a small number of anarcho-syndicalists continued to exercise influence within the organization.⁶² Within the FNCU, Communist leadership was dominant. A comparison of the figures identified as sitting on the union's Executive Commission and Federal Bureau in the minutes of these

⁶² Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy*.

meetings with research carried out by contributors to the *Cheminot et Militants* biography project, reveals the clear links between PCF and FNCU at the level of the union leadership. This close relationship is demonstrated most conspicuously by such figures as Pierre Sémard, leader of the FNCU between 1921 and 1926 when he became leader of the PCF, returning to become joint leader of the union with the CGT's Jean Jarrigion following reunification in 1935. Lucien Midol, who acted as General Secretary in Sémard's absence, was a Communist deputy between 1928 and 1939 and Antoine Demusois, a leading member of the FNCU, was elected as a PCF deputy at the Popular Front elections of 1936. In fact, of the leading figures in the *Unitaire* union, only two appear to have not been active members of the PCF during the interwar period, one who eventually joined the party in 1938 and Antoine Rambaud, leader of the powerful *Paris-État-Rive-Droite* union whose history weaves in and out of this thesis throughout the period.⁶³

Rambaud was an early leading figure within the trade union movement and an opponent of the CGT leadership of the national railway federation. Close to Gaston Monmousseau, Rambaud, who lost his employment as a result of participation in the 1920 general strike, became a leading figure within the Parisian section of the *État* rail network. Close too to Pierre Monnatte, Rambaud was strongly influenced by the anarcho-syndicalist philosophy of the former.⁶⁴ A strong advocate of unity within the French trade union movement he became increasingly dissatisfied with what he viewed as CGTU inertia on this subject and, in particular, the influence of the PCF on French trade unionism. Rambaud argued strongly in favour of a return to the tenets of the Amiens Charter in cheminot trade unionism, entailing a divorcing of the labour movement from political parties. In this he was supported by the FNCC who too

⁶³ Biographical entries are provided in the work Marie-Louise Goegen avec Eric Belouet, *Cheminots Engagés, 9500 biographies en mémoire*, CD-ROM, (Paris, 2007). For an indication of the centrality of Communist Party membership to high ranking members of the FNCU, Rambaud excepted, see the entries for Antoine Rambaud by Georges Ribeill; Pierre Brandy by Jean Maitron and Claude Pennetier; Jules Crapier by Jean Maitron, Claude Pennetier and Jean-Luc Pinol; Victor Denys by Jean-Pierre Bonnet and Jean-Luc Pinol; Camille Frey by Jean Maitron and Claude Pennetier; Alphonse Jacquet by Jean-Luc Pinol; Robert Lutgen by Jean-Louis Panné and Jean-Luc Pinol; Louis Péria by Jean-Luc Pinol and Pierre Vincent; Louis Winberg by Jean-Luc Pinol and Nadia Ténine-Michel; Raymond Tournemaine by Georges Ribeill; Marc Dupuy by Jean Maitron, Françoise Marchais and Claude Pennetier; Antoine Demsois by Jean-Luc Pinol; For information on Lucien Midol and Pierre Sémard see the entries in *Cheminots engagés* and Lucien Midol, *La voie que j'ai suivie*; Serge Wolikow (ed), *Pierre Sémard* (Paris, 2007).

⁶⁴ On Monnatte see Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy*, p.160; Philippe Robrieux, *Histoire intérieure du Parti Communiste, 1920-1945, tome 1* (Paris, 1980), pp.198--201.

championed the Charter of Amiens at this time, somewhat opportunistically given the links of several leading *confédérés* with the SFIO.⁶⁵

The process which developed into the Rambaud Affair began with the plan unveiled by Lucien Midol in 1925 aimed at restructuring the operations of the FNCU, in particular seeking to centralize the leadership of the various union federations in Paris and to formalize the relationship between union centre and its regions, the aim being to remove the degree of autonomy which was seen to exist for the regions within the FNCU federal structure. The impetus for this move came directly from the PCF and can be seen as forming part of the wider Communist Bolshevization process occurring at this time.

By 1923, the prospects of revolution seemed to be dwindling in the West. The German revolution had been defeated and in France, Britain and Italy capitalist stabilization seemed to be securing the position of Europe's elites. These events, together with Lenin's death in January 1924, 'plunged the Comintern into crisis'.⁶⁶ Courtois and Lazar describe the Bolshevization period as 'a terrible tempest' which swept the international Communist movement, a process which transformed the Comintern into simply 'an element in the Soviet diplomatic game.' The years 1924 to 1927, argue Courtois and Lazar, represented the moment when the PCF was 'brought to heel' (*la mise au pas de la section française*). For these historians, this was a process which followed the logic of Stalinization, created and implemented from Moscow.⁶⁷ Certainly, as McDermott and Agnew attest, such a reading of a Bolshevization 'from above' had a great deal to recommend it, representing 'a trend toward Russian dominance of the Comintern and its member sections'.⁶⁸ Campaigns waged within the Russian Communist Party (RCP) to fill the vacuum left by Lenin, which turned first against Trotskyites, then Zinovievites and Bukharinites, before finally leaving Stalin in sole power, played a significant role in transforming the Comintern and its member sections. According to this reading, International Communism became increasingly hierarchical,

⁶⁵ Tony Judt argues that links between the SFIO and the CGT were closer than had previously been thought in the period prior to 1914, at least below the leadership level see his, *Marxism and the French Left: Studies in Labour and Politics in France, 1830-1981* (Oxford, 1986), p.121; this reading is reinforced by a document in the *Archives de la Préfecture de Paris* which discusses the political orientation of leading FNCC members, noting the firm links to the SFIO of certain union leaders, APP: BA2219, 11/7/1938 'Membres de la Bureau de la Fédération Nationale', Rapport de 10/1926.

⁶⁶ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, p.41.

⁶⁷ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, p.84. and pp.85--92.

⁶⁸ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, p.42.

bureaucratically centralized and ideologically monolithic. In addition, the failure of worldwide revolution increasingly forced the Soviet Union to look to its own security in an international arena dominated by unfriendly powers.⁶⁹ However, a straightforward narrative of ‘Russification’ as the overarching concern of the Soviet hierarchy in the period does not tell the whole story. Indeed, McDermott and Agnew posit the suggestion that Soviet impatience with organizational problems and factionalism, notably within the French Party, may have been a significant impetus behind the renewed emphasis upon ideological and organizational tightening. Equally the Bolshevization proved to be a two way affair, as strongly made ‘from below’ as ‘from above.’⁷⁰ Thus, while Bolshevization reveals a direction of travel toward a strengthening of Russian control, the overall development was complex and distinctly uneven in its results.

The Bolshevization of the PCF emphasized a major break with the traditions of French Socialism. Up to this point, the PCF had mirrored SFIO organization with party branches being 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 reorganized its cells upon the workplaces rather than habitations of its members. The creation of factory cells was a key element of this procedure. In August 1924, the PCF adopted the thesis of the Fifth 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.’⁷¹ In November 1925, a plan was announced for the reorganization 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; Region Six, for instance, the ‘Lyon Region’ took in a very large geographical area of Ain, Rhône, Loire, Haute Loire, Ardèche and parts of Vienne and Isère.⁷²

⁶⁹ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, p.43.

⁷⁰ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew. *The Comintern*, pp. 58--68.

⁷¹ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, p.89.

⁷² Archives Départementales de Seine-Saint-Denis (Hereafter ADSSD): Archives du Parti Communiste Français (PCF), 3 MI 6/13, séquence 109, circulaire no 20, 30/11/1925. See also 3 MI 6/23, séquence 160, Plan de la réorganisation de la CGTU (1926).

Bolshevization 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 Sémard. The process saw ‘factional’ elements forced out of the party, most famously Souvarine, who had defended Trotsky in Moscow, as well as Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monnatte.⁷³ Organizationally, the workplace factory cells provided challenges to militants, particularly in rural areas.⁷⁴ Difficulties were not limited to rural areas, however, Torigian has written that many workers left the party rather than submit to the reorganization, and that many of the cells formed in Paris never had more than a paper existence. Indeed, Torigian quotes Albert Vassart, a key Communist leader among Parisian metalworkers, to the effect that, ‘there were no more than 212 cells in the entire Paris metal industry.’ Irwin Wall too casts doubt upon the impact which the replacement of residential with factory cells had for the majority of French Communists. The policy, argues Wall, met with only ‘limited success’: ‘The campaign to restructure the PCF was launched in August 1924 with an initial December target date for completion. But the deadline was postponed and then abandoned because Communist militants resisted the new system.’ Though in May 1926 48.4% of cells were factory based, this fell to 31% in 1927 and 25% in 1928. Wall argues that, ‘despite repeated efforts the PCF was not able until the 1970s to organize more than 25% of its members in factory cells.’⁷⁵ The attempt to transform Communist organization was no more successful in Czechoslovakia where cell numbers equally fell away.⁷⁶ It is likely, however, that the creation of factory cells had less of an impact upon cheminots than it did for other workers. Railway employees tended to live in close proximity to their place of work and railway trade union organization already closely mirrored company structures. In these circumstances the reorientation may have had little practical impact. Magraw has written how in many rural areas cheminots dominated PCF electoral candidatures, it is not unreasonable to surmise from this that they were equally strongly represented in local organization.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, FNCU organization failed to conform to PCF expectations. In a circular issued in March 1926, the *Commission Syndical* of the PCF analysed the organizational structures of the FNCU. Democratic centralism was, it noted, non-existent within the

⁷³ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, pp.85--86.

⁷⁴ Julian Mishi, *Servir la classe ouvrière*, pp.85--87.

⁷⁵ Irwin M. Wall, *French Communism in the Era of Stalin: The Quest for Unity and Integration*, p.10.

⁷⁶ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, p.67.

⁷⁷ Roger Magraw, *History of the French Working Class*, p.244.

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. 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 organization. The plan ran into immediate difficulties, however, as a majority of the council refused to endorse the project without authorization 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.⁷⁸

The centralization plan was finally accepted in January 1927.⁷⁹ The PCF noted, however, that for the moment the FNCU remained a federal body with a 'tendency toward autonomy' among its regions.⁸⁰ Despite the reorganization, 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 who 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.'⁸¹

The reorganization process, with its emphasis upon strengthening the links between PCF and FNCU, led to considerable resistance within the FNCU from the non-Communist member, Antoine Rambaud. His opposition to greater PCF involvement would eventually lead him to resign from the FNCU and re-enter the FNCC with a number of his followers from the west of Paris in 1932. The Executive Committee meeting of 1931 saw angry denunciations of Rambaud's position. Castigated as a free-

⁷⁸ ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/24, séquence 170, CSC Circulaires 1926, CSC Circulaire No. 7, 30/3/1926, pp. 1--2.

⁷⁹ ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/35, séquence 239, CSC rapport No 9, 20/1/1927, p.10.

⁸⁰ ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/35, séquence 239, CSC rapport No 9, 20/1/1927, p.11. 'tendance à l'autonomie'.

⁸¹ Confédération Générale du Travail, Institut d'Histoire Social, Fédération Cheminot (Hereafter CGTIHS): Retour de Moscou (herefter RdM), FD 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. 'nous connaissons très imparfaitement leurs tâches pratiques, souvent même elles ne nous font pas parvenir le matériel qu'elles éditent et qu'elles font parvenir aux syndicats', 'des lacunes qu'il faut combler'.

mason and a tool in the hands of the CGT and the railway companies, Rambaud was attacked as aiming to break the cheminot organization.⁸²

Though the Rambaud affair had been bubbling away for a number of years, at least since 1925, the extant police reports only begin to take note seriously from 1930 onwards. These reports cast the controversy firmly in terms of a power struggle between Communist and non-Communist forces within the cheminot movement, taken as evidence of a lack of Communist influence among the cheminots. At the October 1929 congress of the FNCU *État* regional federation held at Nantes, Rambaud was reported as having argued that, though a 'fervent *unitaire*', he nonetheless believed that proletarian unity was a prerequisite to combat the power of the *patronat*. The representatives at this congress overwhelmingly voted for the Rambaud motion which called for the FNCU to no longer be placed under the direction of the Communist Party. 109 delegates representing 17,070 members voted in favour of the Rambaud motion, just 34 delegates on behalf of 6400 cheminot backed the official FNCU position.⁸³ On the national level, however, Rambaud proved unable to garner sufficient support. At the national FNCU congress held in November 1930, Rambaud and his supporters were firmly defeated. The archival reports demonstrate the disappointment of the officials at the Ministry of the Interior. Though Rambaud and his followers had 'supplied facts which were completely exact, they had been unable to exploit them.' Faced with a strongly partisan audience of 'Communist fanatics', Rambaud and his supporters had not had the communication skills to impose their views upon the cheminots present; the 'braves types' had been the victims of continual 'quolibets et rires'.⁸⁴ The failure of Rambaud's group to make headway at the Congress was welcomed by Moscow, a telegram from the President of the Central Committee of Railway Workers, Amossov congratulated the FNCU on a successful outcome.⁸⁵

This was not the limit of Moscow's involvement, however. The Profintern summoned Rambaud to Moscow in August 1931. Here, in what Georges Ribeill describes as 'une

⁸² CGTIHS: RDM, FD CGT/CGTU, 1922-1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV 16/11/1931, pp.1--4; E H Carr, *The Twilight of Comintern, 1930-1935* (London, 1982), p.174.

⁸³ AN: F/7/13671, Commissariat Centrale de Police, Nantes, 21/10/29, Congrès de la Section Fédéral des Syndicats Unitaire de l'Union Etat des Cheminots (19/20 octobre), pp.1--4 (4). 'qui dit ne pas vouloir être sous la direction du P(arti) C(ommuniste).'

⁸⁴ AN: F/7/13671, Rapport Congrès de Cheminots, 14/11/1930. 'apporté des faits absolument exacts [...] il n'a pas su les exploiter'

⁸⁵ AN: F/7/13671, Télégramme 28170/65 ML (1930), Moscou 11/11 12h35.

véritable procès', Rambaud was strongly condemned for his actions.⁸⁶ By December 1931, an interior ministry report reflected that the hostility of the Profintern leadership and of Losovsky in particular, had far from diminished.⁸⁷ It was not until the following year, however, that Rambaud left the FNCU and re-joined the CGT. Despite the anger of the *Unitaire* and Communist leadership he was not expelled, the strength of his position on the *État* network presumably working in his favour. When he did finally leave the FNCU, Rambaud led a large section of his union into the CGT with him. Exactly what the effects were upon FNCU membership on the *État* is difficult to measure. In March 1932, *L'Humanité* published membership details arguing that only 2613 members had gone over to the CGT. This latter organization while admitting that the numbers had not been enormous felt that such a figure significantly downplayed the real situation.⁸⁸

It is interesting that the restructuring of the FNCU undertaken during the period were centred upon tightening the administrative and bureaucratic links between union centre and peripheries. The debates were not marked by discussions of the creation of Communist cheminot cells, though these certainly existed, as we have seen in the case of Somain for instance in a previous chapter. Equally, discussions of another element of the wider Bolshevization process, the creation of Communist fractions within reformist unions, does not seem to have been a major element in FNCU discussions. Again, evidence suggests that such bodies did exist at certain points, within the CGT Cheminot Federation archive there exists a small number of extant documents pertaining to meetings of Communist fractions operating within the FNCC, largely dating from 1926 to 1928.⁸⁹ How many others existed but did not survive the archive's journey from Paris to Moscow via Berlin is impossible to say. However, a key theme within FNCU discourse focuses upon defending and extending the position of the *unitaire* union in relation to and independently of the FNCC. Confronting and defeating the *confédérés* through a powerful FNCU seems to have been the major concern. This reflects the unpopularity of the fraction tactic noted by historians of the Czech experience, where 'Red' unions flagrantly disregarded the instructions of the Moscow internationals on the need to form fractions.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Entry for 'Antoine Rambaud' by Georges Ribeill in *Cheminots et Militantes* CD-ROM.

⁸⁷ AN: F/7/13671, Rapport, 15/12/1931.

⁸⁸ AN: F/7/13671, Rapport, 29/3/1932.

⁸⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, Union Nord Réseau/PCF.

⁹⁰ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, pp.65--66.

It was in the context of FNCU reorganization and infighting that the wage dispute of the late 1920s developed. The campaign fundamentally recast the dynamic of railway industrial relations as, through the course of their involvement, the Communist-led FNCU reconceptualized their involvement in cheminot trade unionism. They adopted a policy of engagement with the wider concerns of rank-and-file workers and concentrated upon contesting the claims of management and CGT to power and legitimacy within the railway industry.

The Wage Dispute, 1925-1928

On 13 January 1928, the Director of the *Sûreté Générale* issued a circular to *Commissaires Spéciales* across France asking for information on the morale of the cheminots, particularly regarding their attitude to the on-going salary negotiations. The responses were not encouraging; cheminots across France were reported as strongly aggrieved by the company stance over the question of pay. The issue had been raised initially in November 1925 by a delegation uniting various cheminot union bodies who had negotiated among themselves a common proposal to put before the Committee of Directors. Jarrigion, head of the FNCC, explained before a meeting of cheminots of all tendencies in Dunkirk in February 1929, that the unions had demanded an increase to an annual basic salary of 7000 francs, up from 5600.⁹¹ A study of 1923 investigated in detail the working conditions of the cheminots, including the complex question of pay. Salary levels varied according to which of the three services the agent worked in (Matériel et Traction; Voie; Bâtiment), length of employment, grade, number of children and in which part of France they lived. The author of the study, however, suggested the figure of 5512 francs as the average cheminot salary.⁹² This hid a wide range of differing situations, however. Cheminot salaries had failed to keep pace with the rising cost of living, indeed single railway workers in some areas of France (Lazard mentions the Meuse and Seine-et-Oise in particular) had actually seen their salaries drop in real terms from 1911 levels. Indeed, unless workers were employed in the *Voie* service and had at least two children, they were worse off than they had been prior to World War One.⁹³ This was particularly the case with the drivers and firemen who had

⁹¹ AD Nord: M595/91, 1926, Commissaire Spécial de Dunkerque, Rapport 1/2/1926, p.1.

⁹² Roger Lazard, *Situation Économique des Agents de Chemins de fer*, p.155.

⁹³ Roger Lazard, *Situation Économique des Agents de Chemins de fer*, pp.98–99.

seen their position relative to other cheminots considerably reduced.⁹⁴ Cheminot pay, which had been fixed by the railway statute of 1921, was, according to Lazard's study, on average inferior to pay levels elsewhere among French workers and had lost significant ground. In 1923, it was calculated that an average cheminot daily salary was 18 francs 38, for other occupations this amounted to 18 francs 92. These two figures are relatively close, yet in the period since 1911, while the average wage of cheminots had increased 234%, elsewhere in the economy the average increase had been 310%.⁹⁵

March 1926 saw a large-scale demonstration of *unitaire* and *confédéré* cheminots in Lille in protest against the slow pace with which the authorities were reviewing their pay demands.⁹⁶ While it is unclear whether the FNCU had been immersed in inter-union discussions at a national level, at the local level militants were closely involved in the issue, witness the joint demonstrations alongside the FNCC at Lille, discussed above. They also played a key part in a similar demonstration at Valenciennes in March 1926. The climax of this latter demonstration involved the secretary of the local *unitaire* sector presenting a letter of grievance to the *Sous-Préfet*, to be passed on to higher authorities. The union secretary protested the lack of movement on the issue of salaries, 'On many occasions, the Federation has been heard by the Public Powers on the subject of the lamentable situation of the cheminots, whose salary becomes each day increasingly insufficient.' The high cost of living, argued the FNCU official, was driving the cheminot into poverty, wages were not keeping up. The *unitaire* writer made common cause with the rival FNCC position, asking for an increase to 7000 francs and ended by respectfully offering his 'sincere thanks' to the *Sous-Préfet*.⁹⁷ While the FNCU were playing an important role at the forefront of the campaign for pay increases, this was only one element of their wider platform. They gave equal attention at this time to other cheminot issues, top of which was the demand to see the reintegration into railway employment of those who had lost their jobs following the 1920 general strike together with a full amnesty.

⁹⁴ Roger Lazard, *Situation Économique des Agents de Chemins de fer*, p.98.

⁹⁵ Roger Lazard, *Situation Économique des Agents de Chemins de fer*, pp.156--159.

⁹⁶ AD Nord: M595/91, 1926, Commissaire Central de Police de Lille à M. le Préfet du Nord, A/S. Manifestation des cheminots Hellemmes-Lille, 11/3/1926.

⁹⁷ AD Nord: M595/91, 1926, Commissaire Spécial de Valenciennes 21 Mars 1926: M. Mortellette à M. le Sous-Préfet. 'A maintes reprises, la Fédération...a été entendue par les Pouvoirs Publics...au sujet de la lamentable situation des cheminots dont les salaires deviennent chaque jour plus insuffisants.'

The wage campaign escalated considerably and was fundamentally altered by the response of the rail companies. In May 1926, the CGT affiliated Federation released the news that the rail companies had announced a 12% increase across the board.⁹⁸ This information was met with anger among the cheminots. A joint meeting of cheminots of all political groupings gave their strong support to the original inter-union demand, a 35% increase for the lowest paid reducing to a 10% rise for those earning in excess of 15,000 francs. The FNCU delegate at the meeting voiced the position of the assembled cheminots, 'we refuse a 12% increase. We demand a 7000 franc basic salary.'⁹⁹

The negative response of the rail companies to the cheminot pay demand was a blow to the CGT policy of discussion and negotiation with management. This situation was inflamed further by the 1927 government decision to increase the basic pay of public sector workers (*fonctionnaires*) from 6900 to 8000 francs per year.¹⁰⁰ *Sûreté Commissaires* across France reported widespread discontent amongst the cheminots; annoyance deepened by the fact that cheminot salaries were losing ground relative to other workers in the public sector.¹⁰¹ The 8000 franc level became the new standard for which cheminot unions, FNCC as well as FNCU aimed. Rank-and-file anger was such that it forced the Minister of Public Works, André Tardieu, to involve himself in discussions, meeting with representatives of the FNCC and the rail companies in an effort to broker a better deal. As part of the Poincaré and later Tardieu administration's policy of attempting to marginalize the CGTU, FNCU delegates were not received by the minister.¹⁰²

The intervention of Tardieu was a crucial moment in the dispute. Historical works exploring André Tardieu's political thought and its reception in the 1920s and 1930s do not address directly his involvement in the cheminot wage dispute of the late 1920s. Tardieu's actions in this episode, however, reveal a great deal regarding his political vision for a 'modernized' France. Equally, the reaction his intervention solicited on the Communist left were of great significance, opposition to the Tardieu political project

⁹⁸ AD Nord: M595/91, 1926, Commissaire Spécial de Dunkerque à M. le Ministre de l'intérieur, Rapport, 21/5/1926, p.2.

⁹⁹ AD Nord: M595/91, 1926, Commissaire Spécial de Dunkerque, Rapport, 21/5/1926. 'nous refusons les 12% d'augmentation. Nous réclamons par contre, 7000 francs de salaire de base.'

¹⁰⁰ AN F/14/17919, Ministère des Travaux Publics à M. le Président du Comité des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer, 10/1/1928, p.2.

¹⁰¹ AN: F/7/13687, Commissaire Spécial de Dijon à M. le Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 19/1/1928, p.1.

¹⁰² Reference to discussions between FNCC and Tardieu can be found in AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire spécial de Toulouse Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 8/12/1928, p.3.

together with a vehement pursuit of the immediate demand for fairer cheminot wages allowed the FNCU to harmonize the political and economist elements and negotiate a clear strategy for Communist trade unionism on the railways. The FNCU campaign against Tardieu, the rail companies and, importantly, strongly in favour of significant wage increases, marked the moment when the FNCU firmly cemented their position within the cheminot corporation.

François Monnet has written of the importance of the ideas of the *Redressement Français* group to the development of Tardieu's political thought in the 1920s. This group had been founded by the electricity magnate Ernest Mercier in 1925 and was a forcing ground in France for thinking engaging with the 'neocapitalism' of the 1920s emerging from America in the form of Fordist and Taylorist production techniques.¹⁰³ For those involved in *Redressement Français*, French social problems were to be solved primarily, not by the redistribution but by the creation of wealth, with the emphasis placed upon 'conditions de production' and efficiency.¹⁰⁴ Emphasizing the ideal of the solidarity of the trenches which would be reinforced by rationalization procedures, for Tardieu the class war would become an 'economic nonsense', 'Ford,' he argued, 'rendered Marx obsolete.'¹⁰⁵ As Clague has noted, 'Tardieu had a vision of a rapidly expanding economy with a larger product to apportion, that would reduce social tensions and obviate the need for a serious redistribution of income.'¹⁰⁶ Central to Tardieu's vision, however, was the importance of the collapsing of sectional interests in favour of the national, collective interest founded upon a political and social coalition built around anti-Marxism.¹⁰⁷ Tardieu's intervention in the cheminot dispute can be read as an important part of his effort to extend his ideal of an anti-Marxist coalition into the trade union movement. In a speech at Belfort delivered in either 1927 or 1928, Tardieu elaborated upon his ideal of the national community appealing across class divides. Workers, he argued, knew that economic crises hit capital as well as labour and that they were obliged to 'combine their forces to overcome the peril.' Reflecting upon his experience as Minister for Public Works, he argued that, 'the three great groups of

¹⁰³ On the *Redressement Français* see Richard Kuisel, *Ernest Mercier: French Technocrat* (Berkeley, 1967).

¹⁰⁴ François Monnet, *Refaire La République: André Tardieu, une dérive réactionnaire, 1876-1945* (Paris, 1993), p.90.

¹⁰⁵ François Monnet, *Refaire La République*, p.90. 'Ford rendait Marx obsolète.'

¹⁰⁶ Monique Clague, 'Vision and Myopia in the New Politics of André Tardieu', *French Historical Studies*, 8, 1 (Spring, 1973), 105--129 (109).

¹⁰⁷ Monique Clague, 'Vision and Myopia in the New Politics of André Tardieu', p.106.

workers I have had the honour of managing: miners, cheminots and seamen; have often proved to me that in such matters, one can always count on their courage.'¹⁰⁸

Tardieu wrote to Édouard de Rothschild, President of the Committee of Directors, to argue for a more generous settlement, appealing for the rail companies to demonstrate the spirit of solidarity with their workforce which, according to the Minister, was the basis of the 1921 railway convention.¹⁰⁹ Tardieu's intervention saw rail companies further increase pay levels. Writing to the major trade unions representing the cheminots (though not to the FNCU), Tardieu emphasized the benefits of the new improved settlement. The starting salary would rise to 6850. Using the example of a cheminot based in Paris in *échelle* 1 and placed in the first *échelon* Tardieu wrote that, including all allowances, the new annual salary would stand at 10,050 francs (7050 francs without Parisian housing allowance.) With a family allowance for three children this salary would go up to 14,088, or 9728 outside Paris. For an engine driver on the main line pay would stand at 21,350, increasing to 25,130 francs, according to Tardieu's three child formula. Bonus pay for engine drivers would also increase from its 2300 franc annual average. While this fell considerably below the unions' demand of a basic salary in line with *fonctionnaire* pay, Tardieu underlined that, with all bonuses and allowances taken into account, cheminot pay was potentially considerably more generous than for other public sector workers.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ 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. 'à joindre leurs forces pour maîtriser le péril.' 'Les trois grands prolétaires que j'ai l'honneur de diriger, mineurs, cheminots et gens de mer, m'ont souvent prouvé qu'en de telles matières, on peut toujours compter sur leur courage.'

¹⁰⁹ AN: F/14/17919, Ministère des Travaux Publics à M. le Président du Comité des Grands Réseaux de Chemins de Fer, 10/1/1928, p.2.

¹¹⁰ AN: F/14/17919, Ministère des Travaux Publics aux Syndicats des Cheminots, 23/1/1928, pp.2--3.

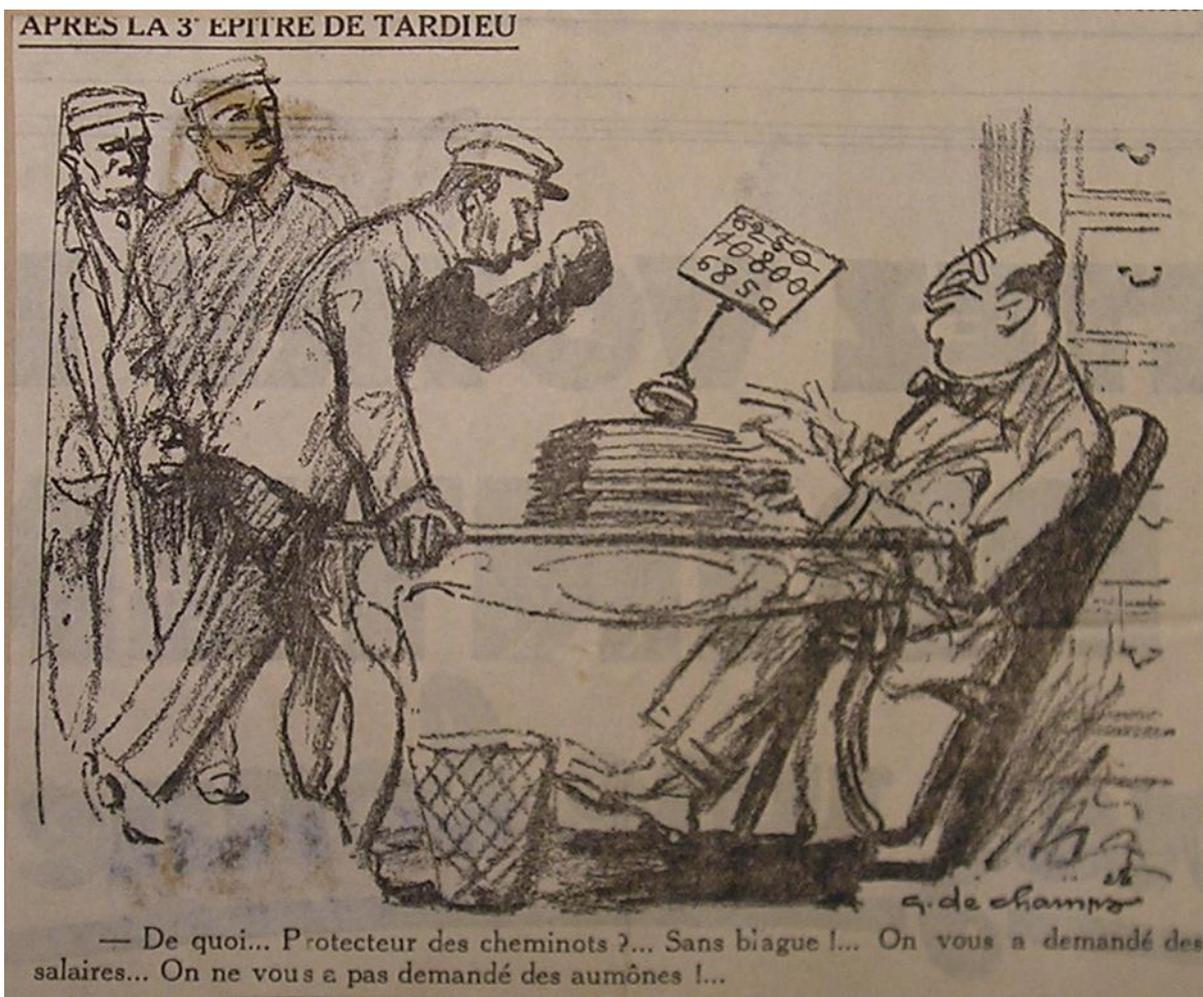


Figure 1: *Après la Troisième Épitre de Tardieu*. Source *L'Humanité* 27/1/1928. The caption reads 'What, Protector of Cheminots? You must be joking! We demanded salaries, we did not ask for charity!'

Laura Frader has placed the question of the family bonus in a broader context in French labour history. Prior to World War One, calls for a family wage were made by certain skilled workers arguing that pay levels should be sufficient for men to provide for their unwaged wife and children at home. Thus, for Frader, the call for a family wage included an important strategic imperative, 'to ensure high wages for skilled workers and ultimately to exclude women from the public world of wage labour.' Equally embedded in the concept was the 'idealized notion of the family, sustained by women's private unwaged labor in the home and by men's breadwinning in the public world of work.'¹¹¹ As we saw in Chapter Two, the interwar period saw the loosening of the boundaries constructed in the pre-war era separating private and public domains. Frader

¹¹¹ Laura Frader, 'Engendering Work and Wages: The French Labour Movement and the Family Wage' in Laura Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, 1996), pp.142--164, (143).

argues, the ‘discursive boundary between private and public spheres became more difficult to sustain as the wartime devastation of the population and France’s historically low birth rate became national concerns and women (especially married women) continued to hold jobs at a relatively high rate’, in such circumstances in the interwar period a shift in the understanding of wage value occurred. Whereas the ‘pre-war wage was based on the production of exchange value in public, the post-war wage became linked to value produced in private: reproduction now redefined as a public issue.’¹¹² Labour unions strongly opposed these changes, as Pedersen details in the example of the Parisian metalworking and Northern textile industries.¹¹³ Untying wages from the labour of a single worker and instead focussing upon the number of dependents which the employee needed to support, led to widely varying levels of pay for men, and women, doing the same job. As such, argues Frader, ‘it contrasted sharply with labor unions’ attempts to establish unified wage scales over which they could exercise some control in bargaining with employers.’¹¹⁴ The cartoon depicted in Figure One above captures key elements of the means by which Communists on the railways made sense of and depicted their opposition to company wage policy and Tardieu’s intervention in the dispute to their cheminot audience.

The cartoon underlines the key element of working-class independence in its depiction of cheminot opposition to Tardieu’s intervention. The ‘protector of the cheminots’ is depicted as having failed to gain any major concessions from the railway companies, merely advancing the wage settlement from 6250 to 6850 francs, considerably short of the Communist demand. Important is the Communist depiction of Tardieu’s role and the companies’ salary settlement in terms of ‘charity’, which is contrasted to the demand for ‘salaires’. The family bonus and the perceived reliance upon the intervention of the state are characterized as ‘aumônes’; that is reducing the self-reliance of the railway workforce. The demand for ‘salaires’ is, thus, equally a demand for greater independence from management control, an independence which is strongly tied to the offensive action of the Communist-led union in this cartoon. The setting of the action depicted in the illustration is equally significant. Opposition to Tardieu occurs not in the streets, in mass demonstrations or through strike action, it takes place in the Minister’s office with a delegation of cheminots crowding into the room. The emphasis,

¹¹² Laura Frader, ‘Engendering Work and Wages’, p.155.

¹¹³ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, chapter 5.

¹¹⁴ Laura Frader, ‘Engendering Work and Wages’, p.158.

nonetheless, is upon vigorous action and hostility, the delegation leader strikes an aggressive pose and his intervention rocks both table and minister backwards, but this is emphatically not a representation of an insurrectionary scene. It maps out in pictorial form the developing conception of Communist engagement with railway trade unionism, the oppositional engagement in delegations and management committees with Communist cheminots attending and participating, portraying their involvement in terms of the defence of cheminots interests against the combined power of state and management. This re-conceptualization of earlier FNCU engagement is more fully explored in the next chapter.

The outcome of Tardieu's intervention proved far from satisfactory for the majority of cheminots. In the *Commissaire Spécial* responses to the January 1928 circular issued by the Interior Ministry, the mood was widely summed up as one of tension with nervous anticipation of what might occur should further discussions not provide greater success.¹¹⁵ In particular the increase was seen as being 'derisory' for the lower grade employees.¹¹⁶ The *Commissaire Spécial* of St. Etienne reported widespread disappointment among the cheminot with regard to the outcome of Tardieu's pay negotiation. The widespread reading of cheminot opinion was that Tardieu would have to reopen his discussions with Rothschild in the aim of gaining an increase up to 8000 francs per year, thus putting the cheminot on an equal footing with the *fonctionnaires*. This figure was to be exclusive of any indemnities.¹¹⁷ While the *Commissaire* did not expect the dissatisfaction would result in generalized strike action he warned that the tactic of 'working to rule' was being widely discussed, as well as more limited, local strikes [*la grève perlée*] which were 'considered very favourably by the majority of cheminots who realize that these means are more effective than strike action.'¹¹⁸ Another report drew attention to the bitterness felt by the cheminots that wage increases were only being enjoyed by those at the top who had already benefitted from previous large increases.¹¹⁹ This report considered that the cheminots continued to have faith in

¹¹⁵ see for example the Etat d'Esprit reports in AN: F/7/13670, F/7/13677, F/7/13679.

¹¹⁶ AN: F/7/13677, Etat d'Esprit des Cheminots du Réseau de L'Etat, 1/3/1928.

¹¹⁷ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, Commission Spécial de St. Etienne, 28/1/1928.

¹¹⁸ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, Commission Spécial de St Etienne, 28/1/1928. 'envisagée assez favorablement par la majorité des cheminots qui se rend compte que ces moyens sont plus efficace que la grève.'

¹¹⁹ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, Le Conflit des Cheminots, 22/1/1928, p.2. 'seuls les grands chefs, déjà favorisés précédemment bénéficiaient d'augmentations importants.'

the government, but the discontent was profound and general.¹²⁰ Many of the reports highlight the lack of enthusiasm for strike action, though it was noted that the railway workers of Laval did not dare to strike for fear of losing their jobs. These workers were, however, reported to be in favour of a slow-down and adopting 'work to rule' practices to disrupt rail services.¹²¹

The FNCC invested a great deal of time and capital in attempting to negotiate a more advantageous settlement for the cheminots. They were in close contact with Tardieu at the Ministry of Public Works and later with Forgeot, who replaced the former in the course of 1928, though the union was reported as being 'cool' in their response to the new minister, considering him to lack Tardieu's influence with railway directors.¹²² However, for the FNCC union, the results of Tardieu's intervention did not go far enough. The local sector in the south west of France sent a letter to all deputies representing the Bas-Pyrénées department at the end of January 1928, drawing the parliamentarian's attention to 'the particularly unhappy situation which our corporation is experiencing with regard to salaries.'¹²³ It had been completely just, wrote the union, for civil service pay to rise on 1 January, yet, argued the union, what was true for one category of citizens, was equally true for another. Reminding the politicians of the vital service performed by the railway for the national benefit, the cheminots outlined the difficulties faced by the new wage increases, an 'homme d'équipe' received an annual wage of 3800 francs with additional 2450 'complement de traitement' giving him a total income of 6250 or 521 francs per month. However with the 7% pension fund charge, the actual pay level was 485 francs 50.¹²⁴

Through 1928, the FNCC appealed to the Companies to increase wages, pointing to the increase in traffic using the railways since the start of the year together with the fact that the rail companies' financial position appeared more secure at this point than at any time since the end of the First World War. While accepting company arguments regarding

¹²⁰ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, Le Conflit des Cheminots, 22/1/1928, pp.3--4.

¹²¹ AN: F/7/13677, Etat d'Esprit des cheminots du réseau d'état, 1/3/1928, p.3.

¹²² AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire Spécial de Toulouse à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 8/12/1928, p.4.

¹²³ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, Commission Spécial de Pau, 26/1/1928. 'la situation particulièrement douloureuse qui est fait à notre corporation en ce qui concerne les salaires.'

¹²⁴ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendus de Réunions Divers, Commission Spécial de Pau, 26/1/1928. 'ce qui est vrai pour une catégorie de citoyens ne le serait-il plus pour d'autres? et ce qui a été jugé indispensable à un postier pour vivre honnêtement, ne serait-ce pas aussi nécessaire pour un cheminot pour subvenir à ses besoins et élever honorablement sa famille?'

the high personnel costs, they argued that these were in large part the result of the 'augmentations scandaleuses' accorded to the salaries of the highest grades of employees, together with the considerable increase in the number of these well paid administrative roles since the end of the war.¹²⁵ Their appeals failed to move the companies to a reconsideration of the issue.

Increasingly, the FNCC were considered by cheminots as being too timid in their approach. Their strategy of conciliation and faith in government and rail directors had been seriously undermined by events.¹²⁶ The FNCU made considerable capital of the perceived failure of the *confédéré* approach which was founded upon the good will of the companies and the government to pay adequate attention to cheminot demands, the FNCU attacking the 'bankruptcy of class collaboration' and called for a more aggressive, confident approach.¹²⁷ Strike action, however, did not enter into FNCU discourse regarding the wage campaign strategy. The *unitaires* emphasized the decision of the Poincaré government to exclude them from ministerial delegations, leading FNCU member and PCF figure Jules Crapier pointing to the boycott of CGTU delegations to argue that cheminots could not count upon the good will of the public powers.¹²⁸ The FNCU led a vociferous campaign against government, rail companies and the FNCC. From early 1928 onward, the Communist-led union displaced the FNCC as the leading voice among cheminots, arguing for the extension of cheminot pay and placing the defence of cheminot working conditions at the forefront of their political agenda.

In February 1928 the Communist-led union held a meeting in Paris attended by some 3000 cheminots. Here they made clear their position regarding salaries. In the short term wages should rise from 6250 to 8000 francs, mirroring the CGT demand. Over time (the actual formula used was 'un peu plus tard'), this figure should increase to 10,800 francs.¹²⁹ 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

¹²⁵ AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire Spécial de Toulouse à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 8/12/1928, pp. 1--3.

¹²⁶ AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire Spécial de Toulouse à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 12/11/1928.

¹²⁷ AN: F/7/13679, Commissaire Spécial de Toulouse à Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 8/12/1928, p.1.

¹²⁸ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Compte Rendu de Réunions Divers, Commission Spécial de Nîmes, 20/1/1928, pp.2--3.

¹²⁹ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, rapport de séance, 8/2/1928.

unitaire position had seen important increases in their membership.¹³⁰ A similar situation was noted at Besançon and Cannes.¹³¹ On the P-O network, widespread discontent was reported;¹³² the Midi reported an equal situation with widespread FNCU support.¹³³ Membership at Lyon had increased by 250 in a single week, with previously moribund syndicats finding a new lease of life and renewed appeal amongst the cheminots.¹³⁴ The campaign was a long one and one upon which the Communist leadership of the FNCU continued to exert pressure. In November 1928, *L'Humanité* pursued the issue, running numerous articles contrasting miniscule cheminot pay increases to the pay cheques received by company managers, reckoned to amount to at least 50,000 francs annually.¹³⁵ While cheminot pay continued to advance in small incremental steps until the deflationary politics of the Doumergue and Laval governments of 1934 and 1935, the cheminot demand did not come close to being satisfied. The issue remained high on the agenda as a key cheminot concern. In December 1929, Jules Moch the SFIO deputy, was able to draw a large crowd of railway workers to a meeting on cheminot wages. He made it clear that cheminot salaries continued to lag behind those of public sector workers, unless the rail worker had four children.¹³⁶ The complicated system of family benefits, living allowances and work bonuses, which not all rail employees received, conspired to allow the rail companies to hold cheminot basic pay levels at a relatively low level.

Various reports had noted the likelihood that many cheminots would vote for FNCU candidates at the personnel delegate elections, an action that was understood in terms of short term positioning rather than evidence of an ideological commitment to Communism. A vote for a *unitaire* candidate was seen either as a punishment for the company or as a negotiating tactic on the part of the cheminots.¹³⁷ As it was the 1928 personnel elections were a complete success for the FNCU. The results of the

¹³⁰ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, Etat d'Esprit des cheminots du Réseau PLM, 2/3/1928, p.2. 'approuvé par la plupart des agents, même non-syndiqué.'

¹³¹ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, Etat d'Esprit des cheminots du Réseau PLM, 2/3/1928, pp.2--3.

¹³² AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, Etat d'Esprit des cheminots du Réseau PO, 1/5/1928.

¹³³ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, Etat d'Esprit des cheminots du Réseau Midi, 1/5/1928.

¹³⁴ AN: F/7/13670, Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, Le Conflit des Cheminots, 22/1/1928, p.5.

¹³⁵ *L'Humanité*, 19/11/1928.

¹³⁶ AN: F/7/13687, Préfet de la Drôme à M le Ministre de L'Intérieur, 26/1/1929.

¹³⁷ See for instance AN: F/7/13677, Etat d'esprit des cheminots du Réseau d'état, 1/3/1928 pp.1--6 especially p.1 and p.5.

Communist agitation were, according to certain circles, plain to see. A report on the FNCU in the Midi reflected that, 'the *unitaire* success in the *Conseil Supérieur* elections is uniquely due to the company resistance' reflecting that such events were regrettable as, until this point, *unitaire* support had seemed to be on the decline.¹³⁸ FNCU success was resounding, out of a total of 196 delegates in the electoral college for the *Conseil Supérieur* assigned to the *petits cheminots*, the *unitaires* won 131.¹³⁹ The vast majority of the seats in the electoral college, however, remained the property of the *Cadres* union, who held the other 192 seats. An idea of the strength of the FNCU can be gleaned from the size of their vote on the *État* network -- the CGTU affiliate amassing 32,219 votes against the CGT's 19,928.¹⁴⁰ Broken down by networks, the success of the FNCU nationwide is clear. The largest majorities in favour of FNCU candidates was recorded on the PLM network, with the Communist-led union gaining 43,127 votes and twenty-four delegates against the FNCC's 15,213 and four. Only on the *Est* and the relatively small Midi networks did the CGT outpoll the CGTU, though due to the vagaries of the electoral system used only on the *Est* did the CGT gain more delegates than their *unitaire* opponents.¹⁴¹ This was a significant turning point. From this moment on, the FNCU would play a leading role in railway industrial relations. Though at the next elections in 1931, *unitaire* influence declined, dropping to a total of 97 delegates in the electoral college, this still left the FNCU only two short of an overall majority over their rival unions. Given the high degree of cohesion among the FNCU caucus compared to the divergent currents ranged against them, in practice the Communists continued to dominate railway industrial relations. The CGT garnered seventy-five delegates, others included twelve Catholics; eight *mécaniciens et chauffeurs* and four members of the autonomous Alsace-Lorraine Union.¹⁴² A report on the elections suggested the reason for the loss of support for the Communist-led union was a loss of influence among workers in workshops and depots who, though previously 'les troupes les plus combattives' of the FNCU, had largely abstained on this occasion.¹⁴³ This suggests that the elections did not see a major advance in the CGT vote, but rather a drop in that of the CGTU.

¹³⁸ AN: F/7/13670, *Cheminots 1928, Comptes Rendus de Réunions Divers, Etat d'Esprit des cheminots du Réseau Midi*, 1/5/1928. 'le succès des unitaires aux élections du conseil supérieur des chemins de fer et dû uniquement à la résistance des compagnies'

¹³⁹ AN: F/7/13671, *Rapport du 19/2/1931*, p.1.

¹⁴⁰ J. M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France', p.458.

¹⁴¹ *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 1/2/1928.

¹⁴² AN: F/7/13671, *Rapport 19/2/1931*, p.1.

¹⁴³ AN: F/7/13671, *Rapport 17/12/1930*.

The FNCU made much of their 1928 victory, 'Et maintenant Tardieu?' asked the union's newspaper *La Tribune des Cheminots* rhetorically.¹⁴⁴ The union aggressively pursued its position regarding cheminot salaries. A cartoon published in the Tribune demanded of Tardieu and Rothschild, 'payez, vous êtes les vaincus.' The union highlighted the altered landscape of power within railway industrial relations, emphasizing their democratic legitimacy and posing the question to the authorities as to whether they would continue to negotiate with what had been revealed to be the minority viewpoint among the cheminots.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

Writing in the wake of the FNCU success in 1928, *L'Avenir* reflected upon the worrying implications of the Communists' landslide victory. It was not the case, reasoned the paper's editorialist, that the huge majority of the 'petits' cheminots had been won over by Communist ideology. It was rather the case that Communists had been effective in articulating cheminot concerns and proving their interest in resolving them. The article went on to quote General Weygand's remarks about the dangers of leaving workers' grievances unresolved, 'if many workers turn toward Communism, the reason is that Communism alone is actively taking an interest in them.'¹⁴⁶ According to this view, the Communist-led union owed its success to the fact that it had most effectively positioned itself as the champion of key cheminot concerns.

The FNCU position in 1928 contrasted significantly with its outlook in the immediate aftermath of the schism within the FdC. With Sépard and Monmousseau at the helm of the newly-created union, the *unitaires* had repudiated the 'economist' orientation in railway trade unionism, reacting against the legacy of Bidegaray, the *Union Sacrée* and the perceived failures of the Second International. Such an approach served to distance the FNCU from its CGT affiliated rival in the early years of dual unionism on the railways. Yet it represented more than an effort at tactical positioning. The early FNCU approach, it can be argued, seemed to best suit the political conditions of the early

¹⁴⁴ *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 1/2/1928.

¹⁴⁵ *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 1/2/1928.

¹⁴⁶ *L'Avenir*, 15/2/1928. 'si beaucoup d'ouvriers se tournent vers le Communisme, la raison est que, seul, le Communisme s'occupe d'eux activement.'

1920s as rail companies in concert with the French state re-imposed their authority over the industry. The benefits attained by the FNCC's 'politics of presence' were short lived, however. Within three years of its creation, the eight-hour day legislation had been significantly weakened through the unilateral but parallel actions of the government and management. CGT anger at this perceived betrayal and their inability to defend the gains made in the immediate armistice period led to FNCC leaders themselves calling for the type of militant opposition more usually associated with the *unitaires* in these early post-war years. The upswing in militancy was equally marked among the rank-and-file who became impatient with FNCC negotiations and turned toward the Communist union, who, in turn moved towards the membership through the resolute and aggressive representation of cheminot interests. It bears emphasis, nonetheless, that the FNCU's Communist leadership did not cease to regard themselves as both Communists and revolutionaries. They supported the Bolshevization moves and, as the Rambaud incident demonstrates, worked hard to marginalize those who were deemed to have erred from the tenets of Communist ideology. The CGT, management and the bourgeois capitalist state retained their prominent places in the FNCU's pantheon of enemies. At the same time, opening the door to participation in railway politics precipitated a major challenge to the Communist identity of FNCU leaders. Once engaged upon the politics of presence the FNCU found that there was no retreating back into anti-system 'oppositionalism'. To have done so risked alienating the rank-and-file or, almost as bad, abandoning the field to their CGT rivals. The tensions which this position occasioned and the FNCU's response to them form the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Communists and Cheminots: Railway Industrial Relations c.1928-1936

Introduction

The campaign for the *Conseil Supérieur* elections of 1928 was notable for the FNCU's embrace of the cheminot wage claim. The campaign was also differentiated from previous elections by the FNCU's announcement that its candidates would, if elected, take up their places on the *Conseil* rather than resigning *en masse* as they had done in previous years. This represented a strategic about-turn. The move took place amidst a climate notable for an apparent loosening in the ideological rigidities of French Communist politics. The CGTU, at its September 1927 Bordeaux conference which agreed cheminot participation with the *Conseil Supérieur*, also passed a measure aiming to create a mutual *Caisse Nationale de Solidarité Ouvrière*. At Bordeaux, writes Michel Dreyfus, the CGTU for the first time in their history began to envisage a Communist-organized, mutualist politics.¹ Following this congress, the CGTU was met by ironic taunts from the national CGT leadership who hailed the conversion of the *unitaires* to reformism.² This change in approach did not escape the attention of France's police. The *Sûreté* reported in late 1927 on attempts by the CGTU in Paris to get *unitaire* candidates elected to the *Conseil Supérieur du Travail* operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Labour. The results, if any, of this latter initiative are unknown. Torigian in his study of the Parisian metalworkers in this period makes no mention of this Council.³ What is certain is that efforts towards *unitaire* mutualism were abandoned under pressure from the new sectarian 'class against class' line from 1928 onwards, although they resurfaced again in 1932.⁴ The FNCU decision to renounce the straightforwardly anti-system position it had pursued up to 1928 regarding the *Conseil Supérieur* coincided with the stricter ideological discipline evident within the wider International Communist movement as the Comintern moved towards the embrace of the sectarian 'class against class' line. Yet, while the new sectarianism resulted in CGTU moves towards developing a mutualist politics being abandoned, the FNCU persisted with their

¹ Michel Dreyfus, *Histoire de la CGT* (Brussels, 1995), p.135.

² E H Carr, *Foundations of a Planned Economy*, vol. 3, part 1, p.494.

³ Michael Torigian, *Every Factory a Fortress: The French Labor Movement in the Age of Ford and Hitler* (Athens, OH., 1999).

⁴ Michel Dreyfus, *Histoire de la CGT*, p.135.

position on the *Conseil* throughout the period 1928-1934, during which time the 'class against class' line was in operation. Indeed, prior to the railway personnel elections of 1931, a genuine debate occurred within the FNCU leadership as to the merits of continuing their participation. As a result, the union came out decisively in favour of renewed engagement.

These actions pose deeper questions both in regards to the relationship between railway Communists and the wider Communist movement in France, and the role of the FNCU within railway industrial politics, a role that may be evaluated by assessing their liaison with the rank-and-file, connections with rival trade unions, as well as contacts with the railway companies and the French state. FNCU readings of the expectations of the rank-and-file clearly helped determine their new approach to cheminot trade unionism. The desire to place themselves at the head of cheminot representation and to increase working-class power at the expense of railway capitalists ensured that the Communist leadership of the FNCU consistently placed rank-and-file expectations at the forefront of their decision making. The key consideration in assuring that the *unitaires* would proceed with their role on the *Conseil Supérieur* was the belief that ordinary cheminots saw this as a central aspect of railway trade unionism. Participation on the council did not, however, put an end to FNCU rhetorical attacks upon this body. Nor did it diminish the leadership's hostility to railway capitalism. Nor, finally, did it lessen their attacks upon the practices of railway management. Employing the language of class conflict and working-class solidarity, the FNCU fashioned a blueprint for participation which differentiated their approach from the perceived *Union Sacrée* tactics of the FNCC. In the *unitaire* imagination, the *Conseil* was reconceptualized as a site of class conflict in which FNCU delegates opposed the combined forces of company and state power through an unflinching defence of cheminot interests. The personnel elections and *Conseil Supérieur* also served as important means of competing with their CGT rivals and 'unmasking' the 'collaborationism' of the FNCC.

While participation was understood firmly in terms compatible with the sectarian line of 'class against class', the FNCU engagement with railway industrial relation structures raised fundamental questions regarding the identity of the *unitaires* as Communists and revolutionaries. Following the defeat of the 1920 general strike and the memory of widespread victimization in its wake, the FNCU approach offered a channel for cheminot militancy to express itself short of outright confrontation with management. The FNCU were uncomfortable with this bureaucratization of their role. They

recognized, however, the altered realities of industrial politics on the railways and adapted to them accordingly, most tellingly in their significant downplaying of the role of political strikes and demonstrations in their repertoire, a practice which did place them at odds with the national PCF organization but which was, nevertheless, considered a necessary adjustment to railway realities. Moreover, the strong tradition of railway trade unionism ensured that cheminots were habituated to delegating to the union organization the representation of their political interests. This was a tradition in which all railway union Federations operated.⁵

An analysis of the role which rank-and-file expectations and aspirations played within FNCU political culture during these years must engage with the Communist movement's engagement with the question of gender in French society and in the lives of workers more specifically. Overwhelmingly male in composition and in outlook, the FNCU, in line with wider Communist thinking in the period prior to the Popular Front, did not develop a differentiated approach to male and female workers. Women workers on the railways, vastly outnumbered in the masculine world of the *cheminot*, were understood by the Communists as first and foremost workers, their demands understood to be synonymous with those of the male workforce. This could have positive effects as Susan Pedersen has argued.⁶ However Laura Frader's research encourages us to be aware of the manner in which the French Social Model, in development during this period through the interactions of labour, capital and state, was founded to an extent upon gendered and exclusionary assumptions about work and the nature of the 'Public' as opposed to the 'Private' sphere.⁷

Inter-union Rivalries on the Railways

The acrimony between CGT and CGTU on the railways occasioned by the schism cast a long shadow, particularly among leading *unitaires*. The impact of these early conflicts had a strong effect upon Gaston Monmousseau who would, in the 1930s, resolutely oppose any accommodation with the CGT as the Comintern moved to embrace the Popular Front strategy. In 1925 Monmousseau had co-authored a report on the

⁵ See the hypothesis advanced on this drawn from the examples of Saint-Etienne and Limoges in Kathryn Amdur, *Syndicalist Legacy*, pp.137--138.

⁶ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*.

⁷ Laura Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens*.

relationship between the CGTU and the PCF. In the course of this analysis he was strongly critical of the emphasis being placed upon trade union unity within the French Communist movement. He noted how under such circumstances, ‘the perspectives of a victorious revolutionary movement are subordinated to the conquering of *syndicats*.’ Monmousseau brought his experience of the interior world of trade union politics to bear in order to argue for the rejection of collaboration with the CGT. Noting the various procedural and bureaucratic methods by which *confédéré* leaders could assure their continued dominance of reformist organizations, he made clear that Comintern and PCF strategy would lead to the effective marginalization of minority currents.⁸ Above all, argued the report, ‘to consider trade union unity to be the lone factor in the organization of the masses is [...] an error in a country such as France in which the CGTU holds a preponderant place within the trade union movement.’⁹ Monmousseau and his co-authors called for a more confrontational relationship with the CGT, calling for the *front unique* to be based upon the formula *plumer la volaille*.¹⁰ The report concluded with a telling commentary on the relationship between the Communist Party and its trade union movement. Despite the Bolshevization of the party leadership, Communists, it was alleged, still had little real understanding of the realities of industrial politics and organization. Monmousseau and his co-signatories called for more workers to be involved at the highest levels of the PCF who would be ‘experienced in trade union organization and in trade union struggles.’¹¹

It is clear that Monmousseau’s reading of the situation within the French trade union movement was strongly influenced by his intimate knowledge of industrial politics on the railways. His characterization of the preponderance of the CGTU position within the French trade union movement is particularly telling as, beyond the railway workers, no significant occupational federation had a *unitaire* majority. Marked by the antagonisms within the railway trade union tradition, Monmousseau at the head of the CGTU remained committed to a reading of inter-union relations which became increasingly ill-suited to the wider *unitaire* position within French society. Such a thesis approaches that advanced by Philippe Buton in which he posits that early experiences indelibly

⁸ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/13, séquence 104, Rapports entre la CGTU et le PCF, p.15. ‘les perspectives d’un mouvement révolutionnaire victorieux sont subordonné à la conquête des syndicats.’

⁹ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/13, séquence 104, Rapports entre la CGTU et le PCF, p.16. ‘considérer l’unité syndicale comme le seul facteur de l’organisation en masse des ouvriers est [...] une faute dans un pays comme la France où la CGTU tient dans le mouvement syndical une place prépondérante.’

¹⁰ ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/13, séquence 104, Rapports entre la CGTU et le PCF, p.16.

¹¹ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/13, séquence 104, Rapports entre la CGTU et le PCF, p.34. ‘expérimentés dans l’organisation des syndicats et les batailles syndicales.’

marked the political identities of French Communists. However, while it seems to be true of Monmousseau it should be noted that Communists closer to the daily workings of cheminot trade unionism who were equally involved in these early encounters proved extremely adaptable in their politics. Lucien Midol is an important example of the latter group.¹²

The outcome of Monmousseau's interventions was his replacement at the head of the CGTU by Benoît Frachon, a metal worker by profession, as Communist politics moved into the Popular Front period. Jacques Girault places the differences between Frachon and Monmousseau as being, at base, a question of the subordination of the union movement to the party. While Monmousseau was strongly in favour of close ties between CGTU and PCF, Frachon, conversely, called for a greater degree of local initiative with militants developing tactics around the immediate demands of workers in their area. Frachon's position, which emerged dominant from 1930-1931, was ironically close to the position which had been developed within the FNCU through the course of the late 1920s. Monmousseau's conception of trade union organization was stuck in the rhetoric and experience of the immediate post-World War One era which the FNCU itself had abandoned.¹³

In the late 1920s, however, the FNCU placed attacks upon the FNCC at the forefront of their political rhetoric, as we have seen during the Rambaud saga explored in the last chapter. In the summer of 1928, the wider International Communist movement moved into line with this approach, adopting the 'class-against-class' tactic which gave impetus to FNCU competition with the CGT. From now on any co-operation with Socialist and reformist parties and trade unions was off the agenda of the Comintern. These groups were now to be castigated as 'social fascists' in league with the 'capitalist classes'.

'Class against Class'

Widely seen as being disastrous for Communist Parties across Europe, particularly in Germany, the 'class against class' period buttressed the position of the FNCU as a

¹² Philippe Buton, 'Les Générations Communistes', *Vingtième Siècle*, 22 (1989), pp.81--92. On Communism, youth and the question of generation see Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilising Youth*.

¹³ Jacques Girault, *Benoît Frachon: Communiste et Syndicaliste, 1893-1975* (Paris, 1989), pp.115--119.

radical trade union participating within railway industrial politics.¹⁴ The decision to participate in the *Conseil Supérieur* predated the official announcement of the new Comintern line made in the summer of 1928. The Comintern line and the rhetoric used to justify it married with the approach developed by FNCU delegates as they took their seats on the railway *Conseil Supérieur* for the first time. It also promoted a distinctively Communist approach to railway industrial relations, marking FNCU candidates out from their CGT rivals. Put simply, the tactics of ‘class against class’ proved more applicable to the realities of competitive trade unionism on the railways than had the united front tactic.

The Comintern had been working to impose the ‘class against class’ line in France from 1927, part of an effort to wean the PCF away from what Moscow considered to be the party’s ‘continued sentimental attachment to left-wing unity.’¹⁵ In May 1928 André Ferrat, writing in the *Cahiers de Bolchevisme*, underscored how the new line would bring about a demonstrative ‘rupture with the bourgeois left-wing parties, with democratic prejudices, with all opportunist and electoral deviations.’¹⁶ At the sixth world congress of the Communist International held in July and August 1928, the announcement was made that the ‘capitalist system’ was entering a ‘Third Period’. Capitalism, it was asserted, was entering a renewed phase of crisis and European elites would become increasingly reliant upon coercive and ‘fascist’ techniques to maintain their hold on power. These circumstances would generate increasing militancy on the part of the industrial proletariat and thus the ‘objective’ conditions were becoming increasingly favourable for revolutionary action. Affiliates of the Third International were to abandon the ‘united front’ tactic which had seen them attempting to reach out to moderate and Socialist parties and trade unions. Instead, Communists were to identify themselves fully with a more revolutionary and sectarian politics, particularly in their dealings with ‘reformist’ groups. These last were to be stridently denounced for their collaboration with capitalism as ‘social fascists.’ In the new sectarian line of ‘class

¹⁴ See the discussion in Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern*, p.116; See also 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* (London, 2004), 1--17 (1--2).

¹⁵ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.24.

¹⁶ Quoted in Bernard Pudal, *Prendre parti: pour une sociologie historique du PCF*, pp.145--146. ‘opérer une rupture démonstrative avec les partis de gauche de bourgeoisie, avec les préjugés démocratiques...avec tous les déviations opportunistes et électoralistes.’

against class', social democracy was dogmatically identified as being coterminous with 'bourgeois' capitalism.¹⁷

This strategy has long been viewed as a disaster for the Comintern, the renewed emphasis upon sectarianism and division severely weakening the Left. The widespread slump in membership of European Communist Party memberships has been emphasized as Communists isolated themselves from the concrete concerns of their national constituencies, all the while burnishing their revolutionary credentials. Analysed in part as an instrument of Stalin's consolidation of power in Moscow, Communist Parties have been viewed as acting once more as puppets of Soviet power struggles. As Nicholas Kozlov and Eric Weitz noted in an important article of 1989, observers had long explained the Third Period line 'as a result of Stalin's assumption of near-absolute power both domestically and within the international Communist movement.'¹⁸ Kozlov and Weitz, however, emphasize the wider developments in Communist political theory, particularly those associated with Nicholai Bukharin as being of greater significance.¹⁹ 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, argues Robrieux, the Communist leadership and the party militants increasingly isolated themselves from reality.²⁰ 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 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.²¹ Within the PCF leadership, the party's previous group of leaders, including Pierre Sémard, saw themselves increasingly marginalized as a new, younger cohort emerged.²² Increasingly, however, scholars have underscored the importance of

¹⁷ Matthew Worley, 'Courting Disaster?', pp.1--2.

¹⁸ Nicholas N. Kozlov and Eric 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--388).

¹⁹ Nicholas N. Kozlov and Eric Weitz, 'Reflections on the origins of the 'Third Period'.

²⁰ Philippe Robrieux, *Thorez: vie secrète et vie publique* (Paris, 1975), p.127. 'le recours à la rue, l'agitation, l'action directe et la grève politique de masse'; 'plus le Parti développe la politique de la troisième période, plus il se coupe des masses ouvrières.'

²¹ Annette Wieviorka, *Maurice et Jeannette: Biographie du couple Thorez* (Paris, 2010), p.165.

²² Serge Wolikow, 'Un secrétaire générale oublié...', in Serge Wolikow (ed.) *Pierre Sémard* (Paris, 2007), 159--196 (193--196).

periodization in the era of ‘class against class’. Bernard Pudal has argued that ‘Third Period’ sectarianism began to be gradually loosened from 1930 onwards as Maurice Thorez, in concert with Eugene Fried and Moscow, established himself at the head of the PCF.²³ The period 1930-1934 represents for Pudal the slow process through which political realism made its return within the PCF, a process based upon a gradual re-engagement with the everyday lives and aspirations of French workers.²⁴ Equally, its negative impact has been more critically scrutinized with important new evidence adduced to question it. In Germany, KPD membership levels in fact went up during the initial years of the new line.²⁵ Evidence such as this indicates that it makes little sense to accept the generalization that the adoption of the more militant, fully sectarian line was simply an unwelcome imposition from Moscow. In the context of Spain, Tim Rees has argued that the politics of the ‘Third Period’ must be considered in a more ‘ambiguous light.’ ‘In fact’ notes Rees, ‘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.’²⁶ Many were more comfortable with a renewed emphasis upon the revolutionary identity of the Third International, ‘the language and tactics of the Third Period representing ‘a return to fundamental principles rather than being simply knee-jerk ‘leftism’ or Stalinist device.’²⁷

Julian Mischi has emphasized the favourable reception and applicability of the ‘class against class’ strategy in certain areas of France. He focuses on the case of Saint-Nazaire where, despite a large industrial population tied to dockyard labour, working-class Socialism remained the dominant force until well into the Fourth Republic. Communists remained a marginal group, unable to challenge Socialist dominance of local municipal politics. In such circumstances the key site of struggle between Communists and Socialists in Saint-Nazaire became the workplace. Previously sidelined, CGTU militants readily adapted the new line to their struggles with the CGT for influence among workers. The new line made sense to militants who were able to forge a distinctive political identity and voice, allowing them to position themselves firmly as

²³ Bernard Pudal, *Prendre parti*, pp.155--167.

²⁴ Bernard Pudal, *Prendre parti*, p.157; Bertrand Badie, *Stratégie de grève*.

²⁵ Matthew Worley, ‘Courting Disaster?’, p.3. Dick Geary, *European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression* (Basingstoke, 1991), p.69.

²⁶ 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).

²⁷ Tim Rees, ‘The Good Bolsheviks’, p.183; Matthew Worley, ‘Courting Disaster?’, p.3.

a counterweight to the established CGT. Such a move vastly improved the local Communist position.²⁸

On the railways the 'united front' line had long made little sense in circumstances which saw FNCU membership throughout the period either larger or analogous in size to its CGT rival. Jacquet, in his history of cheminot trade unionism, has emphasized the continued tendency towards de facto unity which existed among rank-and-file railway workers in the years following the schism.²⁹ However, the feeling among the FNCU leadership was firmly in favour of the maintenance and advancement of the independent Communist-led organization. The FNCC was similarly opposed to consolidation with the Communists which would weaken the CGT's position among the cheminots.

Making Sense of Participation: The *Conseil Supérieur* within Communist Practice

The French government certainly conceptualized the development in Communist tactics in terms of wider developments in the international Communist sphere, as we have seen. On the railways such moves were, as ever, comprehended through the prism of the potential implications for national security with the opportunities for espionage being made very clear. The railway *Conseil Supérieur*, noted a report, was closely involved in examining technical questions relating to the organization of transport in France 'and notably the dispositions envisaged for national defence. The CGTU is thus in a position to gather precious documentation to which the International attaches great importance.'³⁰ Nevertheless, the authorities recognized a marked transformation in the FNCU position. A *Sûreté* report announced that at the 1927 Bordeaux conference the CGTU 'had demonstrated that, while guarding their revolutionary phraseology, the *unitaires* seem to mean to change their methods and utilize certain tactics up to now employed by the reformists.'³¹

²⁸ Julian Mischi, *Servir la Classe Ouvrière*, p.149.

²⁹ Joseph Jacquet emphasizes the unity current in *Les cheminots dans l'histoire sociale de la France*, p.104, pp.109--111.

³⁰ AN: F/7/13671, rapport 19/2/1931, p.2. 'et notamment des dispositions envisagées pour la défense nationale du pays. La CGTU est ainsi en mesure de recueillir une documentation précieuse à laquelle l'internationale attache une très grosse importance.'

³¹ AN: F/7/13584, Dossier CGTU 1928, signale 3/1/1928. 'a montré que tout en gardant leur phraséologie révolutionnaire, les unitaires semblaient vouloir changer leurs méthodes et utiliser certaines employées déjà par les réformistes.'

In an election pamphlet of 1928, the leadership of the FNCU presented its own reasoning to the cheminot workforce for their change of heart over the issue of participation in the *Conseil Supérieur*. The document argued that the increasingly combative attitude of the government towards the union had necessitated the change in tactics. The FNCU argued that they were faced with a situation in which ‘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 *unitaire* organizations.’ Highlighting aggravated working conditions and increasing employer combativeness, the FNCU argued that it was necessary for them to take their place on the *Conseil Supérieur* to combat 'pied à pied' company policies of rationalization and to defend cheminot interests.³²

In November 1927 the FNCU announced to their members that, in the *Conseil Supérieur*, ‘in which the most qualified representatives of industrial and commercial capitalism sit, the *unitaire* delegates will know how to speak in the name of despoiled cheminots. They will make their demands heard.’³³ In June of 1928, following the election success of January, Raymond Tournemaine wrote in *La Tribune des Cheminots* regarding the nature of the FNCU's tactics on the *Conseil*. It was, he underlined, a body on which ‘one can observe at ease [...] the base calculations of a capitalism which seeks to earn money, nothing more’ noting that the delegates would ‘uncover the true motives which guide the bourgeoisie.’ The role of the *unitaire* delegates would be to act as a voice for cheminot interest on the Council, ensuring that the demands of railway workers and the 'working class' were heard.³⁴

The PCF were well informed regarding developments within the FNCU. In February 1928 the PCF's *Commission Syndicale* issued a report to party militants which outlined the potential problems facing Communist action among a workforce which still harboured ‘many parliamentary illusions.’³⁵ There was, it asserted, a great risk that

³²AN: F/7/13670, Syndicat des Cheminots 1928, FNCU Election Pamphlet, 1928. ‘les compagnies et le gouvernement veulent éliminer le syndicalisme de lutte de classe, supprimer toute opposition à leurs visées d'esclavage et rompre avec les organisations unitaires.’

³³ AN: F/7/13674, Commissaire spécial de Briey à M le contrôleur des services de police administrative, 23/11/1927, p.2. ‘dans cette assemblée où siège les représentatives les plus qualifiés du grand capitalisme industriel et commercial, les délégués unitaires sauront parler au nom des cheminots spoliés. Ils feront entendre leurs desiderata’.

³⁴ *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 15/6/1928. ‘nous pouvons observer à l'aise tous les bas calculs d'un capitalisme qui veut gagner de l'argent sans plus; ‘dégager les véritables motives qui guide la bourgeoisie.’

³⁵ADSSD: PCF 3 MI 6/43, séquence 294, Conseil Syndical 1928, Aux Secrétaires de secteurs, Membres du Parti 28/02/1928, p.1. ‘beaucoup d’illusions parlementaires.’

Federation delegates would be tempted into compromises with management that would weaken revolutionary action. At the same time, the PCF acknowledged that absolute intransigence risked alienating the Communists from their supporters. Communists were cautioned to take care that they did not fall victim to the impression that, through co-operation with the *Conseil Supérieur*, the position of the cheminots could be transformed in any fundamental way.³⁶

First and foremost, by taking up their seats on the *Conseil Supérieur*, Communist delegates triggered unprecedented argument over the alleged threat to the independence of worker delegates in the lion's den of railway capitalism. In fact, the leadership of the FNCU were under no illusions as to their position on the *Conseil*. It was very much conceived as enemy territory in which the *unitaire* delegates were heavily outnumbered by hostile voices. The Communists saw their role in puritanical, even moralistic terms as being to unmask the perfidious machinations of bourgeois and collaborationist trade unions thereby revealing that actions supposedly taken in the 'general interest', in fact, served the interest of capital. A report of August 1933 summed up the FNCU position in regard to participation in such committees:

[They] permit us to pose general questions on the whole situation of the cheminots, permitting [us] to have responses from the management of the networks which are often evasive, but which provide certain information which serves us in our propaganda and agitation. Moreover, it is through these delegations that we unmask the manoeuvres of the reformist leaders and their intimate liaison with the network directors.³⁷

For all their ostensible ideological purity, the FNCU leadership were nonetheless concerned by the threat which participation in elections and sitting on these various delegations posed to their identities as revolutionary, worker activists. One leading figure in the FNCU, Raymond Tournemaine, remarking of personnel delegates in 1931, ruefully noted that 'it is a sphere of corruption, yet we must be involved in the

³⁶ ADSSD: PCF, 3 MI 6/43, séquence 294, Conseil Syndical 1928, Aux Secrétaires de secteurs, Membres du Parti, 28/02/1928, p.2.

³⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, FD 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, Rapport 11/8/33 p.5. 'nous permet de poser des questions générales sur toute la situation des cheminots permettant d'avoir des réponses des directions des réseaux qui sont souvent évasives, mais qui apportent certaines renseignements dont nous servons dans notre propagande et notre agitation. De plus, c'est au travers de cette délégation que nous démasquons les manoeuvres de chefs réformistes et leur liaison intime avec les directeurs des réseaux.'

delegations as the cheminots have great confidence in it.’³⁸ Involvement in these committees necessarily required close interaction with bourgeois and collaborative forces, which, it was feared, could lead FNCU delegates astray. Yet it was equally an environment which had to be entered into. As Tournemaine makes clear, it was seen by the cheminots as a vital decision-making arena, one which, consequently, the *unitaires* felt they could not afford to neglect.

Concerns over the possibilities of delegates being tempted into following a reformist path go a long way to explaining the recurrent emphasis placed on the importance of discipline in communications to, and about, personnel delegates. The same meeting of the FNCU Executive Committee at which Tournemaine voiced his analysis also passed a resolution in favour of continuing participation in the councils. The meeting recorded how 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.’³⁹ It was vital that *unitaire* delegates should not be left to act individually in this ‘milieu de corruption.’ Clear guidance should always be provided. One member of the FNCU leadership noting that, ‘it is necessary to give them directives and not let them act alone.’⁴⁰ The delegates themselves were regularly reminded of their role. The FNCU report of 1933 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.’⁴¹ This was clearly the ideal as far as the FNCU was concerned, delegates would as far as possible be guided by the *unitaire* leadership. Discipline was emphasized, for instance in a report on the planned security delegates circulated to personnel delegates in 1931, the FNCU underlined that ‘delegates are reminded that they have been elected as representatives of the *unitaire* trade union

³⁸CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT/CGTU 1922-1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. de séance de Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 27/11/31, p.2. ‘il s’agit d’un milieu de corruption, mais il faut aller à la Délégation car les cheminots y ont encore une grande confiance.’

³⁹CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT/CGTU 1922-1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 27/11/31, p.2. il sera nécessaire de fixer le rôle et la caractère du travail des délégations et mandate le bureau fédéral pour établir la plateforme sur laquelle devront travailler les délégués.’

⁴⁰CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT/CGTU 1922-1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 20/5/32, p.4. ‘il faudra...leur donner des directives et ne pas les laisser agir seul’.

⁴¹CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport 11/8/33, Rapport destiné à faciliter la discussion au cours du Conseil Fédéral, 29-30/8/1933, p.5. ‘cette délégation est sous le contrôle des sections fédérales et du bureau fédéral; l’établissement de l’ordre du jour se fait en commun avec le bureau de la section fédéral, un membre du bureau fédéral et les délégués réunis préalablement.’

organization and understand that they remain *mandataires* of the union before the railway companies.⁴²

Against the corrupting influence of bourgeois dominated committees and reformist collaboration, the *unitaires* juxtaposed the moral purity of the worker from which the delegates drew their legitimacy. Much effort was expended in ensuring that *unitaire* delegates were fully connected to the ‘masses’. The need to ensure the connection of delegates with the ordinary worker was emphasized by Blanchet, a member of the Executive Committee suspicious of FNCU involvement in committees with management. Delegates, argued Blanchet, should be used principally for propaganda and organizational purposes, to gain members and ‘to engage them in trade union work.’⁴³ Similarly, an instruction to personnel delegates of 14 April 1933 reminded delegates that they were also active trade unionists and must be ‘up to date with the decisions of the organization in order to popularize these among the mass of their constituents; our personnel delegates must lead a great discussion in the workplace, not simply with the cheminots *unitaires*, but also with our comrades in the CGT, CFTC and the unorganized.’⁴⁴

The aim of Communist militants to be seen to be guarding their distance from management representatives was not a phenomenon limited to the cheminots. Herrick Chapman has noted how, following June 1936 as collective bargaining structures and worker councils were instituted across France, trade unionists in the aircraft industry became acutely conscious of the tensions inherent in their necessarily close relationship with management and state. Some aircraft worker delegates, for instance, pointedly refused to travel in cars laid on for them by management.⁴⁵ Vitaly, it was through their early experience of participation on the *Conseil Supérieur* and the practices which were developed in these years which defined an aggressive militant culture which set FNCU

⁴²CGTIHS: RdM, Circulaires, 1929-1935, Délégués à la sécurité, Projet de Délégués à la Sécurité, Déclaration. ‘Les délégués rappellent qu’ils ont été élus en tant que représentant de l’organisation syndicale unitaire et qu’ils entendent en rester les mandataires devant les compagnies de chemins de fer.’

⁴³ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU 1922-1935, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédéral, PV. 20/5/32, p.4. ‘les embrayer un travail syndical’.

⁴⁴CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU 1922-1935, Fédération Unitaire, ‘Aux Camarades Délégués du Personnel’ 14/4/33. ‘mis au courant des décisions de l’organisation pour pouvoir les populariser dans la masse de leurs mandants, nos délégués du personnel...doivent entamer une grande discussion sur le lieu de travail, non seulement avec les cheminots unitaires mais avec les camarades confédérés, professionnels, inorganisés qu’ils ont la possibilité de toucher en raison de mandat électif qu’ils ont reçu.’

⁴⁵Herrick Chapman, ‘The Political Life of the Rank-and-File: French Aircraft Workers During the Popular Front, 1934-1938’, p.27.

delegates apart from management as well as from delegates of other unions on this body.

At the first meeting of the *Conseil Supérieur de chemins de fer* following the elections of 1928, Jacquet, one of the newly elected delegates representing the higher grades of railway workers, laid out the terms of his union's involvement. The *Cadres*, announced Jacquet, would 'collaborate loyally with representatives of the public powers, in the general interests of the nation and of our networks. We affirm in all cases that we shall only be guided by the general interest.' These words were greeted with applause from the assembled delegates.⁴⁶ One of the six representatives of the 'petit personnel', Antoine Rambaud, a railwayman from the *État* network and a leading figure in the FNCU, then read out a prepared statement. Rambaud announced that 'our presence among you must be considered as the affirmation of the vitality of the strength of the organization which has seen us elected.'⁴⁷ He and his fellow FNCU delegates were present in the name of the CGTU and 'it is in the name of the *Fédération Unitaire des Cheminots* that we will speak.'⁴⁸ Rambaud emphasized repeatedly in a long peroration that 'our mandate has been determined by our organization' and that the *unitaires* on the *Conseil Supérieur* were 'mandataires des travailleurs.'⁴⁹ In stark contrast to the collaborative spirit invoked by Jacquet, Rambaud underlined that, as far as the FNCU were concerned, 'all forms of committees created were only a way of making the workers' representatives swallow decisions taken exclusively in the interest 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.'⁵⁰

⁴⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p.4. 'collaborer loyalement avec les représentants des pouvoirs publics, des intérêts généraux de la nation et de nos réseaux. Nous affirmons, en tout cas, que nous ne serons jamais guidés que par l'intérêt général.'

⁴⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p.4. 'Notre présence parmi vous doit être considéré comme l'affirmation de la vitalité de la puissance de l'organisation qui nous a fait élire.'

⁴⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p. 5. 'c'est...au nom de la Fédération unitaire des cheminots que nous discuterons.'

⁴⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p.7. 'notre mandat a été déterminé par notre organisation'.

⁵⁰ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p.7. 'toutes les formes de comités ou de conseils créés, ne sont qu'une manière de faire avaliser par les représentants ouvriers des décisions pris dans l'intérêt exclusif du capital...Mandataires des travailleurs dont les intérêts sont opposés à ceux des détenteurs des moyens de production et d'échange, nous défendront les premiers, nous demanderons des comptes aux seconds.'

From the earliest extant minutes of *Conseil Supérieur* meetings in the CGT's *Institut d'Histoire Social*, Cheminot archive, FNCU delegates Antoine Rambaud and Raymond Tournemaine announced that they would not be participating in *Conseil* discussions or votes as they had not received the relevant documentation in time for themselves or the union to make a sufficiently detailed study of them. The point was made that Tournemaine in particular 'having received the reports on Friday and working in the workshops had hardly the time to study reports during the night.' (*Conseil* meetings taking place on Saturday mornings).⁵¹ The next month's meeting was similarly marked by *unitaire* refusal to participate in discussions as once more insufficient time had been permitted to 'enter into long and arduous technical studies.'⁵² This highlights several important features of *unitaire* involvement on this council. Firstly, the lack of time to study the documentation underscores the concern of the FNCU that even their most senior members had to be given clear direction in this environment. It should be noted that Rambaud's long speech quoted at the beginning of this piece was read out from a prepared statement, most likely written in collaboration with the union. The emphasis upon the need to enter into long and arduous technical examination of council business points to the mistrust of bourgeois intentions and the potential, indeed the expectation, for documentation emanating from these sources to be evasive and masked in its actual meaning. However, it also demonstrates the concern to highlight the difference between Communist cheminot delegates and the other representatives upon the committee. The Communists wished to emphasize that they were, first and foremost, workers who had to earn a living. The type of work being undertaken is also juxtaposed to white collar employment of railway capitalists, the hard labour and toil of the cheminot was implicitly contrasted with the administrative duties of managers and directors, whose 'work' allowed plenty of opportunity to read through extensive documentation at short notice.

The lack of time to study the relevant documentation served as a basis for the Communist delegates to refuse to participate in the first meetings of the *Conseil Supérieur* following the elections of 1928. It would be incorrect, however, to read into this action a generalized rejection of participation in the affairs of the *Conseil*. Once elected, *unitaire* delegates did engage with the issues raised by the other members of the

⁵¹CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 30/5/28, p.8. 'ayant reçu les rapports le vendredi et travaillant aux ateliers n'a guère le temps d'étudier les rapports la nuit.'

⁵² CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 13/6/28, p.3. 'entre dans des études techniques longues et ardues.'

body, largely related to technical discussions of tariff levels charged for the transportation of various goods. *Unitaire* involvement in these discussions and votes occurred particularly when the issue could be related to working-class concerns. For instance, at the meeting of 1 August 1928, the *unitaire* representative Marc Dupuy announced that the Communist delegates would support management plans to reduce transport tariff P.V. 2/102: Tarification particulière consentie aux farines et blés de la Beauce. Dupuy argued that ‘Flour, being a consumer good of the highest necessity, any reduction in the price of resale of this merchandise must be looked for. We will vote in favour of a reduction in the transport tariff of wheat and flour.’⁵³ The tariff alteration was unanimously supported by the Council. Thus, involvement in what could be construed as reformist politics, aiding in the better management and operation of capitalism, could be justified if, as in the case of the grain tariff, it could be linked to a wider working-class issue, in this case the traditional French revolutionary concern with bread prices.⁵⁴ In late 1928, well into the politics of the ‘class against class’ line, the Communist rhetoric on the *Conseil Supérieur* had become, if anything, more nuanced regarding participation in Council debates. December 1928, for instance, saw Marc Dupuy intervening on a debate over gherkin tariffs.⁵⁵ Later during the same meeting, Dupuy attacked the *Conseil Supérieur* members for their failure to provide sufficient oversight regarding the operation of tariffs once these had been voted. The *Conseil*, argued Dupuy, was effectively delegating its responsibilities regarding tariffs once they had been assented to, not revisiting their operation until the next year.⁵⁶ In the course of this December meeting, Raymond Tournemaine intervened regarding a report on foreign émigrés using the French railway network. Tournemaine objected strongly to the terms employed by the author of the report to describe such people. In particular he objected to the use of the words ‘sordid’ and ‘nomads’ to describe these individuals. The chairman of the session underlined that the reporter had merely been trying to capture the poverty which such individuals were suffering, but suggested that the description be altered to ‘the unfortunates who are forced to emigrate’. This being done, no further objection was raised to the tariff change under question.⁵⁷ The Communists,

⁵³ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 1/8/28, p.8. ‘La farine étant une denrée de première nécessité, toute diminution dans le prix de revient de cette marchandise doit être recherchée. Nous voterons en faveur d’une diminution de tarifs de transport de blé et de farines.’

⁵⁴ On bread prices and revolutionary sentiment see Tyler Stovall, ‘The Consumer’s War: Paris, 1914-1918’, *French Historical Studies*, 31, 2, (Spring, 2008), 293--325, (304), (318).

⁵⁵ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 19/12/1928, pp.9--10.

⁵⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV 19/12/1928, pp.30--31.

⁵⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 2, PV. 19/12/1928, pp.22--23.

however, continued to be highly sensitive regarding their role on the *Conseil Supérieur*. The delegates were strongly alive to the manner in which their words were recorded and how these might be represented to the wider cheminot population. In November 1928, for instance, Raymond Tournemaine asked that a statement he had made at the previous month's meeting be amended. He was recorded as remarking that he 'ne pas vouloir empêcher la commission de travailler.' He asked that the verb 'vouloir' be replaced by 'pouvoir' thus altering the sense of the statement from one of apparent acquiescence in, or even support of, the commission's work and objectives to a reading which was more suggestive of a willingness, albeit frustrated, to obstruct this work. Whether it represented a genuine error in the minutes, or was an attempt to expunge an embarrassing slip into reformist language, the desire to alter a single verb demonstrates the tight line Communists felt themselves to be walking on the *Conseil Supérieur*.⁵⁸

The tightening of the 'class against class' line appears to have opened renewed debate regarding the position of the FNCU on the *Conseil Supérieur*. In March 1930, ten months ahead of the next round of personnel elections, voices were raised which called into question the Federation's participation on the railway High Council. 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.⁵⁹ 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 realize in such an environment.⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil Supérieur des chemins de fer, Carton 1. PV. 14/11/1928, p.4.

⁵⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, 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.

⁶⁰ CGTIHS: RdM, 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. aucun place pour défendre les intérêts des cheminots'

masses regarding the true nature of the *Conseil Supérieur* ahead of any FNCU break with the council.⁶¹

In response to Milu's call for a break with the previous tactic of engagement, Raymond Tournemaine strongly argued 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 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 1930.⁶² 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 emphasized 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 emphasized that 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.⁶³ Yet in 1931, as noted above, Tournemaine made no recourse to such statements of revolutionary intent. Participation was justified as a means of continuing to cement the FNCU's position of influence among cheminots.

In July 1930, following the 'liquidation' of the Barbé-Célor group, Maurice Thorez, newly inaugurated as the leading figure within the PCF, wrote condemning the neglect by many Communist militants of the day to day concerns of workers. 'Examples abound' wrote Thorez, 'where our militants, passably qualified when it is comes to discussing events in China or America, lose their footing when they have to discuss the

⁶¹ CGTIHS: RdM, 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.

⁶² Union Nord Unitaire, Délégations, Carton 5, Position sur l'élection des délégués au Conseil Supérieur, 'Rapport sur le Conseil Supérieur', pp.1--2.

⁶³ 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.

demands of the factory or workforce.⁶⁴ The example of the FNCU and the *Conseil Supérieur*, however, demonstrates the extent to which conceptions of the expectations and corporate interests of the rank-and-file continued to weigh upon a major Communist-led trade union. Even at the height of Communist sectarianism, the FNCU felt the constraining influence of their membership and supporters and adjusted accordingly. The move towards full participation in railway industrial politics from 1928 onward occasioned considerable tensions within the revolutionary identities of cheminot Communists. In response to the necessity of taking their places on the *Conseil Supérieur*, the FNCU developed clear strategies in order to ensure that committees designed by the 1921 railway statute to encourage a collaborative approach to industrial relations could instead be reconceptualized as sites of class conflict. This was not achieved without difficulty on the *Conseil Supérieur* where cheminot representatives were vastly outnumbered by representatives of the French state and representatives of the highest branches of French capitalism. The main business of the *Conseil*, however, with its emphasis upon technical questions of tariff charges ensured that Communist participation, for all its symbolic importance was in reality often marginal to the everyday experience of railway workers. Lower down the railway hierarchy on individual company committees and regional and local commissions, Communist activists were under greater pressure to be seen to be pursuing objectives relevant to the rank-and-file. This can be seen particularly in their approach to the question of rationalization and cheminot working conditions.

Rationalization, Railway Work and Cheminot Trade Unionism.

While membership of the *Conseil Supérieur* carried significant symbolic resonance regarding the FNCU's approach to railway industrial relations, the committees centred upon the individual railway companies, the *Délégations auprès du Directeur* were arguably of greater practical importance for the elaboration of an independent *unitaire* politics on the railways. Practical action on these committees entailed a more complex and nuanced interaction with railway capitalism than that necessitated by *Conseil Supérieur* participation. These committees allowed greater scope for the raising of

⁶⁴ Quoted in Bernard Pudal, *Prendre parti: pour une sociologie historique du PCF*. p.166. 'où nos militants, passablement qualifiés dès qu'il s'agit des choses de Chine ou d'Amérique, perdent pied lorsqu'il faut parler des revendications de l'usine ou de la corporation.'

concerns directly affecting the rank-and-file than did the *Conseil Supérieur* with its emphasis on the ‘high politics’ of the railway industry. Delegates to the Director’s Committees were thus able to develop Communist positions on a wide range of topics particularly regarding the organization of work, rationalization and relations between personnel and management. The archive of the Cheminot Federation at the CGT headquarters in Paris contains extant reports of such meetings held on the *Compagnie du Nord* between 1933 and 1935. Occurring twice annually this committee saw personnel delegates raising the concerns of the rank-and-file with Company director Emile Javary and, from 1934 onwards, the new Director, Robert Le Besnerais. The reports of this committee, produced by the FNCU’s Northern Union to be used to aid discussion in its local branches, are necessarily problematic. However, they provide a privileged insight into the manner in which Communists on the railways conceptualized industrial politics as well as the important issues of rationalization and the organization of work in this period.

In the early 1930s FNCU engagement continued to be expressed in revolutionary rhetoric. The unequal distribution of power within management committees was regularly highlighted in FNCU reports. It was noted in early 1933, for instance, that the Director of the *Compagnie du Nord* had refused to allow twenty out of the forty-three questions the Communist delegates had tabled on the agenda. The leadership of the FNCU’s Northern Region noted that the excluded questions were those it considered to be the most pressing, concerning the defence of cheminot interests. Developing the theme of the inequality of power within the industry, the FNCU’s Northern region argued that ‘the remedy to this situation will not be found through the intervention of talks with the network management; It is necessary to increase the combativeness of the cheminot masses.’ Yet the logic of this argument did not, for the union, necessitate a rejection of participation in personnel committees. Although they argued that ‘only the means of the direct struggle will diminish the arrogance of management’, they equally noted the need to build up their organizational strength and to cement their position among the rank-and-file gaining the ‘confidence of the cheminot masses’.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ CGTIHS: RdM, Union Nord (Unitaire), Activités des Délégués (1/5), Compte rendu de la délégation auprès du Directeur 1933 (1er Semestre), p.1. ‘le remède à cette situation ne sera certes pas trouvé par le truchement de pourparlers avec les directions des réseaux; il faut augmenter la combativité de la masse des cheminots.’; ‘seuls les moyens de la lutte directe feront baisser l’arrogance des directions de réseaux’.

A theme to which FNCU delegates regularly returned were company policies regarding rationalization and the organization of work. Historians of the labour movement in France have emphasized the means by which rationalization techniques sharpened political tensions in the workplace as the resulting alienation of workers from control over the productive process led to an increase in political consciousness, or in the work of Michael Seidman, to a broad rejection of work.⁶⁶ Yet the position developed by Communist delegates on the *Nord*'s director's committee suggests a different reading of worker reactions to the introduction of rationalization techniques. In their response to company policies regarding the organization of railway work, the FNCU based their position on the question of job security and the reduction of the arbitrary power of railway management, through the augmenting of cheminot participation in decisions affecting the workforce. In this the cheminot experience closely approximates that identified by Herrick Chapman among aircraft workers at this time.⁶⁷

The response of the FNCU's Northern Region to the company's employment of psychotechnics provides an illustrative study of the *unitaire* approach on the railways. From its initial application the use of psychotechnics by the railway networks was viewed with suspicion by the *unitaires*. In 1933, union delegates before Emile Javary argued that, as nothing in the company regulations or the railway statute either authorized psychotechnic testing or demanded that cheminots attend such sessions, FNCU delegates would boycott the tests. Moreover, any demotions resulting from a psychotechnic test, argued the delegates, would be met with legal action. Following the discussion, the Communist produced *compte rendu* of the meeting noted that the Director promised the delegates that no cheminot would be downgraded as a result of a psychotechnic test, but that it was possible that they might be moved to a more suitable task. The FNCU delegates insisted that these words be recorded in the minutes of the meeting.⁶⁸ This critique of psychotechnics can be read as a straightforward rejection of capitalist rationalization procedures, particularly the threatened boycott of tests by union delegates. Yet such an interpretation does not capture the full complexity of the Communist position. A major aim was to ensure job security for cheminots, it should be noted that the declaration made by the Director of the *Compagnie du Nord* that cheminots would not be demoted from their rank within the company hierarchy was

⁶⁶ Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity*; Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work*.

⁶⁷ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism*.

⁶⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, Union Nord (Unitaire), *Activités des Délégués* (1/5), *Compte rendu de la délégation auprès du Directeur 1933* (1er Semestre), pp.5--6.

considered a major coup by the delegates, hence their desire to ensure a written record of this promise. The reference to workers being moved from one form of railway employment to another as a result of test results, it should be noted, did not occasion any recorded comment in the Communist's report of the meeting, although the lack of job security occasioned by changes in job task and occasionally the displacement to another area of the network were an important part of FNCU critiques.⁶⁹ It is important to note that such critiques of arbitrary company power were, however, a long established element in cheminot industrial politics. In his 1917 work, *Contre les compagnies, pour la nation*, Marcel Bidegaray had emphasized the same concerns regarding arbitrary authority, though not specifically concerning psychotechnics, in his condemnation of private railway company policies towards their employees.⁷⁰

The FNCU proved adept at highlighting occasions where company regulations were, in fact, hindering the cheminots in their work. In June 1934 delegates protested on behalf of locomotive footplate men that the introduction of regulations limiting the time available to prepare the engines prior to their use was having a detrimental effect upon the abilities of staff to adequately perform their tasks. They further requested alterations to the design of the Mikado locomotive to render the work of the fireman more effective, as well as safer.⁷¹

A concern with the defence of cheminot working conditions in the face of company offensives was not limited to the Communist-led union. By April 1932 the catholic *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétien* (CFTC) judged the situation to be of such severity that the congress of its Cheminot Federation voted unanimously to approach the FNCU with a proposition to participate in a *Comité d'Entente Nationale* composed of representatives of all cheminot unions with the aim to elaborate a unified response to industry attempts to restructure working conditions. The hour was grave, wrote the Vice-President of the Cheminot CFTC, 'you know the projects of the major networks concerning our salaries, our pensions, the eight-hour legislation, job losses [...] Before these dangers, all the cheminot unions must form a bloc for the defence of

⁶⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, Projet de résolution pour le conseil fédéral des 29-30/8/1933. Pp.1--3, (1).

⁷⁰ AN: F/7/13666, œuvres sociales des cheminots, 1883-1923, Marcel Bidegaray, *Contre les compagnies, pour la nation* (Paris, 1917), pp.16--19.

⁷¹ CGTIHS: RdM, Union Nord (Unitaire), Activités des Délégués (1/5), Compte rendu de la délégation auprès du Directeur (2e semestre 1934), pp.3--5.

our established rights.⁷² Such an attempt at a 'main tendue' in reverse from Catholic to Communist trade union may appear surprising, yet placed in a wider context it becomes less so. 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 generalization of family allowances, the struggle against rationalization and the reduction in the length of the working day due to the eight-hour day.'⁷³ In addition, as Julian Mischi has argued, local circumstances could be crucial in 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.⁷⁴

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.'⁷⁵ Nor were they prepared to abandon what they viewed as the essential elements of their conception of railway trade unionism, ending their call for the establishment of a joint committee with an affirmation of their attachment,

to the principles of justice, of collaboration, of independence, which are the base of the *Fédération des Cheminots de France* and invite its militants to intensify their propaganda and to rally to our movement the numerous cheminots who accept without constraint or any sort of pressure our social doctrine and the whole of our professional programme.⁷⁶

⁷² CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale 14/4/1932, p.1. 'vous connaissez les projets des grands réseaux sur nos salaires, nos retraites, les huit heures, les compressions de personnel [...] Devant ces dangers, toutes les organisations syndicales doivent faire bloc pour la défense de nos droits acquis.'

⁷³ Bruno Béthouart, 'La Naissance du Syndicalisme dans le Pas – de – Calais, 1919 – 1939', *Mouvement Social*, 174, (Jan. – Mar. 1996), 75--95 (84). 'fidèles à la collaboration des classes prônée par les Encyclides et la doctrine sociale de l'Église'; 'axé sur la généralisation des allocations familiales, la lutte contre la rationalisation du travail, la réduction de la durée du travail grâce à la journée de huit heures.' on the CFTC more broadly see Michel Launay, *La CFTC origines et développement, 1919 – 1940* (Paris, 1986).

⁷⁴ Julian Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière*, p.149.

⁷⁵ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 14/4/1932, p.1. 'trop de chose nous divisent encore.'

⁷⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, Documentation aux Membres de la Commission Exécutive Fédérale, 14/4/1932, CFTC Motion sur l'unité syndicale, p.2. 'aux principes de justice, de collaboration, d'indépendance, qui sont à la base de l'action de la Fédération des cheminots de France et invite ses militants à intensifier leur propagande et à rallier à notre mouvement les nombreux cheminots qui acceptent sans contrainte ni pression d'aucune sorte, notre doctrine sociale et tout notre programme professionnel.'

Despite these words, clearly aimed to underline their distance from the FNCU's conception of trade union activity, the CFTC believed common action to be both possible and necessary.

The CFTC congress had taken place between 8-10 April 1932. By 14 April the FNCU had prepared its response, a complete rejection of the Catholic union's proposals. 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.'⁷⁷ 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*.⁷⁸

The CFTC offer to the FNCU of joint action between the two unions, presumably made also to the FNCC, is suggestive of just how strongly all unions felt regarding the railway companies' response to the onset of economic depression. It makes clear the fact that the concern with rationalization and the pressure being placed upon cheminot working conditions by rail companies attempting to respond to the grave financial crisis they faced, was no mere invention of Communist propaganda. It had an important basis in the actual workplace experience of the workforce to which all cheminot unions responded.

In addition, the response of the FNCU to the CFTC is indicative of the state of inter-union relations in the early 1930s and the position of the Communists within railway industrial relations. Thus far in this section, the *unitaire* response has been analysed in terms of its liaison with wider Communist discourse of the sectarian 'class against class' period, centring as it does upon class conflict, a rejection of class collaboration, and the importance of the 'united front from below'. However, a second reading of the FNCU's response is equally plausible, namely that the response of the Communist-led union speaks to the dominant position of the FNCU within railway trade unionism and the concomitant confidence of the *unitaire* leadership at this time. Certainly in terms of

⁷⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, 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. 'une duperie à laquelle la Commission Exécutive des Cheminots Unitaires ne peut souscrire.'

⁷⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, 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.

membership, by the early 1930s the FNCU was considerably weaker than had it had been in the late 1920s. However, as we have seen, the union was still competing strongly with the CGT Federation for the dominant position in regard of membership strength. The CFTC meanwhile came nowhere close to matching CGT or CGTU membership on the railways. Yet membership does not tell the whole story, the question of influence is of much greater relevance and here the FNCU were by 1932 clearly in a very strong position. Elections of 1928 and 1931 had confirmed the Communist-led union's prominence among cheminots. The aggressive participation tactics of the CGTU Federation had been met with considerable success and, as France moved deeper into depression, looked likely to become ever more suited to 'objective' conditions. In short, the FNCU saw little to gain from co-operation with a relative minnow like the CFTC.

February 1934 was to prove to be the last *Conseil Supérieur* personnel elections prior to the creation of the SNCF in 1937. All cheminot unions put forward candidates, the manifestos of the three major unions, the CGTU, CGT and CFTC are extant within the IHS archives. All three place critiques of company rationalization programmes and the attacks upon cheminot working conditions at the heart of their campaigns. The CFTC noting that, 'everything is threatened. The Networks are abolishing posts, transferring agents into jobs which are inferior to their grade or discharging them.' In addition, the Catholic union argued that 'rationalization and mechanization are spreading to the detriment of safety.'⁷⁹ The FNCC were equally vocal on the question of rationalization, addressing themselves particularly to workshop employees, the CGT Federation noted how such cheminots were 'victims of the new production methods which have no other aim than to place at the disposition of the companies the means to constrain the personnel.'⁸⁰

At the 1934 elections the gap between CGTU and CGT Federations on the railways in terms of votes continued to hold roughly level. While both Federations lost votes compared to their 1931 positions, the greater drop in the CGT vote from 112,296 to

⁷⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, Commission Supérieur de chemins de fer, Box 1, Elections, Résolution CFTC, s.d. (1934) p.1. 'tout...est menace. Les réseaux suppriment des postes, déplacent des agents, leur font tenir un emploi inférieur à leur grade, ou bien les mettent à la réforme.'; 'la rationalisation et le machinisme s'étendent au détriment de la sécurité.'

⁸⁰CGTIHS: RdM, Commission Supérieur de chemins de fer, Box 1, Elections, FNCC, s.d. (1934) p.2. 'victimes des nouvelles méthodes de production qui n'ont pour autre but que apporter des avantages nouveaux aux compagnies et de mettre à leur disposition d'autres moyens de contrainte à l'égard du personnel.'

109,939, compared with an FNCU vote decline by just over a thousand to 111,563, allowed the *unitaires* to claim the results as an important victory. The overall figures however hid a great deal of regional variation. The CGTU were in effect only ahead of the CGT on three out of seven networks, the PLM, Alsace-Lorraine and the *Nord*. A large part of the FNCU's strength continued to be focussed upon the PLM network where the *unitaires* had beaten the FNCC by 35,595 votes to 16,251. The victory on the *Nord* was a good deal narrower, the Communist-led union surpassing the *confédérés* by less than a thousand votes. On the *État* network, where Rambaud continued to have significant influence, the CGT were now firmly in the ascendancy, leading the FNCU by 31,190 votes to 19,212.⁸¹ This, however, was the only network which had seen the CGT advance on their 1931 vote. The FNCU Federal Bureau meeting of March 1934 underlined that, the *État* network aside, FNCU influence was on the increase, though they lamented its concentration in the Paris region.⁸² Unfortunately a national appreciation of the relative position in terms of delegates gained at these elections is not possible from the available documents, however, the narrow FNCU victory on the *Nord* translated into the *unitaires* gaining 16 delegates to the FNCC's 12.⁸³

The continued success of the FNCU tactic of engagement throughout the period speaks to their firm integration within railway politics and among a significant section among the cheminot rank-and-file. Through their approach the *unitaires* developed their position as the militant voice within cheminot trade unionism, even as the effects of their engagement were often focussed upon achieving practical and limited improvements to cheminots' working lives. Such tactics often seemed to differ little from the FNCC approach except in the rhetorical clothing in which the actions were dressed and raised considerable ideological difficulties for the FNCU who never ceased to think of themselves as committed Communists and revolutionaries. The difficulties which railway trade unionism posed to the Communist leadership of the FNCU is further underlined by an examination of the role which political strikes and demonstrations came to play in their political practice.

⁸¹ *L'Humanité* 9/3/1934.

⁸² *L'Humanité* 2/3/34.

⁸³ CGTIHS : RdM, Union Nord (Unitaire), Election des Délégués (4/5), Résultats 1934.

Strikes, Demonstrations and Railway Communism

Upon the arrival, in January 1930, of efficiency experts acting on behalf of the *État* network, workers at the repair shop at La Garenne downed tools and called a strike. The strike was soon supported by cheminots in various locations on the state-run network. The action quickly fizzled out as Dautry arrived on the scene, meeting with workers' delegates and agreeing that no sanctions would be taken against the strikers. In addition, Dautry initiated a joint commission for elected members of the workforce to discuss working practices with engineers.⁸⁴ In his study of Dautry's efforts on the state railway, the historian John Sherwood notes that these proposals 'startled the working class'.⁸⁵ Certainly Dautry's offer occasioned much debate within CGT and CGTU organizations as Sherwood makes clear, but it is equally the case that both unions were by this date fully participating in elections to the *Conseil Supérieur* and holding regular meetings with management and state officials. In the event, both CGT and CGTU officials on the ground acted entirely within the established paradigm and participated in Dautry's commissions.⁸⁶ Yet local action pursued in part by FNCU rank-and-file was strongly condemned at the national level. It was the subject of a lengthy analysis by the FNCU Executive Commission in a report issued in March 1930. This analysis contained an extended organizational self-criticism on the part played by Communists during the strike action, an indication of the importance of strikes in wider Communist thought. Despite their criticisms and analyses of the economic situation, the FNCU admitted themselves 'surprised' by the suddenness of the workers' reaction at La Garenne, an error compounded by the subsequent 'underestimation' of the demonstrations.⁸⁷

The failure of Communist leadership, particularly the lack of direction from the central Parisian leadership, argued the FNCU, had left the local militants at the hands of reformist and opportunist elements which, despite the *valeur combative* of the workers, led to a failure to enlarge the strike movement or give it a definitive revolutionary direction.⁸⁸ In particular the actions of Antoine Rambaud were criticized as the local union leader had agreed to participation in the Dautry committees, however, contrary to

⁸⁴ J. M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France', p.455.

⁸⁵ J. M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France', p.455.

⁸⁶ J. M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France', pp.455--458.

⁸⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport 21/21 mars 1930, p.4.

⁸⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport 21/21 mars 1930, pp.4--5.

Sherwood's claims, in this instance at least, the majority of FNCU vitriol was directed against the local CGT militant Henri Sirolle.⁸⁹

The La Garenne episode demonstrates the tensions within Communist railway trade union theory when it came to the question of strikes. Strike action was a central tenet of wider Communist thought, and certainly played an important role in the discourse of the FNCU. Yet at the same time, FNCU leaders had fully absorbed a reading of cheminot militancy which downplayed the importance of strike action. As such, when actions such as that of La Garenne occurred, the FNCU leadership found itself ill-prepared to respond. Nevertheless, for all that, the La Garenne strike was an isolated incident of cheminot strike action undertaken during the interwar period. Railway work, however, offered opportunities for more subtle means to subvert company power short of full blown industrial action, approaches which cheminot trade unionists did embrace in their rhetoric. 'Working to rule', that is ensuring that all company regulations were enforced to the letter despite their often convoluted and contradictory nature, was an important tool recognized by the Communist leadership from early in the CGTU's existence. It was also a favoured weapon of the wider cheminot community as it was considered as being less dangerous and more effective than strike action. As early as 1922, Pierre Sémard was urging 'working to rule' as an appropriate course for cheminots to take, noting that certain regulations, regularly ignored but still in effect, were at least 60 years old; their full implementation would cause considerable disruption to services.⁹⁰

Focussing upon the educational values of the political strike, Communist thought emphasized that such actions should be widely used as an important means to demonstrate how workers could contest employer power in the workplace. Engaging in strikes, even unsuccessful ones, was felt by Communist theoreticians to be a necessary means of building a revolutionary, class consciousness among workers. May Day and other days of action, as elsewhere in French Communism in the period, provided important elements in FNCU thought. The political mass strike, particularly associated with May Day, was encoded in ideological terms, a demonstration that the cheminots were 'completely resolved to defend the USSR, to fight against war and to struggle for the workers' demands, aiming at the overturning of the bourgeoisie and the installing of

⁸⁹ CGTIHS, RdM, FD CGT/CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport 21/21 mars 1930, pp.4--5; J. M. Sherwood, 'Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France', pp.457--458.

⁹⁰ AN: F/7/16005/2, Fonds Panthéon Sémard, Rapport de séance, Paris-Est, 12/10/1922.

a government of workers and peasants.⁹¹ May Day demonstrations were an opportunity for cheminots to affirm their solidarity with workers who were victims of repression, to overcome the sources of such repression and to demonstrate their solidarity with the defence of the Soviet Union.⁹²

However, leadership enthusiasm for strike action and demonstrations of worker solidarity was strongly tempered by the perceived lack of enthusiasm for such actions among the wider cheminot workforce. Indeed, the widespread opposition to stoppages for May Day 1930 forced the leadership to considerably alter their approach. A police report of April 1930 noted that FNCU plans for a major May Day demonstration 'have run up against the indifference, and often the hostility, of railway personnel.'⁹³ In Perpignan, forty-six out of forty-eight delegates had voted against strike action, in Saint-Etienne, delegates had refused to follow the leadership line, as had those of Nevers who voted thirty-eight against three in opposition to a strike. All over France, noted the report, FNCU members demonstrated their 'very clearly marked reluctance [...] to throw themselves into a new adventure with no notion of how it will end.'⁹⁴ The report details the discussions of the FNCU Executive on the subject. It underlines the hostility to strike action of the rank-and-file, noting that of all the local unions within the Communist-led Federation, only those of Lyon (six votes against two) voted in favour of a full day's strike.⁹⁵

The minutes of the meeting at which the 1930 May Day strike was discussed are extant in the CGT archive. They reveal the extent of the disagreement within the union hierarchy on this subject, but also the flexibility which existed within the union structure as members debated the means by which the FNCU could best mark May Day in a manner which married Communist expectations with those of the cheminots. There were no illusions as to the levels of cheminot enthusiasm. One delegate recalled how on a recent tour of the PLM sector, out of a total of 8000 members he had spoken to a grand total of only 150 at meetings. Tournemaine, leader of the Northern union, while

⁹¹ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport, 21/22 mars 1930, p.8. 'décidés à tout pour la défense de l'URSS pour lutter contre la guerre et qu'en engageant pour les revendications, ils visent le but à atteindre: renversement de la bourgeoisie et instauration d'un gouvernement ouvrier et paysan.'

⁹² CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, Rapport, 27/28 mars 1931, p.5.

⁹³ AN: F/7/13671, Préparation 1er Mai, 26/4/1930, pp.1--2. 'se sont heurtés à l'indifférence du personnel du rail et parfois à son hostilité'

⁹⁴ AN: F/7/13671, Préparation 1er Mai, 26/4/1930, p.2. 'hésitation très nettement marquée des syndiqués à se lancer dans une nouvelle aventure à l'issue incertaine.'

⁹⁵ AN: F/7/13671, Préparation 1er Mai, 26/4/1930, p.2.

less pessimistic was equally unenthusiastic about the chances of a large demonstration noting how, 'if only 25% of comrades march it will be a success.'⁹⁶ The insufficiency of educative work undertaken by Communists among the cheminots was a common theme, one delegate recommending a serious effort of 'éclaircissement' to conquer the reformist spirit, another likening the FNCU to a sick body requiring a purge, though not, he hoped, one carried out with 'German spirits [eau de vie allemande] which could finish off the patient.' Such a comment perhaps representing a condemnation of the sectarian and violent tactics particularly associated with the German KPD, and evidence that such approaches were not supported by Communists on the French railways.⁹⁷ A serious discussion continued as to the exact slogans and directions which were to be transmitted to the rank-and-file. Some called for only the most general of instructions, one member arguing against the imposition of military-style orders to be rigidly adhered to by local sections.⁹⁸ Another member called for some measure of direction, but that the federation should limit itself to realizable aims, 'it would be better to demonstrate for ten minutes at 80% then at 10% for an hour.'⁹⁹ Only one of the Communists present is recorded as arguing for a twenty-four hour stoppage.¹⁰⁰ The record of the meeting terminates abruptly as the secretary records how the 'brouhaha' made it impossible to continue to minute individual interventions.¹⁰¹ The police report discussed above does, however, include a report of the final decision, the Executive had compromised, agreeing to allow 'each section, according to its combativeness and the extent of its organization, all latitude to give to the demonstration the character which is most appropriate.'¹⁰² From police reports it is clear that the PCF were extremely unhappy with the position taken by the FNCU. The Political Bureau had roundly condemned Monmousseau who, while criticizing members of the FNCU who had voted against the May Day strike, had

⁹⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 15/4/1930, p.2. 'si seulement 25% des camarades marchent ce sera un succès.'

⁹⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 15/4/1930, pp.3--4. 'l'eau de vie allemande qui pourrait faire crever le malade',

⁹⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 15/4/1930, p.5. 'ne pas donner des ordres militaires'

⁹⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 15/4/1930, p.6. 'il vaut mieux manifester dix minutes à 80% que 10% pendant une heure.'

¹⁰⁰ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 15/4/1930, p.6.

¹⁰¹ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Commission Exécutive Fédérale, PV. 15/4/1930, p.6.

¹⁰² AN: F/7/13671, Préparation 1er Mai, 26/4/1930, p.2. 'à chaque section, suivant sa combativité et le degré de son organisation, toute latitude pour donner à la manifestation le caractère qui lui convient.'

defended the behaviour of the ordinary cheminots who had refused to take part in the action.¹⁰³

The following year, the FNCU leadership announced its plans of action for the May Day demonstrations stating how 'mieux encore qu'en 1930', 'the railway workers must make of 1 May a day of proletarian action.'¹⁰⁴ On this occasion, no doubt with the previous year's criticisms in mind, the FNCU set out to give a clear lead to the cheminots. Even so, expectations were firmly tailored to the type of work and working conditions which the membership faced. Above all else, FNCU orders were designed to be achievable. For those employed in workshops and depots a one hour stoppage was recommended 'at the most favourable hour of the day.' By contrast, in the stations, 'triaux' and track maintenance the stoppage was much reduced to only a 15 minute cessation of work. For those employed on the rolling stock, including train drivers and train staff, for instance, FNCU 'mots d'ordre' were even more carefully circumscribed. These cheminots would mark the 'journée d'action prolétarienne' by holding their trains at the platform for an extra minute after the signal to depart. This would occur at certain set times: 2am, 10am or 6pm.¹⁰⁵ It should be noted that a one minute delay was in most instances sufficiently small to be made up by the driver en route.

Through the study of the role of strikes and demonstrations in the repertoire of railway Communists the adaptability of leading Communists to the specific circumstances of railway work and its pressures is made clear. Communists on the railways developed their strategy with a particular reading of their constituency firmly in mind. With extremely low, indeed realistic, expectations of the willingness of cheminots to participate in strike actions, the FNCU looked to other means of voicing cheminot militancy. In the specific circumstances of railway industrial relations, with the available channels open for expressing discontent and opposition which the FNCU became adept at exploiting, strike action did not form a significant element within a strategy aimed at extending cheminot power within railway industrial relations through the union organization's engagement with management and state. Though oppositional in rhetoric, such engagement and the bureaucratization of the union organization which accompanied it, witnessed in embryonic terms the development of the broad

¹⁰³ AN: F/7/159851/1, Fonds Panthéon, Gaston Monmousseau, rapport, 10/5/1930.

¹⁰⁴ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, rapport, 27-28/3/1931, p.5. 'les cheminots doivent faire du premier mai une journée d'action prolétarienne.'

¹⁰⁵ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Conseil Fédéral, rapport, 27-28/3/1931. p.5. 'à l'heure la plus favorable de la journée.'

characteristics of the French social model which would be firmly grounded within French society following the experience of the Popular Front. Yet such a social model was founded upon important assumptions about gender, women's work and the role of women in the 'public' as opposed to the 'private' sphere.

Communism and Gender on the Railways

The railways were a strongly male domain. Prior to World War One, as François Caron has written, the employment of women was limited and restricted to certain sectors of the industry. Though in 1912 women made up 15% of the workforce, on the Midi on the Nord this figure was just 7.9%. Overall Caron suggests, women constituted around 10% of the workforce. Female workers were considered suited to certain roles, in particular office and clerical work. They were also employed in ticket offices and as level crossing attendants.¹⁰⁶ As elsewhere this position was modified somewhat by the war years. Mary Louise Roberts notes that the image of the female train conductor wanting her husband to return from the front to care for the children, was one representation in cartoon form of soldier's anxieties over the blurring of gender boundaries.¹⁰⁷ In his study of the *cheminotes* in the Arles workshops during World War One, David Lamoureux has emphasized the strain which this period placed upon the railways. The Arles workshops were among those converted to war production, making shells and munitions for the war effort. Faced with a severe lack of male workers, employers at the PLM turned to women workers to make up the shortfall. By 1918 there were at least 126 female employees at the workshop. Women in the workshop, argues Lamoureux, were largely employed in the manufacture of machine tools, semi-skilled repetitive work which was vividly depicted by Simone Weil in her record of her time employed in the metal working industry in Paris between the two world wars.¹⁰⁸ By the strike wave of February 1920, those employed at Arles had dropped to forty-eight. Following the May general strike all workers in the Arles workshop were fired. Rehiring took place on an individual basis, none of the women workers were rehired, a strategy which Lamoureux considers to have been a deliberate ploy on the part of the PLM to remove

¹⁰⁶ François Caron, *Histoire des chemins de fer en France*, pp.416--417.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilisation Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago, 1994), p.29.

¹⁰⁸ Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière* (Paris, 1951); see the discussion in Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London, 1996), p.103, pp.129--131; On women's employment in the metalworking industry see Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*.

women workers from workshops, along with troublesome workers.¹⁰⁹ Lamoureux emphasizes the role which employment of women played in the mind-set of employers on the PLM. Such employment was seen as a temporary measure in response to the exceptional circumstances of the war years, it was not envisaged that women should continue in employment beyond the exigencies of the war economy. Questions of social peace and workplace order were equally at the forefront of employers' minds. Jean-Louis Robert has drawn attention to the occasionally bitter reaction of male trade unionists to women workers once the war had ended, a moment he sees as a 'rendez-vous manqué' between French trade unionism and female labour.¹¹⁰ Lamoureux notes similar hostility among male cheminot trade unionists who, he writes, 'wanted to protect working women but, on the other hand, perceived them as competitors.'¹¹¹

The post-war era sees women largely absent from historiographical discussions of railway work. François Caron's immense study of the industry makes no mention of female employment after World War One. Christian Chevandier, in his study of cheminots in the Oullins workshops, has found evidence of a small number of female employees working for the PLM in Lyon. The introduction of the eight-hour day legislation had necessitated the hiring of women into the PLM's Oullins workshops, however, as Chevandier notes their employment was confined to areas judged to represent 'feminine' work, particularly in offices, shops, and in carriage repair where women were employed 'at a battery of sewing machines.'¹¹² Chevandier notes how, although women worked at the Oullins *ateliers* through the interwar period, they were 'always in restricted numbers [...] confined through the 1920s to certain tasks judged to be 'feminine''. With their frequent lack of qualifications, the brevity of their terms of employment their lack of statutory rights, 'les cheminotes' judges Chevandier, were 'des cheminots atypiques'.¹¹³

Little documentary evidence had been identified concerning women's work on the railways for the period 1919-1939. In the SNCF archive at Le Mans, however, a handful of documents are extant which give a limited picture of the role played by women in the

¹⁰⁹ 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).

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars*, pp.100--101.

¹¹¹ Davis Lamoureux, 'Des Cheminotes en Usine: des femmes aux ateliers d'Arles (1914-1920)', p.419.

¹¹² Christian Chevandier, *Les Cheminots en Usine*, p.111. 'sur une batterie de machines à coudre.'

¹¹³ Christian Chevandier, *Les Cheminots en Usine*, p.115. 'toujours en nombre restreint...confinées dès les années vingt dans certaines tâches jugées féminines, au dégraissage et au garnissage, aux magasins et à l'infirmerie.'

industry in the wake of World War One. In May 1928 the *chef de l'exploitation* of one of the railway companies, the precise one is not recorded, wrote to his subordinate asking for information on the numbers of women employed during the War and to provide information on those who were still employed and were making pension contributions.¹¹⁴ A list of just thirty names was returned. Almost all had been hired as temporary workers in the second half of the war and had joined the railways as permanent staff in 1919 and 1920. The majority are simply listed as '*employées*'.¹¹⁵ The implication of this limited document is to support Chevandier's findings regarding the marginal status of women within the railway industry.

Prior to the advent of the Popular Front in 1936, Communists developed a gendered political culture centred upon an idealized masculine proletarian identity, what has been referred to as the 'heavy metal' imagery of International Communism. Eric Weitz has argued, in the context of German Communism, that Communists both reproduced and accentuated a tendency already evident within the nineteenth-century labour movement, which defined work as 'primarily a masculine enterprise located at the point of production', thereby elevating the productive sphere to be the bedrock of social organization and the locus of politics. 'In consequence', writes Weitz, 'the trade unions and the Socialist parties articulated an intrinsically gendered self-understanding of the labor movement as an enterprise composed primarily of male workers.'¹¹⁶ In the context of nineteenth-century France, the historian James McMillan has argued that it was not simply the gendered language of workplace organization which alienated women, but also the open hostility of male trade union activists to women in the workplace. McMillan notes how defenders of women's rights in the workplace, such as revolutionary syndicalist Alfred Rosmer, 'were driven almost to despair by the reactionary views of so many male militants in the syndicalist movement with regard to the question of women's work.' McMillan goes on to note that 'in the minds of many male trade unionists, women were dangerous rivals in the labour market and, because of their willingness to accept lower wages than men, a threat to the living standards of the working-class family.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Archives de la Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer, Le Mans (Hereafter SNCF): 0047LM77, Le chef de division du personnel de l'exploitation à M. le sous-chef, 2/5/1928.

¹¹⁵ List enclosed within SNCF: 0047LM77, Chef du Secrétariat de l'Exploitation à M. Febvre, Chef de Division du Personnel de l'Exploitation, 27/4/1932.

¹¹⁶ Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, pp.189--191.

¹¹⁷ James F. McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London, 2000), pp.184--185.

The advent of the Third International initially saw member parties attempt, rather self-consciously, to distance themselves from attitudes which were associated with the ideological positions of what they considered the discredited Second International. In 1920 the ECCI called on member parties to promote the ‘participation of women in all realms of life and to integrate women into all realms of the proletarian class struggle.’¹¹⁸ With its attacks on ‘petit bourgeois’ family values and conventional morality, Weitz argues that, ‘ideologically the Communist movement seemed the legitimate heir of the bourgeois and socialist feminist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.’ Yet, despite this, Communist parties remained overwhelmingly masculine both in membership and in imagery.¹¹⁹

German Communists further developed this masculine reading of labour politics with their emphasis upon conflict, physical prowess and street violence as integral facets of revolutionary ardour. To a degree this merely reflected the particularly violent context in which German Communism developed during the 1920s; political life being marked by the violence of the revolutions of 1918-1920, the Kapp Putsch of 1920 and further confrontations in the early 1920s leading to the October uprising of 1923. In addition, the exclusion of German Communists from the workplace by a combination of employer and state action forced KPD politics onto the streets, reinforcing the emphasis upon violent confrontation and physicality.¹²⁰

Susan Whitney has explored a similarly gendered and masculine reading of worker politics among the youth section of the French Communist Party in the period prior to 1934. In the years leading up to the Barbé-Célor affair of 1931, which saw its wings severely clipped, the Young Communist (*Jeunes Communistes*, JC) movement of the PCF had acted as a form of vanguard within the party, attempting to set the leadership along a more forthrightly revolutionary path. As Whitney notes, the JC’s brand of revolutionary action was deeply gendered, ‘The ideal militant of the 1920s was virile, tough, and unafraid of violence and war. He was quite literally a revolutionary fighter.’¹²¹ The figure of Jacques Doriot stands as an exemplar of this strand in French

¹¹⁸ Eric Weitz, ‘The Heroic Man and the Ever-Changing Woman: Gender and Politics in European Communism, 1917-1950’, in Laura Frader and Sonya Rose (eds), *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY., 1996), 311--352, (311).

¹¹⁹ Eric Weitz, ‘Heroic Man’, p.312.

¹²⁰ Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, pp.191--196; on the adaption of the KPD to the political space of the street see Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, chapter 5; Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929-1933* (Cambridge, 1983).

¹²¹ Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth*, pp.43--44.

Communist culture. His incendiary rhetoric and violent encounters with the French police became legendary within the PCF, but also beyond it. Whitney quotes Pierre Drieu La Rochelle's approving description of Doriot's exploits: 'Those who saw Doriot standing alone, confronting two hundred policemen, charging ahead, swinging a café table above his head, lifting people onto his powerful shoulders, stopping only when completely exhausted, know that there is in France at least one politician who is a man.'¹²²

The street-centred violence of the JC repertoire was alien to the FNCU's workplace-oriented political culture. Despite this, the Communist-led railway union presented a strongly gendered image of the *cheminot*; not once was the feminine '*cheminote*' used in union publicity material. With a strong emphasis upon the workplace and working-class identity, specific appeals to women workers and representations of female workers were notably lacking from FNCU literature. Once again, Susan Whitney is informative, arguing that Communist understanding of the gender question was subsumed within the wider analysis of the class struggle. 'When young women were singled out' writes Whitney, 'it was often to equate their exploitation with that of the young male workers and to urge them to see their real interests in terms of common struggle with young male workers and the "working class" more generally.'¹²³

In subtle contrast to Whitney, who sees Communists side-lining women's political concerns in favour of broader class struggles, Susan Pedersen has argued that throughout the 1920s both Communists and Socialists made real efforts to integrate women, both as workers and housewives. Within a certain strain of Communist thought, she concludes, 'a kind of proletarian and egalitarian feminism flourished.'¹²⁴ This reading is supported by the work of Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert who emphasize the early solidarity evinced by the PCF with the politics of women's liberation, prior to the party 'sacrificing' this cause 'on the altar of the Popular Front.'¹²⁵ Some Communist activists, Pedersen offers the example of Communist teacher Marthe Bigot, argued that equal treatment of women, particularly over wage rates, was a central element in the wider emancipation of women: 'the woman has the right to live by her

¹²² Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth*, p.44.

¹²³ Susan B. Whitney, 'Embracing the Status Quo: French Communists, Young Women and the Popular Front', *Journal of Social History*, 30, 1, (Autumn, 1996), 29—53, (31--32).

¹²⁴ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, p.278.

¹²⁵ Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert, 'The Communist Party and Women, 1920-1939: From Feminism to Familialism', in Helen Gruber and Pamela Graves (eds), *Women and Socialism/Socialism and Women: Europe Between the Two World Wars* (New York, 1998), pp.321--347, (322).

labour,' declared the CGTU in 1925, 'and not be subordinate to anyone, not even a man.'¹²⁶

At a meeting organized by the FNCU in Paris in October 1930, Henriette Chenard summarized her impressions of Soviet society gleaned in the course of her attendance at the fifth congress of the Profintern in Moscow. Chenard had been employed as a cheminote, although *L'Humanité* announced on 28 October 1930 that she had been sacked from the PLM railway company.¹²⁷ The meeting was attended by a large number of cheminots, though two reports in the archive differ on the precise numbers present. One suggests figures of 300 with 30 women in the audience; another indicates 400, although with no mention of the female contingent. The numbers may differ but the sources agree about the details of the meeting.¹²⁸ Chenard began her account by focussing on the general situation of the Russian cheminots, which she expressed in class rather than gender terms. Noting that Russian railway workers enjoyed the benefits of a seven-hour day, Chenard underlined that she had found that 'the Russian proletariat understands that they work for themselves and not for the capitalists.' Following this, Chenard turned her attention to the situation of women employed on the Russian railways. She explained to her audience that women workers were in every respect the equals of Soviet men in terms of both salaries and political rights. The report ends with the observation by the police informer that roughly half the cheminot audience left the meeting during Chenard's speech. The police informer judged that this was because she had failed to address concerns relevant to her cheminot audience.¹²⁹ The informer's interpretation accords with wider official interpretations of the narrow professional concerns of the cheminots. However, it is interesting that this walk-out occurred in one of the few meetings recorded in the archives addressed by a female speaker and with a larger than usual female audience, roughly 10% of the total. This may be indicative of the reality that the discussion of women's specific corporate demands commanded minimal interest among the male workforce, or, it seems, the police informant.

In May 1928 an issue of the FNCU's *La Tribune des Cheminots* carried front-page greetings from Russian railway workers to their comrades in France. Archived by the

¹²⁶ Quoted in Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, p.278.

¹²⁷ Entry for Henriette Chenard by Jean-Luc Pinol in *Cheminots engagés*, CD-ROM.

¹²⁸ Both are to be found in AN: F/7/13671, 8/10/1930, Rapport sur une séance organisée par le syndicat unitaire cheminot région parisienne 7/10/1930'.

¹²⁹ AN: F/7/13671, 8/10/1930, Rapport sur une séance organisée par le syndicat unitaire cheminot région parisienne 7/10/1930. 'le prolétariat russe comprend qu'il travaille pour lui et non pour les capitalistes.'

Sûreté and still extant, this publication provides a lens through which to view the means by which Communists presented the Soviet Union and gender relations to a cheminot audience. Four brief paragraphs, authored, it was claimed, 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 organization? 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.’¹³⁰ 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 narrow gender interests is highlighted in the other three contributions. 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 organization of society and the place of workers within it. They each emphasized 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 used to the hierarchies of the sector would have found familiar. Despite the equality between workforce and the *chefs* under the Soviet regime, he noted how ‘on 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 about 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

¹³⁰ *La Tribune de Cheminots*, 15/5/1928 in AN: F/7/13670. ‘racontez-nous comment vivent les femmes dans votre pays’.

change which we have made.’¹³¹ The imagery in these brief notes focuses upon generalized proletarian themes. It is also important to note the function that such glimpses of life in the Soviet Union played in Communist and FNCU discourse. Insofar as these were interventions in French political debates, it is immaterial whether they were in fact written by Soviet workers or if they are true reflections of life in Russia in the 1920s. They serve as evidence of the political positioning of the FNCU and as such reveal more about France than life in the Soviet Union.

While drawing to an important extent upon Pedersen’s work, Laura Frader demurs from the former’s more positive analysis of women’s involvement in the CGTU. In the early formative years of the French Social Model, argues Frader, trade union interactions with management did much to elaborate its future direction. Noting the weakness of the trade union movement within France, Frader nonetheless argues how, ‘workers’ discussions contributed to the larger climate of ambivalence surrounding women’s economic citizenship that underscored employers’ and policymakers’ vision of society.’¹³² Putting the concerns of women to one side, the trade union movement in effect colluded with management to ensure that the social model, in embryo in the interwar period, would be based upon a strongly gendered reading of labour relations. While the FNCU did advocate an emancipatory narrative of the place of women within the revolutionary future, their relative neglect of women, though within the context of an overwhelmingly masculine workforce, does seem to accord with Frader’s analysis.

Decree Laws and Cheminot Unity, 1934-1936.

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. One week later, on 12 February, a mass counter demonstration was held by CGT and CGTU against the leagues. This response to the riots of the right-wing leagues has been identified as marking the opening steps which would lead the Left in France towards the anti-fascist Popular Front strategy. An alliance was concluded between SFIO and PCF 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

¹³¹ *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 15/5/1928 in AN: F/7/13670.

¹³² Laura Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens*, p.141.

October 1934.¹³³ Historians have long debated the origins of the Popular Front strategy which has played a central role in the Communist's own heroic narrative of their advancement within the French political community, firmly identifying the party with the Republic and with the anti-fascist struggle. As Eric Weitz has noted, the emergence of the Popular Front strategy marked the PCF's moment of popular breakthrough, for the first time becoming a mass based political movement.¹³⁴ The key contentions within the historiography have centred upon the extent to which the emergence of the Popular Front strategy can be viewed either as an imposition from Moscow or as a development from within the national political context. In their biography of Eugen Fried, the 'grand secret' of the PCF, Annie Kriegel and Stéphane Courtois firmly emphasize the Moscow origins of the anti-fascist alliance with Social Democratic parties. Though they hold back from ascribing this episode in French Communist history entirely to the influence of Fried, Kriegel and Courtois highlight the importance of Soviet foreign policy concerns in the development of Comintern strategy in the course of 1933-1934. Above all they note, 'the Popular Front was [...] the fruit of a strategic decision by Stalin.' Concerned by the anti-Soviet rhetoric emanating from the new German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, Stalin identified France as a key strategic ally. In September 1933 leading French Radical politicians Édouard Herriot and Pierre Cot were welcomed in Moscow.¹³⁵ The Comintern Popular Front line, argue Kriegel and Courtois, was introduced to further this alliance, with a Franco-Soviet treaty of mutual assistance being concluded in May 1935. This line of argument, as Jonathan Haslam pointed out in 1979, had long been an entrenched view among historians of the Comintern.¹³⁶ Julian Jackson in his study of the French Popular Front presents a more balanced picture, though ultimately Jackson sees the PCF being pushed unwillingly into adopting the Popular Front strategy by pressure from Moscow.¹³⁷

Haslam, in an important article, emphasizes the wider political context in which both Comintern and national Communist parties were operating as the Popular Front strategy

¹³³ Jacques Fauvet, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français, 1920-1976* (Paris, 1977), pp.121--137, pp.142--143.

¹³⁴ Eric Weitz, *Popular Communism*, p1.

¹³⁵ Annie Kriegel and Stéphane Courtois, *Eugen Fried: le grand secret du PCF*, p.232. 'le Front Populaire est avant tout le fruit d'une décision stratégique de Staline.'

¹³⁶ Jonathan Haslam, 'The Comintern and the origins of the Popular Front, 1934-1935', *Historical Journal*, 22, 3 (1979), 673--691, (673).

¹³⁷ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, pp.32--36 (33); see also the chapter by Célie Vassart & Albert Vassart, 'The Moscow Origins of the French "Popular Front"' in Milorad Drachkovitch & Branko Lazitch (eds), *The Comintern: Historical Highlights* (Stanford, Calif., 1966), pp.234-252.

was elaborated. Events in Germany had thrown Comintern strategy into ‘disarray’. Far from presenting a monolithic image of Comintern politics, Haslam emphasizes the contradictions in the line emanating from Moscow in the period 1934-1935.¹³⁸ Significant for Haslam was the on the one hand, the arrival of Dimitrov in Moscow, a well-known advocate of a more inclusive Communist strategy, on the other, developments within European Social Democratic parties. In particular Dimitrov drew attention to developments in France, where one-third of SFIO delegates at their May 1934 conference voted in favour of an alliance with the PCF, and in Austria where Social Democrats were involved in an uprisings against Dollfuss’s authoritarian regime in Vienna in February 1933.¹³⁹ Kriegel and Courtois see in Dimitrov’s elevation to the head of the Comintern evidence of Stalin’s desire for an alteration in strategy, though as Richard Overy has noted, Stalin was consistently unconvinced of the new Popular Front line.¹⁴⁰ Eric Weitz has emphasized that the emergence of the Popular Front was a product of both international and national factors acting in concert.¹⁴¹ A new impetus emerged among organized French workers in favour of unity, a current which, initially at least, largely bypassed the leaderships. By 1935 the CGTU had re-joined with the CGT, reforming the old pre-schism occupational and departmental federations. At a national political level, the PCF rebranding as a pro-republican and pluralist force created momentum behind a broader alignment of the Left. In April 1936 Blum, Daladier and Thorez agreed a Popular Front electoral alliance which would contest the May general elections. The result was a decisive victory for the Left. The PCF gained significantly, advancing to 72 seats from their 1928 position of 12. The SFIO, to the surprise of all, emerged for the first time as the largest party in the National Assembly.¹⁴² The Popular Front coalition gained 5,420,000 votes against 4,223,000 for its opponents. This translated into 376 seats to the Right’s 222.¹⁴³ This section, while accepting the significance of the Comintern policy, emphasizes the importance of the ground swell of rank-and-file militancy among the cheminots and the leftward moves of the CGT Federation in response to the fascist challenge but significantly, the deepening

¹³⁸ Jonathan Haslam, ‘The Comintern’, p.676, p.690.

¹³⁹ Jonathan Haslam, ‘The Comintern’, pp.679--681.

¹⁴⁰ Annie Kriegel and Stéphane Courtois, *Eugen Fried*, p.233; Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia* (London, 2004, 2005), p.201.

¹⁴¹ Eric Weitz, *Popular Communism*, p.55, n.54.

¹⁴² Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire* (Paris, 1986, 2006), pp.65--96.

¹⁴³ Joel Colton, ‘The Formation of the French Popular Front’, in Martin S. Alexander and Helen Graham (eds), *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 1989), 9--23, (22).

depression and government deflationary policies as significant factors in moves towards cheminot unity.

Meeting on 26 February 1934, the Federal Council of the FNCU had reason to once more regret the lack of engagement of the cheminots with political demonstrations. Cheminot involvement in the general strike of 12 February 1934 had been ‘weak’ compared to other Federations, yet the FNCU leadership did underline how it, nonetheless, marked the most important cheminot action since the strikes of 1920.¹⁴⁴ In an article for *L’Humanité*, Pierre Séward noted how workshop employees in Mulhouse and a number of other centres had joined the strike, but blamed the limited enthusiasm of the FNCC for the otherwise disappointing cheminot response.¹⁴⁵ Extant documents reinforce the limited response of the cheminot rank-and-file. The *Compagnie de l’Est* recorded that in total 1734 agents faced disciplinary action following the events of 12 February, the vast majority (1254) for having ceased work for between fifteen minutes and half an hour. A further 235 agents were disciplined for beginning work between fifteen minutes and half an hour late.¹⁴⁶ On the PO-Midi network 706 agents were disciplined for marking 12 February in some way in the course of their work.¹⁴⁷ Christian Chevandier, however, has argued that the 12 February strike was at best only a ‘symbolic’ action on the railways, nevertheless, the broader unity current was gaining important ground among the cheminots.¹⁴⁸

In December 1934 a meeting was held in Paris attended by some 600 cheminots working at the Gare du Nord. The aim of the meeting was to begin the process of fusing the local branches of the FNCU and FNCC, local organizers of both syndicats spoke in favour of the efforts. From their speeches it is clear the importance which grassroots opposition to the government's deflationary policies had in motivating cheminot unity moves. In his speech, the local FNCU secretary, Péria, strongly condemned the decree laws passed by Doumergue. ‘The government’, argued Péria, ‘has led a violent attack against all public services. *Fonctionnaires* have suffered the consequences. We cheminots have not been spared. Our salaries have been cut and our

¹⁴⁴ *L’Humanité*, 2/3/1934.

¹⁴⁵ *L’Humanité*, 2/3/1934.

¹⁴⁶ 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.

¹⁴⁷ SNCF: 25LM203, Manifestations du 12 février 1934, Statistique de punition, Réseau PO-Midi, Incidents du 12/2/34, Sanctions infligées.

¹⁴⁸ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, p.144.

retired comrades, they too have been despoiled.’¹⁴⁹ The leaders of the local FNCC joined in the attacks on both government and railway companies. Successive governments, argued a *confédéré* militant, had worked ‘on the side of capital to the detriment of the working class.’ The advantages enjoyed by the cheminots, argued the FNCC representative, were increasingly coming under threat as the rail companies sought to unfairly target the *petit personnel* for cost cutting measures, increasingly turning to non-statutory workers and leaving the higher grade workers untouched.¹⁵⁰

Cheminot salaries, in line with workers in the public sector, were severely affected by the decree laws passed by the Doumergue, Flandin and Laval governments. As has been noted in the previous chapter, cheminot pay rose consistently, though in small increments, between 1920 and 1933. From April 1934, ‘elements’ of the cheminot remuneration package began to be cut. Cheminots earning under 20,000 francs received a 5% pay cut rising 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 regarding the award of these were tightened. The housing indemnity was cut by 10% across the board.¹⁵¹ 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 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.¹⁵² 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

¹⁴⁹ Centre des Archives Contemporaine, Fontainebleau (Hereafter CACF): 19940500/0198, Commissaire Divisionnaire de la Gare du Nord à M. le Directeur Générale de la Sûreté Nationale, 8/12/1934, p.2. 'Le gouvernement 'a mené une violente attaque contre tous les services publics. Les fonctionnaires en subissent les conséquences. Nous, cheminots, nous n'avons pas été épargnés. Nos salaires ont été diminués, et nos camarades retraités, eux aussi, ont été spoliés.'

¹⁵⁰ CACF: 19940500/0198, Commissaire Divisionnaire de la Gare du Nord à M. le Directeur Générale de la Sûreté Nationale, 8/12/1934, p.3. 'pour le compte du capital au détriment de la classe ouvrière.'

¹⁵¹ SNCF: 25LM636, Décrets Doumergue et Laval, Conditions de Rémunération, 'Modifications successives apportés aux conditions de rémunération du personnel depuis l'application du statut', pp.14--15.

¹⁵² SNCF: 25LM636, Décrets Doumergue et Laval, Conditions de Rémunération, 'Modifications successives apportés aux conditions de rémunération du personnel depuis l'application du statut', pp.15--17.

reduced to 8000 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 9000 and 10,000 would see a 4% pay cut.¹⁵³

In late-1934 across France, rank-and-file cheminot trade unionists of all political persuasions were holding joint meetings in an effort to create a united Federation in an effort to better resist the April decree laws. The Ministry of the Interior recognized 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 FNCCU 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 realized that unity was clearly going to happen 'with them or despite them on the entirety of the French railways.'¹⁵⁴ 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.¹⁵⁵ This current of thought was not an entirely new phenomenon in CGT thinking as we have seen, yet outspoken militancy on the part of the FNCC had increased since the arrival of the depression and the collapse of the financial position of the railways. In early 1933, at a meeting of the FNCC in the Nord department, speakers attacked the terms of the railway statute which assured profits for wealthy shareholder even as cheminot wages were being reduced. Quertelet, head of the FNCC's Northern Union argued that, while ordinary cheminots were losing their jobs, high grade staff were being kept on at salaries ranging from 100,000 to 500,000 francs. He also argued that shareholders (according to his analysis largely bankers, companies providing railway material and coal companies) were intent upon defending their own narrow interests rather than those of the nation.¹⁵⁶ In December 1934 cheminots on the Midi formed a unified Federation. Through the course

¹⁵³ SNCF: 25LM636, Décrets Doumergue et Laval, Conditions de Rémunération, 'Modifications successives apportés aux conditions de rémunération du personnel depuis l'application du statut', p.17.

¹⁵⁴ CACF: 19940500/0198, Ministre de l'Intérieur à Ministre des Travaux Publics, AS Unité Syndical chez les cheminots, 22/11/1934, p.1. 'débordés par la base.'; 'avec eux ou malgré eux sur l'ensemble des chemins de fer français.'

¹⁵⁵ CACF: 19940500/0198, Commissaire Spéciale de Troyes, Rapport, 30/11/1934, p.1.

¹⁵⁶ AD Nord : M595/92, Commissaire Démissionnaire de la Police Spéciale à M. le Préfet du Nord, 19/3/1933, pp.1-- 2.

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 Sémard 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 reformed national Federation, making up around 54% of the membership.¹⁵⁷

Conclusion

In 1933 the *International des Syndicats Rouge* (ISR, Profintern), communicated its analysis of the FNCU's tactics to date to the French Communist Party. A copy is extant within Maurice Thorez's private archive at the *Archives Nationales*, Paris. The Federation was taken to task on two counts: its failure to develop its position among cheminots outside the workplace and its failure to sufficiently advance the immediate concerns of the cheminot workforce. The union's passivity regarding personnel committees was particularly admonished.¹⁵⁸ This document is important evidence adding weight to the gradual loosening of the 'class against class' line from the early 1930s onwards, even in directives emanating from Moscow. This chapter has emphasized the workplace and corporative-oriented political strategy of the FNCU, an important element in the Profintern's critique. Yet, at the same time, this chapter has highlighted the tensions and ambiguities of Communist politics within the railway industry as militants and union leaders struggled to make sense of the course they had embarked upon as a result of the decision to participate in personnel elections.

Keith Mann, in his study of worker political identity in Lyon, has identified the Communist-led CGTU's position through the interwar years as being driven by ideas of 'class independence' and 'anti-nation' rhetoric, a tradition inherited from the pre-war anarcho-syndicalist current.¹⁵⁹ In many ways, this represents what Irwin Wall has identified as the strong current within the historiography of leftist organizations which tend to identify both PCF and CGTU as 'anti-system' elements.¹⁶⁰ Agreeing with Wall's analysis, this chapter has argued that such readings are of only limited use in capturing

¹⁵⁷ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, p.141.

¹⁵⁸ AN: 626AP/48 Fonds Maurice Thorez/Jeannette Vermeersch, Cheminots CGT/CGTU, Directives à la Fédération Unitaire des Cheminots, 1933.

¹⁵⁹ Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity*, p.33.

¹⁶⁰ Irwin M. Wall, 'The French Social Contract: Conflict amid Cooperation', p.116.

the true complexity of the Communist position in France in these crucial years, which saw the slow elaboration of a model of industrial relations more generally associated with post-1945 France and its 'thirty glorious years' of strong economic growth. Exploring the idea of the 'social contract' between state, management and labour in the immediate post-Liberation period, Wall acknowledges that a rudimentary form of social contract was in existence between 1944 and 1947. This tacit understanding was founded, not upon agreements over increased productivity in return for ever-rising wages in the Fordist sense, but, rather, upon the expectation of power-sharing in the economic and political spheres.¹⁶¹ Discussing the impact of the Popular Front on Communist leaders in the aircraft industry of south-western France, Herrick Chapman has also contended that the shift to the new strategy enabled Communist militants to become more pragmatic. Union organizers began insisting that shop floor representatives abandon their generic attacks upon the system and engage more closely with the local concerns of the workforce.¹⁶²

This strategy was already present in embryo in the railway sector by the late 1920s. 1928 marks the moment when the Communist-led *cheminot* trade union emerged as a genuine participant in railway industrial relations. Continuing to blend a new-found political pragmatism with an unrelenting economist stance, the union focussed its energies upon consolidating its status within railway industrial relations structures as both the premier representative and the principal guardian of *cheminot* interests. The change in approach paid dividends. Railway workers voted *en masse* for Communist candidates during the late 1920s and continued to support them into the 1930s. Yet the missing ingredient in the period prior to 1936 was any equivalent accommodation with the state, which, prior to the arrival in power of Blum's government in the altered national and international contexts of the Popular Front, ensured that the Communist union remained oppositional in its orientation. Prior to 1936 the FNCU therefore developed a form of 'hostile participation' within railway industrial relations.¹⁶³ The Communist aim was to champion an independent *cheminot* voice within the capitalist framework, at the same time contesting the power of employers and the legitimacy of the CGT to speak in the name of railway workers. Pursuit of these objectives demanded

¹⁶¹ Irwin M. Wall, 'The French Social Contract', pp.118--120.

¹⁶² Herrick Chapman, 'The Political Life of the Rank-and-file: French Aircraft Workers During the Popular Front, 1934 – 1938', *International Labor and Working Class History*, 30 (Fall, 1986), 13--31 (16).

¹⁶³ The term is drawn from Patricia R. Turner, 'Hostile Participants? Working Class Militancy, Associational Life and the "Distinctiveness of the Prewar French Labor Movement"', *Journal of Modern History*, 71 (March 1999), 28--55.

that union leaders somehow reconcile the persistent tensions which existed between the Communist perception of themselves as a revolutionary vanguard and the day-to-day necessities of participation in cheminot trade union activity. Adapting to involvement in the structures of railway capitalism required Communists engaging in an on-going conflict with management and other unions to justify their readiness to operate within the constraints of a capitalist system whose basic tenets they claimed to oppose.

Chapter Six: Railway Safety and Industrial Relations in Interwar France

Introduction

We have seen in the previous chapter how the political practice and culture of the FNCU cannot be explained through an undiluted reading of Communism as an anti-system ideology applied constantly throughout the interwar period. The FNCU's central concerns with the contestation of power -- whether with management, with state agencies or with trade union rivals, combined with the organization's desire for a distinct cheminot voice at the centre of railway decision making -- demanded new forms of engagement. By 1928 the FNCU was deeply implicated in the intricacies of railway politics, social legislation, workplace regulation and the day-to-day advancement of cheminot interests. Nowhere was this multi-faceted outlook more obvious than in the *unitaire* involvement with issues of railway safety.

The social impact of railway safety and railway accidents in nineteenth and twentieth-century European history has largely been explored from two contrasting perspectives: the social history of medicine and the cultural history of industrialization. An important focus of research has been into the area of neuralgia and a particular form of industrial injury: so-called 'railway spine'.¹ The history of railway safety has also been investigated as an element in the broader history of the development of state regulation.² Changing conceptions of safety were also important elements in industrial relations, however. In the French mining industry, the importance of safety as a key issue in industrial politics and nineteenth-century class formation has been explored by Donald Reid.³ With regard to railway trade unionism, Georges Ribeill has argued that the dangerous nature of railway work encouraged a close camaraderie among cheminots,

¹ Ralph Harrington, 'On the Tracks of Trauma: Railway Spine Reconsidered', *Social History of Medicine*, 16, 2 (August, 2003), 209--223; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1986).

² Bridget Hutter, *Regulation and Risk: Occupational Health and Safety on the Railways* (Oxford, 2001).

³ Donald Reid, 'The Role of Mine Safety in the Development of Working-Class Consciousness and Organization: The Case of the Aubin Coal Basin, 1867-1914', *French Historical Studies*, 12, 1 (Spring, 1981), 98--119.

ensuring an underlying shared interest even during periods of bitter internecine tensions between Communist and non-Communist trade unions.⁴

Improvements in railway safety were certainly a major concern within railway industrial relations. Any accident was a major preoccupation for railway company management, with potentially deleterious implications for their public image. From the point of view of the workforce, ensuring a safe working environment went to the heart of the most basic questions: the preservation of life and livelihood. There was thus a powerful incentive for co-operation between the two sides. That incentive acquired extra momentum thanks to widening state interest in matters of industrial safety. Perennial public interest in the safety of railway travel added another dimension to the issue. The creation by ministerial decree in 1931 of railway safety delegates, who were elected from among the railway workers to investigate the immediate circumstances of accidents, whether on the railway network or industrial accidents in the workplace, may be viewed as evidence of this corporatist spirit and of Wardhaugh's 'partial community of thought' in action. Yet this debate within railway industrial relations was never simply confined to safety improvements. For management and unions there was always much more at stake, specifically, their contrasting ideological conceptions of the roles of management and workforce within the French economy. Interpretations of railway safety were shot through with readings of the power dynamics between union and management and equally between Communist and non-Communist trade unions. As a result, railway safety became a crucial front line in the on-going skirmishes which defined the nature of the relationship between labour and management in this industry.

Safety Standards on the Railway Network

In his history of the French railways prior to the creation of the SNCF on 1 January 1938, François Caron presents a picture of generally improving safety standards on the railways during the interwar years. Drawing upon statistics from the Ministry of Public Works Caron argues that, although relatively low, the numbers of accidents and deaths on the railways were slowly rising in the period 1889-1913, from 267 deaths in the decade 1889-1899 to 408 in the period 1907-1913. In the same periods the numbers injured rose from 474 to 688. The volume of traffic during these years rose from 92

⁴ Georges Ribeill, *Cheminots* (Paris, 1984), p.34, p.104.

million travellers per kilometre (1899-1899) to 170 million in 1907-1913.⁵ Following World War One, under pressure from the public administration, Caron argues that railway safety improved considerably. While the general trend in the numbers killed or injured on the railways is downward there is, however, a considerable spike in the percentage killed between 1928 and 1936, which Caron argues were the result of two accidents of 1933, those of Lagny (230 dead, 300 injured) and Saint-Elier (36 dead, 68 injured).⁶

Caron's figures do not tell the whole story of railway safety in the period between the two world wars. Caron concentrates entirely upon incidents occurring on the railway network, which is say to accidents involving trains, in particular, passenger trains. Yet, even in this sphere, further evidence presents the risks associated with railway travel, and railway work, in a very different light. In January 1934 the PCF published figures for the number of accidents experienced on the French rail network which are revealing. In the ten years between 1923 and 1932, argued the Communists, 18,028 accidents had killed 3,690 cheminots, with 6,303 injured.⁷ The most 'douloureuse' incidents on the network were recorded in their parliamentary bill.

⁵ François Caron, *Histoire des Chemins de Fer en France*, p.123.

⁶ François Caron, *Histoire des Chemins de Fer en France*, pp.934--937.

⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la Sécurité, Proposition de loi, p.8.

Figure 2. Source: CGTIHS, RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Proposition de Loi.

Date	Network	Cause	Killed	Injured
1921	Nord	Derailment	27	60
1921	État	Collision	27	105
1921	PO	Collision	12	40
1921	PO	Derailment	8	45
1921	PLM	Derailment	39	60
1922	État	Collision	18	35
1922	Midi	Collision	33	36
1922	PLM	Collision	7	7
1922	AL	Collision	13	10
1923	Est	Collision	14	85
1924	AL	Collision	9	15
1925	Nord	Derailment	13	137
1925	PO	Derailment	17	24
1926	État	Derailment	19	21
1926	PO	Derailment	7	60
1926	PLM	Collision	6	26
1926	Est	Derailment	4	16
1927	PLM	Collision	11	23
1928	Nord	Collision	15	36
1928	État	Derailment	6	15
1928	Est	Derailment	8	10
1930	PO	Derailment	16	10
1930	PLM	Derailment	8	38
1930	PLM	Derailment	7	8
1931	PO	Derailment	10	16
1932	État	Collision	8	19
1932	Midi	Derailment	7	9
1932	Nord	Derailment	11	6
1933	PO	Derailment	14	129
1933	État	Derailment	36	27

Partial records extant within the F/14 rubric at the *Archives Nationales*, Paris, give a snapshot of the extent of failures in railway safety in this period. Between 1931 and 1934 the Ministry of Public Works investigated eighty-two accidents on the PLM network which resulted in eighty-six cheminots and 290 passengers being injured.

Figure 3.

1931
19 accidents investigated. Cheminots injured: 20; Passengers: 129
1932
13 accidents investigated: Cheminots injured: 9; Passengers: 25
1933
24 Accidents investigated: Cheminots injured: 29; Passengers: 71
1934
26 Accidents investigated: Cheminots injured: 28 (plus one killed); Passengers: 65
Ministry of Public Works Accident figures on PLM 1931-1934 source F/14/14901

It should be noted that these figures are for locomotive accidents on just one of the six major French railway networks, though an extremely large and busy one, over a brief four year period.

In April 1937 Raoul Dautry reported to the *Conseil de Réseau* on the *État* network that compared to the first three months of 1936, the number of fatal accidents amongst the company's personnel had increased from five to thirteen per 100,000 employees.⁸ While the number of fatal accidents amongst personnel had been ninety-three per 100,000 agents in 1933, by 1935 the figure had dropped to sixty-six. Incapacities however had remained relatively stable, 259 (per 100,000) in 1933 and 209 in 1935.⁹

For a longer view the archives of the *Compagnie du Nord* provide figures across all networks between 1928 and 1932. (Figure 4).

⁸ AN: F/14/12484, Conseil de Réseau (Etat), Compte Rendu des Séances, Décembre 1936-Octobre 1937, PV. 30/4/36, p.3.

⁹ AN : F/14/12484, Conseil de Réseau (Etat), Compte Rendu des Séances, Décembre 1936-Octobre 1937, PV. 18/12/36, p.4

Date	Number of Fatal Accidents	permanent incapacity	Total	Total Employees
1928	398	1,650	2,048	496,910
1929	483	1,809	2,292	502,389
1930	455	1,764	2,219	509,027
1931	385	1,658	2,043	491,501
1932	298	1,368	1,166	468,424

Figure 4:

Source: CAMT: *Compagnie du Nord* 48AQ3551, PV. Conférence chefs d'exploitation, 6/7/1933.

In terms of the number of accidents against the total number of employees the ratio of accidents appears relatively low. However, it should be born in mind that the overwhelming majority of accidents occurred in very specific occupational areas. The railways employed a large number of people in clerical and other non-manual roles, secretarial staff, clerks, ticket inspectors and so forth. This large section of railway employees would be unlikely to encounter serious risk at work. The highest risk areas were those employed in track maintenance, workshops and among the train staff. Equally it should be born in mind that not all accidents resulted in death or permanent incapacity. As we shall see, the railways employed specific criteria according to which accidents were recorded. Any incident had, for instance, to be of sufficient seriousness to be judged by company medical staff to require at least twenty days' absence from work before they were classified and counted as 'serious'. As will be discussed below this allowed considerable room for abuse. Moreover, an accident need not necessarily result in injury or death to have a profound impact on those involved. Despite these considerations the dangerous nature of railway work is underlined by the fact that in the five years covered by the *Compagnie du Nord's* own figures there were 2019 fatal accidents while 8249 more resulted in permanent incapacity.

Then as now railway accidents were headline news. While industrial accidents in other sectors of the economy certainly had the power to shock, those occurring on the

railways affected anyone who used the rail network. The concern with improving railway safety cut across the usual divides in French society, rail accidents being indiscriminate in their effects. While the 1920s and 1930s saw the gradual introduction of mass automobile ownership in France, the railways remained the dominant form of transport for personal travel across the country and continued to dominate freight traffic. Rail travel was a common experience, if one which varied distinctly according to class. The detailed coverage of rail accidents in the newspapers reflected this. The railway companies were strongly aware of the importance of the public perceptions of safety. In 1934 a work was published by Robert Le Besnerais, a leading figure within the *Compagnie du Nord*, which laid out in detail the measures which the railway company had implemented to ensure the safe operation of the railway network.¹⁰ As rail safety became a cause of national interest so too did the details of the working conditions of the cheminots themselves. The link between the working conditions faced by rail employees and the incidence of railway accidents was widely made, not least by the cheminot trade unions themselves and in particular by the Communist-led FNCU.

Lagny and the union response.

People woke on 24 December 1933 to news of a major accident, 'une effroyable catastrophe de chemins de fer' at Lagny-Pamponne, just to the east of Paris.¹¹ *Le Figaro* carried news of 113 dead with 300 injured; this death toll was quickly revised upwards to approaching 200.¹² For all major papers the railway accident provided front-page news over the Christmas period. Early reports established that a local suburban service had been hit from behind while halted at a red signal by an express train bound for Strasbourg travelling at around 110 Km/h. The accident had occurred just before 8 p.m.¹³ The suburban train's wooden carriages had provided little resistance to the force of the oncoming express. The government's Minister for Public Works, Joseph Paganon, visited the site at around 10 p.m. and later recorded the tremendous impact of the scene which confronted him. Addressing the National Assembly's Public Works Commission, the Minister recalled how he

¹⁰ Robert Le Besnerais, *La sécurité des voyageurs en chemins de fer* (Paris, 1934).

¹¹ *Petit Parisien*, 24/12/1933.

¹² *Le Figaro*, 24/12/1933, 25/12/1933.

¹³ see for example 25/12/1933 and 26/12/1933 editions of *Le Petit Parisien*; *Le Matin*; *Le Temps*; *Le Figaro*; *L'Humanité* and *L'Action Française*.

saw the victims lying on the frozen ground [...] I have never experienced in my life [...] a more dramatic, more heart-rending emotion, than before the spectacle of all those crushed bodies, all those little children, dead, still holding toys in their hands. It is a terrible image that I will never erase from my memory.¹⁴

At this meeting the Minister gave a full account of the disaster, 201 people had been killed and 203 injured of whom eighty-three were grievously hurt. Thick fog and icy conditions together with delays caused by unexpectedly large numbers of passengers had been key contributing factors to the crash.¹⁵

The rail accident had been indiscriminate in its victims; members of all classes were affected. Among the dead were three parliamentarians, Victor Schleiter, Paul Morel and Henri Rollin.¹⁶ There was shock, but also anger as details emerged of the circumstances of the disaster. The driver of the express train had been able to run straight through a red signal. In the thick fog he had been unable to see that the signal was against him, and had not seen the rear lanterns on the halted train until too late. Supposed safeguards had failed. Detonators on the track which were supposed to sound an alarm in the locomotive cab should the engine pass through a signal set to danger had not worked. An editorial in *Le Figaro* on the 25th asked rhetorically how often the use of wooden railway carriages as opposed to more sturdy metallic ones had been condemned in parliament.¹⁷

Speaking on behalf of passenger groups, the chairman of the Association for the Travelling Public, Dr Schmitt, articulated the public anger felt towards the rail companies: the quest for profit had taken precedence over their responsibility to safeguard their workforce or the travelling public.¹⁸ This was particularly evident in two aspects, each of which had resulted in fatal consequences: the failure to replace old wooden carriages with modern metallic models and company slowness in updating signalling practices. According to Schmitt cold economic calculation formed the basis of company thinking leaving safety considerations trailing behind. Following the Lagny

¹⁴Archives Nationales, Paris (Hereafter AN): C//15045, Tome 3, PV. 17/1/1934, p.4. 'J'ai vu les victimes gisant sur le sol glacé [...] Je ne crois pas avoir éprouvé dans ma vie [...] d'émotion plus dramatique, plus déchirante, que devant le spectacle de tous ces corps broyés, de ces petits enfants morts tendant encore des jouets dans leurs mains. C'est un souvenir terrible qui ne s'effacera jamais de ma mémoire.'

¹⁵AN: C//15045, Tome 3, PV. 17/1/1934, pp 5-6.

¹⁶*Le Figaro*, 25/12/1933.

¹⁷*Le Figaro*, 25/12/1933.

¹⁸Centre des Archives du Monde du Travail, Roubaix (Hereafter CAMT): 202AQ4, A00 39/2, Dr Schmitt, 'A propos d'accidents' *Le Lien Médical* 7 (Juillet, 1934), 41-49 (47).

accident the *Compagnie de l'Est* could expect to face victims' compensation claims totalling a hundred million francs. Even this figure paled in comparison with the costs of purchasing metallic carriages and signal upgrades which, Schmitt wrote, would require 'two billion (francs) to start with, between six and eight in total.'¹⁹ In such circumstances the networks could be relied upon to follow the path which entailed the least expenditure. Schmitt's analysis carried some weight. He was not just President of the *Fédération des Ligues des Voyageurs*, he also sat on the Railway Industry's 'High Council' (*Conseil Supérieur*). Dautry, in a meeting of Company Directors conceded that Schmitt's article though tucked away in a narrow medical journal was a cause for concern.²⁰

Shortly after the Lagny disaster the CGT affiliated FNCC published a short brochure entitled *La Vérité de la Catastrophe de Lagny-Pamponne: L'Incurie Scandaleuse de la Compagnie de l'Est*. The Federation attacked the *esprit des dirigeants du rail* 'imprisoned by routine, by the fear of innovation, the desire to strengthen managerial authority [and] hostility to all improvements suggested by the trade union movement'; company managers, it was alleged, were accustomed to 'sacrificing the public interest to the private interests of the network.'²¹ The union strongly attacked the arrest of the driver and fireman aboard the express train 'under the pretext of satisfying a public shaken by the horrible carnage.'²² Above all, for the FNCC, the major fault for the accident and the loss of life could be imputed to the 'spirit of economy à l'outrance which has prevailed over safety concerns.'²³ The private rail companies, argued the FNCC, had proved their inability to manage a public service; only a nationalized railway network could avoid future disasters.²⁴ The Communist-led cheminot trade union, the FNCU, proved equally severe in their criticisms of the private capitalist

¹⁹CAMT: 202AQ4, A00 39/2, Dr Schmitt, 'A propos d'accidents', pp.41--49, (48). 'les dépenses d'achats de wagons métalliques et d'appareils de signalisation,' 'deux milliards pour commencer, six à huit en tout.'

²⁰CAMT: 202AQ4, A00 39/2, Conférence des Directeurs, 15/10/1934. 'nettement diffamatoire pour les reçu.'

²¹Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Confédérés, *La Vérité sur la Catastrophe de Lagny Pamponne : L'incurie scandaleuse de la Compagnie d'Est* (s.d.), p.3. 'emprise par la routine, la peur d'innover, la volonté de renforcer l'autorité patronale, l'hostilité à toute amélioration préconisée par l'organisation syndicale, l'habitude de sacrifier l'intérêt public aux intérêts privés des réseaux.'

²²Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Confédérés, *La Vérité sur la Catastrophe de Lagny Pamponne : L'incurie scandaleuse de la Compagnie d'Est*, s.d. p.4. 'sous le prétexte de donner satisfaction à une publique bouleversée par l'horrible hécatombe.'

²³Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Confédérés, *La Vérité sur la Catastrophe de Lagny Pamponne*, p.10. 'esprit d'économies à l'outrance qui a primé sur la sécurité.'

²⁴Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Confédérés, *La Vérité sur la Catastrophe de Lagny Pamponne*, p.16.

railway companies, viscerally attacking company rationalization measures and challenging the capacity of a 'capitalist' run railway service to serve the needs of the French people and the cheminot workforce.

The Communist-led FNCU was not slow in ensuring that their analysis would be part of the national debate over Lagny. The Communist's chosen platform for condemning the attitudes and practices of rail companies however, was the floor of the National Assembly. In January 1934 the PCF Deputy and General Secretary of the FNCU, Lucien Midol, presented a *projet de loi* authored by the FNCU on behalf of the PCF. Calling for greater powers of investigation for worker safety delegates in the railway industry the preamble to the proposed legislation detailed the key elements of the place of railway accidents in the wider Communist ideological schema. Yet while the two major railway union leaderships were unanimous in their condemnation of the Lagny catastrophe and were in no doubt as to the ultimate responsibility of the rail companies, the accident served as much to encourage inter-union rivalries as to foster unity. A leading figure within the FNCU, Raymond Tournemaine, publicly criticized the FNCC leadership for their slowness in condemning the rail companies over the Lagny accident. Tournemaine argued that the *confédérés* had only taken up the issue under pressure from ordinary cheminots and the unambiguous position adopted by the FNCU, which itself, it was claimed, had been key in forcing the railway companies to investigate safety concerns. The CGT union was implicitly portrayed by the CGTU Federation as too close to the rail companies to act as a vehicle for cheminot concerns. Tournemaine's attack upon the FNCC demonstrates that the analysis of railway accidents was a key element in political competition within cheminot trade unionism.²⁵

The FNCU and the Safety Question

Concern with railway accidents was not a new phenomenon among the railway workers, however. Though the scale of the Lagny disaster, coming hard upon another serious accident at Saint Elier, amplified the scale of public concern, the railway unions, particularly the FNCU, had placed railway safety at the forefront of their activity throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Their presentation of the issue, while strongly marked

²⁵ AD Nord: M595/92, 1934, Commissaire divisionnaire de Lille à M. le Préfet du Nord, 5/1/1934, p.1. See also Commissaire central de Lille rapport 31/1/1934 in same.

by the sectarian language of class conflict, never ceased to attempt to define a national community of travellers placed at risk by 'railway capitalists'. Accidents were comprehended firmly according to the wider Communist critique of the capitalist economy; company demands for ever greater profits and the related attacks on working conditions through rationalization policies were directly blamed for safety lapses. In the late 1920s and early 1930s posters and flyers emanating from the cheminots *unitaires* appeared across France. In 1932 the poster 'Thieves and Assassins' appeared all over the country, stuck to walls in stations and in town and city centres. Drawing attention to the occurrence of four major accidents in a month, the FNCU claimed that there existed 'no security for the travelling public.' They claimed that the rail networks were deliberately and dangerously reducing the size of the workforce, 'the running of trains is now undertaken by one lone agent. Cheminots are discharged, sacked for the smallest of errors across all services and most especially in the area of track maintenance.'²⁶ The poor state of the rails due to the lack of personnel, together with insufficient train staff, was blamed for the accidents. Ultimate responsibility, however, lay with railway company owners, 'we accuse the railway potentates of bearing responsibility for the crime.'²⁷ In many FNCU publications the image of the everyday French travelling public at risk was juxtaposed with the riches of the railway company owners, variously depicted as 'magnates'; 'potentates' or 'rois du rail', a language deliberately intended to highlight the distinction and divide between wealthy rail owners and the rest of the French population. Importantly, this was not language or imagery peculiar to Communism, the contrast between railway owners and the wider French 'nation' had been drawn since the time of Gambetta.²⁸

In a poster which appeared in Valenciennes in 1928: 'The Truth of Railway Catastrophes', the FNCU argued that in the months of July and August eighteen accidents had killed twenty-three and injured eighty-three more.²⁹ The *Sûreté* officer in Bordeaux reported in July 1928 how an FNCU placard addressed 'To the travelling public' argued that the *État* had recently begun running trains with just one employee on

²⁶ AN: F/7/13671, Commissaire Spécial de Nantes au Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 19/11/1932. 'les réseaux développent la compression du personnel d'exécution. La conduite des trains se fait maintenant avec un seul agent. Les cheminots sont réformés, licenciés pour des peccadilles dans tous les services et plus particulièrement dans le service de la voie.'

²⁷ AN: F/7/13671, Commissaire Spécial de Nantes au Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 19/11/1932. 'nous accuserons les potentats du rail d'être les responsables du crime.'

²⁸ John F. Godfrey, *Capitalism at War*, p.32.

²⁹ AN: F/7/13670, Commissaire Spécial, Valenciennes, 30/8/1928.

board. This, argued the union, was a return to the 'follies' of old which prior to World War One had caused a substantial number of accidents. 'Voyageurs', declared the poster, 'despite you paying huge prices for transport, the railway administration, in accord with the Minister of Public Works, seriously compromise your safety.'³⁰ At Dijon in November 1932, the FNCU drew upon recent events in the city to reinforce their wider point. At a level crossing in the town an express train had collided with a local tram. The level crossing guard was considered responsible; the union maintained,

there we see a pretext for the press to go to town, obeying the orders of the municipality and the PLM Company, dirtying the name of an honest man. With the most villainous, Jesuitical methods, these bought 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!³¹

The centrality of railway safety within the Communist imagination can be gauged by the prominence of the issue in FNCU popular culture. 18 November 1932 witnessed the first annual fête of the FNCU. Held in Paris, it was attended by 150 people paying five francs per head. Music was provided by cheminots from the union band of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges and an acting troupe, the Bobigny Blues (*Les Blouses Bleues de Bobigny*) provided further entertainment.³² The central entertainment of the evening was a theatrical piece entitled *Raillons sans Dérailleur* (Deride without Derailing). The play followed the experience of a driver and his fireman who suffer a derailment having spent eighteen hours straight on the footplate of their engine. Immediately held responsible by the company the two 'prove that personnel reductions are a danger to the travelling public.'³³ The piece ends with these two, together with cheminots and travelling public united, demonstrating 'in front of the station in which the accident took place.'³⁴

³⁰ AN: F/7/13670, Commissaire Central Bordeaux au Directeur de la Sûreté Générale, 24/7/1928. 'malgré que vous payiez le prix fort pour vous faire transporter, l'administration des chemins de fer de l'Etat, an accord avec le Ministre des Travaux Publics, compromet sérieusement votre sécurité.'

³¹ AN: F/7/13671, Préfet Côte-d'Or au Ministre de l'Intérieur, 5/11/1932. 'voilà un prétexte pour la presse à toute faire, obéissant aux ordres de la municipalité et de la compagnie PLM de salir un honnête homme. Avec les procédés les plus canailles, les plus jésuitiques, les plumitifs à gages veulent faire retomber sur les épaules d'un garde-barrière surmené toutes les responsabilités de cette catastrophe. Et ce garde-barrière, père de cinq enfants, vieux poseur expérimenté, est accusé d'être un ivrogne, alors qu'il était obligé de travailler pendant douze heures, malgré l'existence de milliers de chômeurs!'

³² For information on Communist theatre groups see Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People*, p.27.

³³ AN: F/7/13671, note 19/11/1932. 'font la preuve que le compression du personnel est un danger pour les usagers.'

³⁴ AN: F/7/13671, note 19/11/1932, 'manifestent devant la gare où l'accident s'est produit.'

The Le Mans Incident

The action depicted in *Raillons sans dérailleur* closely echoed a real life high profile event which had occurred just a few years previously. The derailment of an express train on the approach into Le Mans station on 2 August 1928 causing the deaths of six people, brought tensions between management and workforce over the responsibility for railway accidents to the fore. Uguen, the driver of the locomotive in question, was arrested on the scene for 'through non-observation of the regulations, causing the deaths of six people.'³⁵ On the first day of Uguen's trial at the Le Mans *Chambre Correctionnelle* the Communist daily *L'Humanité* reviewed the case. On the night in question express train number 519 from Paris to Brest had derailed. Five people on the station platform had been killed instantly, a traveller on the train had died later in hospital. Local inquiries among the workforce allowed *L'Humanité* to claim that the train was over filled: 'passengers crammed in, filling up the corridors...stock defective' and that 'the composition of the train was contrary to common sense.'³⁶ It was, according to this analysis, an accident waiting to happen. The CGT publication *Le Peuple* added its voice to the condemnations. Echoing the Communist criticism of an overladen train, the CGT went on to note how 'once more, the driver is arrested. Such is the rule regarding railway accidents. It is too simple, and it is abusive.'³⁷ While both Cheminot Federations took up the incident there was a marked contrast in their approaches. It was the Communists who made the running in reporting the case and defending Uguen. As he was a member of that particular union this engagement is perhaps unsurprising. The FNCC centred their much more restrained campaign on those workers who had been killed in the accident, postal staff who had been employed at Le Mans station. This reveals the extent to which accident cases could divide cheminots as much as unite them, the FNCU made almost no mention of the deceased postal staff in their campaign which approached the issue solely through the angle of the victimization of the locomotive driver. The FNCC leader, Jarrigion, did make formal complaints to

³⁵ AN: F/7/13671, Préfet de la Sarthe au Ministre de L'Intérieur, 25/1/1929. 'par inobservation des règlements causé la mort de six personnes.'

³⁶ *L'Humanité*, 25/1/1929. 'l'enquête ouvrière a permis d'établir que le convoi comprenait 21 voitures avec un charge avouée de 59 tonnes en supplément, que les voyageurs, emplies jusque dans les couloirs, étaient en surnombre, que le matériel était défectueux et que le composition du train était faite en dépit du bon sens.'

³⁷ *Le Peuple*, 4/8/1928. 'une fois de plus, on a arête le mécanicien. Telle est la règle en matière d'accidents de chemins de fer. C'est trop simple, et c'est abusif.'

both the Ministry for Public Works and the Ministry of Justice regarding the arrest of the locomotive driver but these received only limited coverage in *Le Peuple*.³⁸

The crucial point in the Communist defence of Uguen lay in a direct refutation of the company version of events. The central allegation against the driver was that he had exceeded the 30KpH speed limit on the approach to Le Mans, an allegation strongly denied by Uguen.³⁹ The cheminot was defended in court by Maître André Berthon, a Communist Deputy. The local Prefect wrote to the Minister of the Interior that from the outset of the trial numerous Communists pressed into the entrance of the court.⁴⁰

The inquiry carried out by the FNCU into the accident was undertaken by leading cheminot trade unionist Antoine Rambaud. Official safety delegates would not exist on the railways until 1931, but the lack of institutional support was not a bar to Rambaud establishing a narrative of events. Maître Berthon drew upon Rambaud's investigation in the trial. According to *L'Humanité*: 'He declared that a light wagon, directly behind the locomotive, had jumped the points and derailed, provoking the derailment of the engine.' Rambaud himself outside the trial denounced 'the criminal negligence of the company in conserving non-metallic light postal wagons in service.'⁴¹ Suspicions of a cover up were heightened by the disappearance of the locomotive's speed recorder from the scene of the accident. Having been removed by a company inspector, the FNCU challenged the company to produce the evidence that Uguen had been exceeding the speed limit on the approach to the station. At his cross examination the Engineer concerned argued that the removal of the speed register was normal procedure following a crash. He did not, however, produce the key piece of evidence.⁴²

The Minister for Public Works, André Tardieu, in a letter to the President of the major rail networks, reflected upon the importance of the speed recorder in accident investigations. This 'black box' could prove without contestation not only the speed of the locomotive at a given point on its journey, but also the action of the driver at any signal encountered. However, noted Tardieu,

³⁸ *Le Peuple*, 4/8/1928.

³⁹ *L'Humanité*, 26/1/1929.

⁴⁰ AN: F/7/13671, Préfet de la Sarthe au Ministre de l'Intérieur, 25/1/1929.

⁴¹ *L'Humanité*, 26/1/1926. il déclare qu'un fourgon léger, se trouvant derrière la locomotive [...] a sauté sur l'aiguille et a déraillé provoquant le déraillement de la locomotive.'; 'l'incurie criminelle de la compagnie qui a conservé en service des postales non-métalliques.'

⁴² *L'Humanité* 26/1/1926.

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 finger prints, 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.⁴³

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*.⁴⁴ In mid-August, *Le Peuple* reported how the Ministry of Public Works enquiry had established that the Inspector, ‘in taking the said band, demonstrated a lack of *sang froid* and an inadmissible lack of judgement for an agent of this grade, the Director of the *État* has therefore announced his retirement from office.’⁴⁵ The appointment of Raoul Dautry as the new Director of the *État* rail network transformed the case for the prosecution. Not only did he remove the company inspector from his post, among his first actions upon taking up his role was to review the Uguen case and to move to have the charges against the *cheminot* dropped.⁴⁶ The issue did not rest there, however. The *État* network brought disciplinary proceedings against Antoine Rambaud, the FNCU delegate who had investigated the case. The FNCU response was furious. Following a national campaign, the *État* network backed down from their threat to remove Rambaud from his post, instead giving him a ‘final warning.’⁴⁷ Following the Le Mans trial the reflex of arresting locomotive footplatemen in the aftermath of an accident began to elicit concern in the highest echelons of the French government. 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,

⁴³ AN: BB/18/2912, 10A34, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président des Grands Réseaux, 1/12/1928, pp.1--2. ‘Au cours de différentes enquêtes, et notamment pour les accidents récents, on a pu observer que la dite bande avait été enlevée après l’accident dans de telles conditions que la partie utile de la courbe représentative était entièrement recouverte d’empreintes digitales qui en rendaient la lecture à peu près impossible; il est même arrivé, ces jours-ci, qu’une bande a été remise au parquet intéressé incomplète et que la partie manquante fut précisément celle qui offrait le plus d’intérêt.’

⁴⁴ AN: BB/18/2912, 10A34, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président des Grands Réseaux 1/12/1928, p.2.

⁴⁵ *Le Peuple*, 14/8/1928. ‘en prélevant la dite bande, fait preuve d’un manqué de sang-froid et d’une légèreté inadmissible pour un agent de ce grade, le directeur général des chemins de fer de l’Etat a prononcé sa mise à la retraite d’office.’

⁴⁶ Michel Avril, *Raoul Dautry: la passion de servir*, p.61.

⁴⁷ See editions of *L’Humanité*, 17/9/1928; 13/9/1928.

'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.'⁴⁸

Elected Cheminot Safety Delegates

An early call for safety delegates drawn from the cheminot population was made in 1920 by the *Union des Syndicats du Réseau du Midi*, a part of the then still unified National Federation. Writing to the Minister for Public Works, the union claimed that health and safety procedures were being routinely flouted on the railways. Noting that the labour inspection service was 'already extremely busy' the union proposed to 'entrust the examination of these infractions to inspectors drawn from the personnel, to whom it would be necessary to grant powers of sanction.'⁴⁹ Even by 1920, however, neither the issue of railway safety nor the practice of approaching the French government department were entirely new. As far back as 1870 for instance, a petition on the subject had been presented by the *Union Fraternelle des Mécaniciens et Chauffeurs* to the Ministry, whom the cheminots judged to be 'the best guarantor of worker interests and safety.'⁵⁰ The interwar French state did not prove deaf to the concerns regarding industrial health and safety. In the mid-1920s, the Ministry of Labour entered into correspondence with a number of industrialists over the possibility of initiating safety delegates from among the workforce in all dangerous or insalubrious industries.⁵¹ In August 1927, the Prefect of Police wrote to the Minister for Public Works to alert him of a desire expressed by the *Conseil Général* of the Seine to create elected worker safety delegates, analogous to those functioning in the mines, in all factories involved in the production and distribution of energy.⁵² A ministerial order of 28 June 1927 from the

⁴⁸ AN: BB/18/2912, 10A34, Ministre des Travaux Publics à Ministre de la Justice 4/12/1929, pp.1--2. 'l'incarcération préventive se justifie de moins en moins en cas d'accidents de chemins de fer.' 'provoque souvent une réelle émotion parmi les cheminots qui la considèrent comme une mesure d'autant plus pénible qu'elle n'est à peu près jamais appliqué aux chauffeurs d'automobiles inculpés d'homicide ou de blessures par imprudence.'

⁴⁹ AN: F/22/508, Sécurité Chemins de Fer, s.d (fin 1920), 'Au sujet des questions proposées par l'union des Syndicats du réseau du Midi en ce qui concerne l'application des proscriptions d'hygiène et de sécurité dans des chemins de fer'. pp.1--2. 'confier la contestation de ces infractions aux contrôleurs des agents des chemins de fer auxquels il y aurait lieu d'attribuer les pouvoirs de sanctions.'

⁵⁰ G Thuiller, 'La pétition des mécaniciens et des chauffeurs des chemins de fer en 1871', *Mouvement Social*, 66, (Jan – Mar., 1969), 65--88, (66).

⁵¹ See documents within AN: F/22/435.

⁵² AN: F/22/435, Préfet de Police à M. le Ministre des Travaux Publics (Direction des Mines), 26/8/1927.

Ministry for Public Works created commissions on 'Accidents and Safety' and a second on 'Hygiene', both concerning the railway industry. A second decree of December 1927 announced the membership of these commissions, the list including such diverse personalities as Paul Doumer, President of the Senate, and Marcel Bidegaray, former General Secretary of the FNCC, by this stage assistant to Jarrigion.⁵³ While the records of the safety commission do not seem to have survived, several documents relating to the Hygiene Commission are extant. These papers largely focus upon the health risk to the travelling public; a concern with the cleanliness of railway carriages in particular was evinced by the commission, asking that these should be regularly disinfected. Anxiety regarding the threat of tuberculosis was uppermost in the commission's mind as wider fears relating to the state of French health found their way into discussions concerning the practice of railway work.⁵⁴

Parliament was not isolated from these debates. In December 1925 and again in June 1928, SFIO deputy Charles Goniaux initiated *propositions de loi* aimed at creating safety delegates in all sectors of French industry as assistants to the Ministry of Labour's workplace inspection teams.⁵⁵ This was a theme taken up by the PCF in the assembly on 14 February 1929, the parliamentary group proposing a law 'aiming to institute worker health and safety delegates' across French industry.⁵⁶ A key document concerning the question of safety delegates in the railway industry was the project of SFIO deputy Charles Baron announced in February 1928. This aimed to create elected safety delegates across the railway industry drawn from the ranks of the cheminots themselves.⁵⁷ Baron's proposals led to the first recorded discussion of the merits of railway safety delegates on the Chamber of Deputies *Commission des Travaux Publics*, the body which oversaw the working of this government department. The reporter on the bill for this body was the PCF deputy and former cheminot, Augustin Desoblin. The importance of the issue both to Desoblin and to the wider cheminot community can be inferred by a speech made by the deputy at a FNCU meeting in Valenciennes in August

⁵³ AN: F/14/14925, Arrête Ministère des Travaux Publics, 19/12/1927.

⁵⁴ See AN F/14/14925, Commission d'Hygiène.

⁵⁵ AN: F/22/435, No. 2173, 8/12/1925 and No. 106, 7/6/1928.

⁵⁶ AN: F/22/435, Annexe au PV. 14/2/1929, No. 1264, Chambre des Députés. 'tendant à instituer des délégués ouvriers à la sécurité et à l'hygiène des travailleurs'.

⁵⁷ AN: F/22/435, Proposition de loi de M. Charles Baron, No.5608, Chambre de Députés Session de 1928, Annexe au PV de la 2ème séance du 22/2/1928.

1927. In the course of his remarks, Desoblin felt it worthwhile to bring to the attention of the audience his role in investigating the Baron proposals for the Commission.⁵⁸

A meeting of a *sous-commission des études* on 12 December 1928 recommended forwarding Desoblin's favourable report to the Minister of Public Works, though the concurrent work of the *Conseil Supérieur du Travail* on a proposition to create Safety Delegates across all industries led to a certain degree of caution in the commission's reception of Baron's much narrower proposal.⁵⁹ When, on 6 February 1929, the Minister for Public Works, Pierre Forgeot, came before the Commission it was to discuss two related elements, the creation of safety delegates on the railways but also the request of the Commission to be granted access to inspect for themselves working conditions and safety procedures on the railways. The Minister gave short shrift to the latter proposal arguing that any information the Commission required could be provided by the Ministry's own inspection service.⁶⁰ However, on the general principle of cheminot safety delegates, the Minister declared himself firmly in favour. Recalling his own experience of visiting the site of an accident at Bois-Colombes, the Minister recounted how it was clear to him that certain workers, notably the signaller and the locomotive's driver, were more clearly aware of elements in the affair than the Ministry's own *Directeur Général du Contrôle*. In such circumstances it would be beneficial to have a qualified worker assisting the investigation team.⁶¹ There was, Forgeot contended, an important moral point to make. He argued that worker safety delegates, investigating alongside company inspectors, would give cheminots a greater stake in the industry. On both technical and moral grounds the Ministry for Public Works declared themselves in favour of the principle of safety delegates, but the Minister raised the potential difficulty concerning, in his view, the propensity of railway workers to blame the whole system for their own errors.⁶² It was noted that delegates would have to be ready to find fault where fault was due, Forgeot noting how it was not company directors who manoeuvred the points.⁶³

Enthusiasm for the railway safety delegates was, therefore, decidedly mixed at the highest echelons of the Ministry for Public Works. Nevertheless, the momentum created

⁵⁸ AN: F/7/13681, Commissaire Spécial de Valenciennes, 24/8/1927.

⁵⁹ AN: C//14911, Tome 1, Sous-Commission des Etudes, 12/12/1928, p.6.

⁶⁰ AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 6/2/1929, p.25.

⁶¹ AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 6/2/29, p.26.

⁶² AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 6/2/29, p.28.

⁶³ AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 6/2/29, p.27.

by parliamentary discussions and the wider national concern over railway safety led in 1931 to the Ministry taking action on the subject. The issue of the health and safety of cheminots at work became institutionalized within railway industrial relations as a result of a decree issued by the Minister for Public Works on 18 April 1931, published in the *Journal Officiel* on the 24th. The first article of the decree announced that delegates for personnel safety were instituted within the six major rail companies.⁶⁴ Article Four outlined the role of the new safety delegates:

The role of safety delegates consists, in case of accidents having occasioned while at work, the death or serious injury of one or several employees [...] to undertake an inquiry and to report on the conditions wherein the accident occurred.⁶⁵

While seeming to offer an opportunity for railway workers to involve themselves with the oversight of their working conditions, the decree was in fact far from satisfactory for many in the workforce. The decree only allowed workers to investigate in the aftermath of an accident and they had to be called upon to do so by company management. They were not at liberty to inquire into working conditions as they saw fit. The definition of what precisely constituted a 'serious injury' was also contested. According to the Ministry for Public Works, an injury counted as serious when it resulted in at least twenty days' absence from work; however, it was left up to the railway companies through their medical staff to judge from a brief initial consultation in the immediate wake of the accident the expected period of incapacity. Once decided upon this period was rigidly adopted. Even if subsequently the employee involved required additional recuperation time, no inquiry would be conducted.

The decree of April 1931 followed by another of July 1932 outlining in greater detail the operation of the safety delegates on the railways in no way matched Communist demands. A further November decree made it clear that delegates were not be directly elected by the workforce, but would be indirectly appointed by an electoral college made up of cheminots already elected as personnel delegates. Faced with the gap between the demands of the railway workers and the reality of the scheme, the FNCU

⁶⁴ AN: F/22/435, Délégués à la sécurité, Chemin de Fer, *Journal Officiel*, vendredi 24/4/1931, pp.4486—4487, (4486).

⁶⁵ AN: F/22/435, Délégués à la sécurité: Chemin de Fer. *Journal Officiel* vendredi 24/4/1931, pp.4486--4487, (4487) 'Le rôle des délégués à la sécurité consiste, en cas d'accident ayant occasionné dans le service la mort ou des blessures graves à un ou plusieurs agents [...] à faire une enquête et à établir un rapport sur les conditions dans lesquelles l'accident s'est produit.'

proposed the boycotting of the safety delegations, seeing in them the institutionalization of the Communist trade union into capitalist structures. An early response from the union to their personnel delegates announced that they should 'not, therefore, accept the decree of 18 April 1931 creating the safety delegates, esteeming that on the basis of the decree, they could not be other than tools in the hands of management.' The union leadership underlined that in the manner of their composition and on the close control of their practices by the Ministry for Public Works and the rail companies, the authorities had colluded to ensure that cheminot safety delegates would be toothless.⁶⁶ Such a response was not, however, limited to the Communist-led union. The FNCC was similarly bitterly disappointed with the government's proposals. In terms strikingly similar to the Communist denunciation, the CGT affiliated Federation announced that its leadership was entirely dissatisfied with the measure, the role envisaged being far too limited in scope. 'These dispositions', commented the FNCC in a circular, 'do not correspond in any way to our conception of the role of the worker safety delegate, such as it is defined for miners' delegates for example, and such as it is proposed by us and elucidated in the *projet de loi* put forward by the Citizen Charles Baron.' The FNCC announced its unanimous decision to forbid its delegates to participate in security delegate elections -- just as the FNCU had done.⁶⁷

For its part, the FNCU quickly reappraised the situation. At a meeting of 20 August 1932 the Federation's Executive Committee elected to recommend participation.⁶⁸ In a circular of October that year the Federation outlined its reasoning. It argued that the change of heart was in part due to the worsening offensive of the rail companies against their employees, with working conditions aggravated by rationalization policies.⁶⁹ However it is clear that pressure from members was equally important in altering the initial decision. The Le Mans conference of that year had seen numerous voices raised in favour of participation. These voices had drawn attention to the increased frequency with which accidents were occurring, while others pointed to the fact that FNCU

⁶⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, *Projet des Délégués à la sécurité s.d.* (1933), p.3. 'Les délégués du personnel n'acceptent donc pas le décret du 18 avril 1931 instituant les délégués à la sécurité, estimant que sur la base du décret ceux-ci ne seront que des instruments entre les mains du patronat.'

⁶⁷ CGTIHS: RDM, Union Nord, Fédération Confédérée 1922 – 1935, Circulaire No 18, 9/12/1932, pp.1--2. 'ces dispositions qui ne répondent d'aucune manière à notre conception du rôle du délégué ouvrier à la sécurité, tel qu'il est défini pour le délégué ouvrier mineur par exemple, et tel qu'il fut proposé par nous et concrétisé dans le projet de loi déposé par le citoyen Charles Baron.'

⁶⁸ CGTIHS: RDM, Union Nord Unitaire Déléguations (3/5 – Sécurité), Circulaire No 48 30/8/32, pp. 1--2.

⁶⁹ CGTIHS: RDM, Union Nord Unitaire Déléguations (3/5 – Sécurité), circulaire No 9, 3/10/32.

delegates were already participating in elections to positions as personnel delegates, holding regular meetings with management and government officials in this capacity.⁷⁰ Indeed this last point may have been crucial in *unitaire* thinking. The results of the most recent personnel elections, held in 1931, had left the FNCU in a very strong position, with a considerable majority of candidates elected over rival unions. In an electoral college made up of personnel delegates, the FNCU could expect to see large numbers of its candidates chosen as safety delegates. A similar situation developed in the mining industry in the Aubin basin, where Donald Reid found that from the late 1920s the CGTU affiliate came increasingly to dominate corporate elections and the elected safety delegations.⁷¹

The possibility that the safety delegations might become dominated by Communist candidates had been very present in the minds of both government and rail companies as the decision to create railway safety delegates was taken. The obvious model upon which to base security delegates in the railway industry would have been that already in existence within the mining industry. This had been the basis of the plans drawn up by the CGT and Charles Baron. Created in 1890, safety delegates within the mines had a very wide-ranging role. Their major focus was on investigating the immediate circumstances of any accident which occurred in the mines, providing a report to the Ministry of Labour. However, they also had the duty of conducting monthly inspections of working conditions below ground. The authorities were uncomfortable about extending the same responsibilities to cheminots. In his appearance before the *Commission des Travaux Publics* discussed above, the Minister was cagey on this point. When asked by a member as to whether the delegates on the railways would have analogous functions to those in the mines, he responded that he would prefer not to give an answer at that time, providing the excuse that further discussions with the railway companies were necessary. A clear insight into his thinking was provided by a further comment that railway work and mining were not related occupations.⁷² A report of February 1931 makes for instructive reading. The Ministries of the Interior and of Public Works observed closely FNCU calls for improved railway safety. Emphasizing Communist links with the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Public Works in their analysis of FNCU actions articulated *unitaire* discourse in terms of a national security threat.

⁷⁰ CGTIHS: RDM, Union Nord Unitaire Délégations (3/5 – Sécurité), circulaire No 9, 3/10/32.

⁷¹ Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), p.169.

⁷² AN: C//14911, Tome 1, PV. 6/2/29, p.28.

The railways were a key industry in times of conflict, reasoned the Ministry, and the Communist Party were known to have close links with Moscow and with the Soviet Embassy in Paris. Here, asserted Ministry officials, Russian railway experts were eager for information on the French rail network. The recent engagement of the FNCU with organizations such as the *Conseil Supérieur* could only mean that the union was attempting to gain inside information on administrative practices. Communist desires to create safety delegates with wide ranging investigative powers and freedom of access were conceptualized as evidence of an espionage threat to the French railway network and thus to national security.⁷³

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.⁷⁴ 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 railways, through the practice and experience of the safety delegate role, conceptualized 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'.⁷⁵ 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.'⁷⁶ 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

⁷³ AN: F/7/13671, Rapport 19/2/1931, p.2.

⁷⁴ CGTIHS: RdM, Union Nord Unitaire Délégations (3/5 – Sécurité), Circulaire No 9, 30/10/32', p.2. 'nous avons estimé que la lutte pour de véritables délégués à la sécurité prendrait beaucoup plus d'acuité si de l'intérieur [...] nous essayions de les entraîner à l'action.'

⁷⁵ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p.6. 'Les enquêtes de nos camarades et leurs rapports contiennent pour la grande majorité un très bon contenu, d'un caractère de défense des cheminots indiscutable qui nous ont permis d'embarrasser les Réseaux.'

⁷⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p.7 'nos camarades ne manquent pas de signaler les défauts qu'ils rencontrent aussi bien des installations que du matériel ou des négligences de la part de la Direction pour appliquer ces mesures de sécurité.'

embarrassing the Principal Inspector, as well as the Chief Engineer with his reports which conclude each accident to be the responsibility of the Company.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ 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 realize not simply a demonstration of discipline, but clearly accuse company rationalization policy as being the cause of numerous accidents.'⁷⁹ 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 rationalization policies and new working methods which aggravate working conditions.'⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ A key element of the analysis however, was the inadequacy of the safety delegate role as laid down by the 1931 decree.⁸² To that effect, the FNCU's General Secretary Lucien Midol, backed by the rest of the PCF's parliamentary party, introduced in January 1934 a 'proposition de loi' aimed at 'modifying and completing' the decree of 18 April 1931.⁸³ Rationalization and capitalist modernization were placed at the heart of the Communist critique of railway safety. Central to the Communist conceptualization of railway accidents was the opposition to

⁷⁷ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p.7. 'ce délégué était très actif embarrassait l'Inspecteur de Service ainsi que l'Ingénieur en chef de service avec ses rapports, qui concluaient après chaque accident à la responsabilité de la compagnie.'

⁷⁸ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Rapport, 11/8/1933, p.7

⁷⁹ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p.1. 'nous devons en cette occasion réaliser non seulement une manifestation de discipline, mais accuser nettement la politique rationalisatrice des compagnies comme étant à l'origine des nombreux accidents.'

⁸⁰ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p.2. 'des contestations faites au cours des enquêtes effectuées, il résulte que les nombreux accidents ont souvent pour origine l'application d'une politique de rationalisation et de nouvelles méthodes d'exploitation qui aggravent les conditions de travail.'

⁸¹ CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p.2.

⁸² CGTIHS: RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Circulaire No 2, 11/1/1934, p.2.

⁸³ CGTIHS, RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Proposition de Loi, p.1.

company and state readings of events. Where the latter emphasized the individual nature of each incident and drew attention to human error and the failure to follow regulations, Communists emphasized the systemic failings of capitalist techniques which, it was argued, were compromising safety. The question of workplace discipline was confronted head on, the PCF bill noting how strict productivity requirements enforced through bonuses and fines encouraged unsafe working practices, regulations were necessarily violated if work was to be completed in the allotted time-frame.⁸⁴

Reforming the Safety Delegations: The Case of the Twenty Day Absence

As well as providing considerable propaganda opportunities for Communists on the railways, the FNCU made serious attempts to reform the operations of safety delegates. This involved, as we have seen, arguing for the extension of the delegates' powers and for the implementation of direct elections, though such demands were far from being straightforwardly 'Communist', the FNCC made exactly the same claims. In addition, the Communist-led FNCU attempted to moderate what were perceived as the more iniquitous elements of the 1931 decree, in particular the stipulation that before any non-lethal accident could be investigated the victim's injuries had to be judged sufficiently serious to warrant more than twenty days' absence from work. For the rail companies, this figure came to be accepted as the benchmark standard as to what officially constituted classification as an accident, to be recorded and reported to the Ministry. The 1935 conference of industry *Chefs d'Exploitation* judged it 'inutile' to provide an analysis to the *Inspecteur du travail* in the case of 'minor' accidents.⁸⁵ The FNCU suspected that the rail company medical staff was conniving with the employers to obstruct investigations into working practices. In November 1933, the Ministry of Public works received a letter signed from the Deputy for Seine-et-Oise on behalf of the *Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Chemins de fer*. This letter was most likely from Lucien Midol, General Secretary of the FNCU, who had been elected PCF deputy for Seine-et-Oise in May 1932. Midol wrote that 'it seems that stern orders have been given to the networks' doctors that, in case of accidents, the number of invalid days prescribed be inferior to twenty, so as not to place the Company under the obligation to

⁸⁴ CGTIHS, RdM, FD CGT-CGTU, Fédération Unitaire, Circulaires, Délégués à la sécurité, Proposition de Loi, p.2.

⁸⁵ CAMT: 48AQ3551, Conférence des Chefs d'Exploitation, PV. 10/4/1935, p.1.

call upon a safety delegate.⁸⁶ The railway companies, Midol argued, were attempting to circumvent their responsibilities. Despite numerous accidents, he argued, 'there are safety delegates who have not been called upon to mount a single inquiry in more than six months.'⁸⁷ In particular, Midol drew the Ministry's attention to the case of one Michel Stévenot, an *adjusteur* at the Mohon workshop on the *Est* network. Stévenot had seriously injured an eye in a welding accident. Observed by the company doctor it was judged that he required just fifteen days' absence from work. Stévenot in fact returned to work four months later, complete with new glass eye.⁸⁸

The *unitaire* claim occasioned an inquiry into the Stévenot affair by Ministry inspectors. The *Inspecteur du Travail* underlined that Stévenot had lost his eye due to complications one month after the incident and that such an event had been impossible for the medical staff to foresee.⁸⁹ In any case, reasoned the Inspector, the obvious cause of the incident was Stévenot's failure to wear safety glasses, running counter to article 9 of the 'Prescriptions for Safety at Work'. This regulation imposed the use of glasses 'for all work occasioning dangerous projections.'⁹⁰ The Inspector went on to explain how, in the period between 1 January and 23 November 1933, 498 accidents had occurred on the *Est* network, all but eight considered by medical staff to require less than twenty days' invalid time. On 104 occasions the actual convalescence period extended beyond this time. Only eight times was a safety delegate called upon to carry out an enquiry.⁹¹ There were thus, reasoned the Inspector, several occasions on which 'the provisions

⁸⁶ AN: F/14/14928, Dossier E84D, Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Chemins de fer au Ministre des Travaux Publics, 3/11/1933. 'il apparait que des ordres sévères ont été donnés aux médecins des réseaux pour qu'en cas d'accident du travail le nombre de jours d'arrêt prescrit soit inférieur à 20 jours afin de ne placer la compagnie dans l'obligation de convoquer le délégué à la sécurité.'

⁸⁷ AN: F/14/14928, Dossier E84D, Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Chemins de fer au Ministre des Travaux Publics, 3/11/1933. 'malgré de nombreuses accidents, il existe des délégués à la sécurité qui n'ont pas été appelés à faire une seule enquête depuis plus de six mois.'

⁸⁸ AN: F/14/14928, Dossier E84D, Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Chemins de fer au Ministre des Travaux Publics 3/11/1933.

⁸⁹ 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, p.2.

⁹⁰ 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 novembre 1933, p.2.

⁹¹ 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, p3.

have been clearly insufficient.⁹² Yet the Inspector was clear that this was not evidence of conspiracy: though it was true that medical staff had been underestimating injury severity, such practices long predated the existence of the safety delegates.⁹³ The *Directeur du Contrôle du Travail*, M. De Ruffi de Pontevés, agreed with this analysis but suggested that in future, to avoid misunderstandings, follow up examinations should be undertaken after the initial diagnosis and the invalid period kept under review.⁹⁴

Contesting Responsibility: Terroir and Quence 'Brûlés vifs'

For the rail companies, accidents at work were in large part attributable to a failure on the part of cheminots to observe the correct regulations and procedures. High levels of discipline were a fundamental constituent in the safe operations of the railways. If company rules were followed to the letter then accidents, it was argued, would not occur. In 1929, a Paris-Orléans rail company study concluded that between 70% and 80% of all accidents were attributable to, 'the imprudence or ignorance of the victims.'⁹⁵ The *Nord* followed a similar logic. In an educational pamphlet issued in 1927 the message was clear, injuries amongst the cheminots were in large part the result of 'overconfidence' in their work and a resultant failure to follow the correct procedures.

Numerous agents are each day victim to industrial accidents which are often very serious. How do these accidents occur? Almost always through insouciance, inattention or imprudence; agents are often guilty of an excess of confidence in themselves; they thus lose any notion of danger and do not hesitate to risk their lives.⁹⁶

⁹² 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, p.3. 'ces prévisions ont été visiblement insuffisantes.'

⁹³ 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, p.4.

⁹⁴ 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.

⁹⁵ CAMT: 48AQ3551, Compagnie d'Orléans, Prévention d'accidents, 21/2/1929, p.2.

⁹⁶ CAMT: 48AQ3551, Chemin de Fer du Nord, *Exploitation et Travaux et Surveillance: Instruction générale résumant les prescriptions à observer par les agents pour se mettre à l'abri des accidents* (Lille, 1927, 1929), p.2. 'de nombreuses agents sont victimes, chaque jour, d'accidents du travail qui souvent sont très graves. Comment arriver ses accidents? Presque toujours par insouciance, inattention ou imprudence; les agents pèchent souvent par excès de confiance en eux-mêmes; ils perdent ainsi la notion du danger et n'hésitent pas à risquer leur vie.'

The message was clear. If discipline among the workforce was lax, then so too were safety standards. Accidents occurred as a result of departures from prescribed codes of actions and comportment. It is not difficult to see in such language an implied critique of the political orientation of Communist trade unionism on the railways, itself seen by the rail companies as a troubling departure from workplace discipline. The company interpretation of rail accidents was strongly contested by the Communist FNCU. These competing cultures of railway industrial relations are illuminated through the analysis of the responses of state, management and safety delegates to the case of Terroir and Quence, burned alive on their locomotive on 5 June 1933.

M. Puget, the *Chef de Train* aboard the slightly delayed Paris-Montereau-direct-Paris-Melun, became concerned as the locomotive, having just passed through the station of Maisons-Alfort, slowed rapidly to walking pace. Puget also reported being aware of an odd odour emanating from the direction of the locomotive. Unable to see into the cab (the engine being coupled to the train backwards) and sensing something amiss, Puget applied the wagon break, bringing the train to a halt. Upon descending to investigate, the train manager found the cab empty. Initial investigations of the engine found nothing abnormal. It was noted, however, that the regulator was closed and the water tap in the cab was wide open, upon which sat a soaking wet cloth. Near to the boiler safety valve was found the body of Quence, the fireman. Witnesses informed the inquiry that they had observed the two men working the fire, before seeing each in turn immolated by the flames. The body of the driver, Terroir, was discovered further back down the line.⁹⁷

The cause of the accident, the Ministry's reporter surmized, having assessed the witness statements and the physical evidence of the machine, could only be explained by 'a violent burst of flame provoked by the closure of the regulator by Terroir whilst the door of the firebox had been left ajar by the fireman Quence.'⁹⁸ The intensity of the blow-back was explicable, hazarded the reporter, by the position of the ash box doors. An examination of the engine on its return to the depot had found that the 'forward' trap of the ash box was half open whereas the 'rear' trap was completely closed. In ordinary circumstances this would have been the correct operating position but, the engine

⁹⁷ AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Accident mécanicien Terroir et chauffeur Quence brûlés vifs sur leur machine au train 417 du 5 juin 1933, Paris le 24/11/1934, pp.1--3.

⁹⁸ AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Accident mécanicien Terroir et chauffeur Quence brûlés vifs sur leur machine au train 417 du 5 juin 1933, Paris le 24/11/1934, p.5.

pulling backwards, these should have been reversed.⁹⁹ The *Rapport Judiciaire* of 13 June 1934 concluded that, 'the mechanic Terroir and the driver Quence have been victim to professional imprudence.' There could be 'no other responsibility than that of the two victims.'¹⁰⁰

A cheminot security delegate conducted his own investigation into the causes of the accident. Extensively referred to in the company accident report, it allows an insight into how the workers' delegates in such cases offered competing analyses of events. The report makes no allusion to the political orientation of the safety delegate, or to any trade union connection, however, the report touches upon key themes present in *unitaire* critiques. The safety delegate's report re-focussed the investigative lens away from individual actions to wider systemic causes which, it was argued, played key contributing roles in the two deaths. Firstly, it was suggested that the 'backwards' running of the locomotive was a major factor in the disaster and that in future such operations should be banned. However, the key element in the report was the issue of time. The fact that the engine had arrived late from pulling a previous train meant that Terroir and Quence had been faced with a significantly reduced time-frame in which to build up the fire before the hour arrived for the locomotive to once more depart. Eyewitnesses had reported seeing the two men working the fire as the train was en route, this lack of time, argued the safety delegate, had compromised the judgement and the safety of the two men.

'It is [...] at the moment that the men undertook the necessary work to put the engine in a state to effectively pull the train that the blow-back occurred, all the more violent that the preparation had been rushed. The gas in the firebox emanating from a fuel insufficiently ignited did not have the time to escape via the chimney and finding an opening escaped, all the more violently as this opening was restricted.'¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Accident mécanicien Terroir et chauffeur Quence brûlés vifs sur leur machine au train 417 du 5 juin 1933, Paris le 24/11/1934, p.5.

¹⁰⁰ AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Judiciaire de l'Inspecteur du contrôle de l'État, Paris le 13/6/1934, p.6. 'le mécanicien Terroir et le chauffeur Quence ont été victimes d'une imprudence professionnelle [...] Aucune autre responsabilité que celle des deux victimes ne peut être mise en cause.'

¹⁰¹ AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Accident mécanicien Terroir et chauffeur Quence brûlés vifs sur leur machine au train 417 du 5 juin 1933, Paris le 24/11/1934, pp.6--7. 'c'est [...] au moment où allant effectuer ce travail nécessaire pour mettre la machine en état pour remorquer dans de bonnes conditions ce train, que le retour de flammes se produisit, d'autant plus violent que la préparation avait été accélérée, les gaz dans le foyer émanant d'un combustible non en pleine combustion n'avaient pas eu le temps de s'échapper par le cheminée et trouvant une ouverture, s'échappèrent, avec d'autant plus de violence que l'ouverture était restreinte.'

The safety delegate recommended that in future more time be accorded to allow for the correct preparation of the engine.¹⁰² The strictness of company timetables and punishments for late running created significant pressures upon the workforce. It was argued, in effect, that these pressures had led to the fatal events.

The company investigator discussed the report of the safety delegate largely in order to dismiss it. Yet the representative of the Ministry for Public Works, while arriving at the conclusion seen above regarding the culpability of the two *cheminots*, did draw attention to the wider experience of blow-backs on the railway network. Though less dramatic than that experienced by Terroir and Quence, there had been several examples of such incidents in recent years. The reporter argued that, although locomotive footplatemen were alive to the dangers, the information provided by rail companies to their staff was inconsistent. Depending upon the network, details of the dangers could be transmitted either in written form or orally. However, on the PLM, where the accident in question occurred, *cheminots* were not made aware of the dangers of blow-backs beyond the specific context of operating in tunnels. It was also suggested that a mechanism be introduced to locomotives which would ensure that regulator and firebox could only be opened in the correct configuration. None of the above conclusions, however, detracted in the company mind from the responsibility of Terroir and Quence for their own demise.¹⁰³

Railway Safety in the Popular Front Era

In 1936 the language of railway safety took on the inflections of the Popular Front. Once more the issue was the pre-emptory arrest of driver and fireman, this time following the derailing of a train at Avignon in the summer of 1934. The Geneva to Vintimille express had derailed, claimed the authorities, through an excess of speed. The two footplatemen were arrested for 'blessures involonataire et d'homicide.' It was alleged that the locomotive was travelling at 60KpH, rather than the maximum 20KpH for the section of the line in question. The key evidence however, the *bande flaman* speed recorder, had been destroyed in mysterious circumstances, the investigating

¹⁰² AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Accident mécanicien Terroir et chauffeur Quence brûlés vifs sur leur machine au train 417 du 5 juin 1933, Paris le 24/11/1934, pp.6--7.

¹⁰³ AN: F/14/14902, Accidents à Vapeur, Rapport Accident mécanicien Terroir et chauffeur Quence brûlés vifs sur leur machine au train 417 du 5 juin 1933, Paris le 24/11/1934, pp.7--8.

magistrate at Nîmes only writing that he had been unable to establish the driver's role in its destruction.¹⁰⁴ Lucien Midol and Jean Jarrigion, leaders of the FNCU and FNCC respectively, took up the case, protesting once more the arrest of cheminots following accidents. Midol wrote of the anger which the insinuations against the driver had occasioned among cheminots in the South of France, 'because such an accusation does not correspond at all to the techniques of railway work.'¹⁰⁵ The professional aptitude of all cheminots was considered to be in question. The theme had been taken up in a telegram received by the Justice Ministry from locomotive staff at the railway depot of Marseille-Saint-Charles in August 1934. Protesting vehemently the arrest of the *mécanicien*, engine drivers and firemen argued that, 'these workers are neither thieves nor murderers to be thus treated'. These cheminots considered that it required a complete misunderstanding of the difficult work which they were daily accomplishing for such a 'scandalous arrest' to be undertaken.¹⁰⁶ The 'voleurs' and 'assassins' imagery is an interesting echo of the language used by Communists in the late 1920s and early 1930s in their condemnation of the railway companies, discussed above. This telegram however, demonstrates the strength of feeling occasioned by such arrests and also the strength of the belief in the professional pride of cheminots. It was inconceivable to these locomotive drivers that a cheminot could derail his train through negligence, and certainly not through a considerable excess of speed, unless he had been failed by wider railway systems.

The case dragged on. In March of 1936 the now unified CGT Cheminot Federation section at Avignon wrote to the Ministry of Justice demanding redress as the footplatemen had each received 100 franc fines. Expressing their confidence in the CGT and the Popular Front, 'for the defence of the people against all that oppresses them', the union went on to strongly condemn the practice of arresting and condemning cheminots in the case of accidents.¹⁰⁷ Pre-emptive arrests, however, were not ended with the arrival of the Popular Front government. In September 1938, just prior to the

¹⁰⁴ AN: BB/18/2912, Procureur General de Nîmes à Ministre de la Justice, 8/10/1935 and 28/1/1936.

¹⁰⁵ AN: BB/18/2912, Midol à Ministre de la Justice, 21/11/1934. See also AN: BB/18/2912, Jean Jarrigion à Ministre des Travaux Publics, 14/8/1934. 'car un tel accusation ne correspondent en rien à la technique des chemins de fer.'

¹⁰⁶ AN: BB/18/2912, télégramme à M. la Garde des Sceaux, Août 1934. 'Ces travailleurs ne sont ni des voleurs ni des Assassins pour être ainsi traités [...] ils estiment qu'il faut avoir une méconnaissance absolue du dur métier qu'ils accomplissent journellement pour procéder à une arrestation aussi scandaleuse.'

¹⁰⁷ AN: BB/18/2912, Syndicat des Cheminots d'Avignon à Ministre de la Justice, 13/3/1936. 'pour la défense du peuple contre tout ce qui l'opprime'

full reversal of the hopes of June 1936, the Minister for Public Works, in this case Anatole de Monzie, was still writing to the Justice Ministry to protest the practice of the unreflective arrest of railway workers following rail accidents.¹⁰⁸

Nor did nationalization prove to be the panacea for safety that its proponents had claimed. The SNCF proved just as susceptible to the problems faced by the private firms, particularly in the continued use of wooden carriages. The on-going problems in this area were highlighted by the accident at Chateauroux in March 1939, a train colliding with a cow and derailing. Inquiries revealed that the incident had taken place at Chateauroux station where a young apprentice *sous-chef de gare* had been left in sole charge. Such a situation caused Midol on the National Assembly's Public Works Commission to once more question personnel reductions which, he considered, may have 'given to the accused young trainee too heavy a responsibility.'¹⁰⁹ Noting that there were more than 3800 metal carriages in service, Midol found it astonishing that the express train had still not been formed solely from metallic carriages.¹¹⁰ Similarly, the effects of rationalization procedures being pursued by the SNCF continued to be a major element in the FdC's analysis of safety failings on the railways, just as they had been under private ownership. In a union publication of 1939, FdC leaders Jarrigion and Sémard attacked the SNCF's attempts to reduce cheminot numbers, in language and imagery familiar from the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹¹¹

Conclusion

An examination of the politics of railway safety allows us to problematize questions of 'reformism' and 'corporatist' trade union identities. It is evident that corporatist industrial relations structures in the interwar period did not, of themselves, militate against aggressive trade union action. Both the CGT and CGTU unions prior to reunification in 1935 continued to view railway relations as elements in a wider power struggle against 'capitalism.' For the Communists such a conclusion is perhaps unsurprising. However, it is clear that the CGT were also far from making peace with interwar French capitalism. This might, in part, be seen as a question of rhetoric and

¹⁰⁸ AN: BB/18/2912, Circulaire Ministre des Travaux Publics à Ministre de la Justice, 13/9/1938.

¹⁰⁹ AN: C//15197, Tome VIII, PV. 16/3/39, p.6. 'donner au jeune stagiaire inculpé des responsabilités trop grandes.'

¹¹⁰ AN: C//15197, Tome VIII, PV. 29/3/1939, p.2.

¹¹¹ Fédération des Cheminots, *La Sécurité des chemins de fer* (Paris, 1939).

presentation. Georges Lefranc has written of the pressure which the outflanking presence of the CGTU placed on the CGT, forcing them to adopt more radical language in which to conceal their underlying reformist credentials.¹¹² This analysis was central to the anti-CGT arguments advanced by the FNCU during the 1930s. However, in the railway industry such a clear-cut interpretation takes us only so far. In the final analysis, the FNCC were strongly critical of railway management and were fully supportive of the SFIO position, outlined by Moch, which called for the industrial nationalization of the railways.

Examination of the politics of railway safety also permits a deeper understanding of the operation of Communist politics in interwar France. While it is perhaps unsurprising that Communists, both at the summit of the FNCU and among the rank-and-file, interpreted accidents in terms of the wider Communist critique of capitalism, the nature of their involvement provides an important insight into the means by which Communism established itself firmly among railway workers after the First World War. Unstinting engagement with the immediate workplace concerns of union members and an uncompromising, if instinctive, backing of cheminots involved in accidents was central to FNCU capacity to maintain support in an often dangerous industry. It is further apparent that the FNCU quickly identified the politics of railway safety as an excellent means to advance cheminot authority within railway industrial relations. This is particularly clear in their promotion of railway safety delegates as well as in their vocal campaign to see that the letter and spirit of safety regulations were followed. In practical terms, this required the union to work within the established frameworks of railway industrial relations and parliamentary oversight in order to enhance the role of railway workers within the operations of the rail network.

Ultimately, railway safety was never simply a cheminot issue. It had wider national implications. Pursuing railway safety as a political question meant appealing beyond the FNCU core constituency, and even beyond industrial workers. Communists were, therefore, influenced by the public-versus-private debate in interwar railway policy. Although identification with the workers remained integral to their ideological make-up, the contrast between the travelling public on the one hand, and the 'potentates' of railway capitalism on the other, created categories which allowed for a good deal of manoeuvre. In the years prior to the development of a Popular Front discourse of

¹¹² Georges Lefranc, *Le syndicalisme sous le Troisième République*, p.267.

national unity, it is clear that elements of such a discourse were already present in interwar French Communism in a manner strongly reminiscent of more familiar left-wing attacks against the corrosive influence of the '200 families' on French society. Thus, a straightforward binary opposition between 'reformist' and 'revolutionary' trade union practice is unhelpful in the railway context. Tyler Stovall's work on the Paris 'consumer's war' during the *Union Sacrée* of World War One offers an interesting point of comparison regarding the question of engagement with national concerns and, at the same time, the continuing relevance and persistence of class conflict. The concept of the 'consumer's war,' argues Stovall, 'reframed class conflict so that commodities became symbols of social differences and divisions.' Furthermore, 'it suggested for many working-class Parisians national unity was achieved by excluding the wealthy, not by joining them.'¹¹³ While industrial workers occupied a central role within FNCU and Communist pronouncements, the incorporation of the traditional imagery of republican anti-railway discourse attacking the 'trusts' reconceptualized class relations in such a way as to create an imaginary space within which Popular Front rhetoric could develop.

¹¹³ Tyler Stovall, 'The Consumer's War: Paris, 1914-1918', p.324.

Chapter Seven: Railway Workers in the Twilight of the Third Republic, 1936-39

Introduction

June 1936 was a significant date for the *cheminots*. This was not, however, the result of any widespread strike movement or occupation of the French railway network. Rather, *cheminot* militancy, as we have seen, often appeared to march to a different rhythm to the rest of the French labour movement. This was once more the case during the ‘social explosion’ of May and June 1936, which Gérard Noiriel famously characterized as the arrival of the French ‘working class’ into the national political sphere.¹ This thesis has so far indicated that railway workers were already an important part of this political space prior to 1936. Moreover, the striking workers of June 1936 were relatively unorganized (in the sense of trade union affiliation), coming predominantly from those industries that offered little or no job security, and in which arbitrary employer authority remained all too real. These strikers demanded the kind of benefits and rights that were the common experience of public sector and statutory workers. Moreover, the position of the *cheminots* within railway industrial politics militated against strike action. For the legions of the marginal workers within the French industrial, commercial and agricultural sectors, industrial action was the only means of registering discontent or challenging employer power. The *cheminots*, largely through the innovative approach of the FNCU to railway industrial politics, had, by contrast, reconfigured the pattern of railway industrial relations to allow for a powerful and independent *cheminot* voice to emerge.

While a number of historians have interpreted the personnel committees and elections as evidence of a successful managerial strategy which acted to counter *cheminot* militancy and to keep railway workers out of the Popular Front movement,² the picture emerging from this thesis is rather different. *Cheminots* envisioned these committees in ways that management had not intended, transforming them into important spheres through which employer power was challenged and *cheminot* interests defended. The experience of

¹ Gérard Noiriel, *Les ouvriers dans la société française*, p.184. ‘Juin 1936: le prolétariat industriel entre dans l’histoire (de France).’

² Notably the work of John M. Sherwood, ‘Rationalisation and Railway Workers in France’; Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines républicaines de Vichy*.

around a decade of such independently-minded engagement served the re-united Federation particularly well in the altered political circumstances of Popular Front rule, as they effectively dictated terms to employers and government. It further ensured that the leadership would be able to maintain the confidence of the cheminot rank-and-file as *unitaires* and to a lesser extent *confédérés*, had demonstrated for many years their distance from -- and, when necessary, their opposition to -- management.

None of this is to suggest that cheminots were isolated from the spirit of June 1936, the FdC was forced to work hard to publicize its successes in negotiations with management and state to keep the rank-and-file supportive of Federation policy. That said, the real significance of the Popular Front for the cheminots was the inauguration of a genuinely consultative approach to economic governance in France. With the collective contract and the forty-hour week negotiations and application in particular, cheminots established themselves as something approaching an equal partner in a railway social contract, elaborated in full consultation with management and state. The strength of cheminot organization, their hugely expanding union membership and their position at the heart of France's transport network, ensured that the FdC voice was heard at the heart of railway decision making. This was not, however, sufficient to ensure that railway nationalization would follow union thinking, the creation of the SNCF being labelled as the *Sabotage de la nationalisation par le capitalisme ferroviaire*, but it was also the case that the FdC did not push their vision of a *nationalisation industrialisé* very strongly.

The decision of the Daladier government to overturn the social legislation of June 1936, notably the forty-hour law, and to reaffirm employer predominance in relations with workers through the re-imposition by decree of a liberal economic strategy, judged necessary for the rearmament push, met with significant anger and a profound sense of betrayal on the part of cheminots and the CGT more generally. This was all the more significant as the trade union movement felt strongly that they had been collaborating effectively to ensure a flexible implementation of working time legislation, the central principle simply being that the union movement should have a central role in overseeing such moves. On the railways, FdC anger was all the greater as, as late as the summer of 1938, both the Daladier government and the SNCF President had been praising the union for its openness to achieving genuine reform of the forty-hour law. The November 30 general strike, which may not have occurred without the declared support

of cheminots, was a complete failure with cheminots largely reporting for work as normal in the face of a massive military occupation of the network and the threat of criminal actions against strikers.

Though short lived, the Popular Front experiment in social relations had a profound impact upon both French trade unionists and an important group of future French elites who would hold important positions in French politics and administration in the post-Liberation period. The cheminot were at the centre of these developments. Yet such innovations were not entirely the product of the Popular Front era. The experience of railway industrial politics and the role of Communist cheminots in their practical elaboration through the interwar years were important markers for future Communist and CGT practice.

The Social Explosion

Elections in May 1936 saw a considerable advance for Left wing parties. The success of the SFIO and the PCF in the first round led to jubilation among French workers. Across France, an unprecedented wave of strike action broke out. Shorter and Tilly calculate that for the year 1936, 2.5million workers participated in 17,000 strikes with three-quarters of this number occurring in June of that year.³ In turn over three-quarters of these June strikes consisted of factory occupations.⁴ May Day of 1936, which fell between the two rounds of legislative elections, was strongly supported by metal workers in Paris. In Nantes, 10,000 participated in May Day demonstrations, an increase of 500% on the previous year.⁵ A first wave of strikes, beginning with the Bréguet aircraft factory in Le Havre on 11 May and Latécoère in Toulouse on 13 May, saw the first workplace occupations as aircraft workers protested sackings conducted in the wake of the 1 May demonstrations.⁶ At Bréguet, 90% of workers had failed to attend work on May Day. Following the sacking of two militants for this action all 500 of those employed in prototype and production shops ceased work and occupied the factory.⁷ Nearly one thousand friends, family and well-wishers gathered outside the factory gates and, upon the successful resolution of the strike, two thousand metal

³ Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France 1830-1968* (London, 1974), p.127.

⁴ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.85.

⁵ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire* (Paris, 1986, 2006), p.98.

⁶ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire* p.99.

⁷ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism*, pp.76--77.

workers joined the 500 strikers in a procession to the town hall.⁸ From 26 May major strikes erupted among metalworkers in the Paris region. On 28 May, all 35,000 workers at Renault's Billancourt factory ceased work, followed the same day by roughly 100,000 other workers employed in the Paris region.⁹

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',¹⁰ 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.¹¹ As strikes spread through Paris and in a new wave across France, spreading to Lyon metalworkers on 3 June,¹² the Elysée Palace became increasingly nervous. Jules Moch, in his history of the Popular Front, records that President Lebrun was extremely fearful of the strikes and occupations spreading to the French Railways, which had as yet been unaffected by the social explosion.¹³ There was some cause for concern, on 5 June a serious threat from Parisian transport workers to strike forced CGT 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.¹⁴ As it was, the threat that the capital might run short of bread led Jules Moch and a CGT official on a late night dash into the countryside to secure supplies of fuel for Paris' bakers from an occupied factory. Belin, however, describes Moch's account of this threat as 'melodramatic'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, 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

⁸ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism*, p.79.

⁹ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire*, p.102.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ Quoted in Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.86.

¹² Keith Mann, *Forging Political Identity*, p.233.

¹³ Jules Moch, *Le Front Populaire: Grande Espérance* (Paris, 1971) p.138.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ René Belin, *Mémoires du Secrétariat de la CGT au Gouvernement de Vichy*, p.97; Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire*, p.115.

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 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 organizations, aiming to give satisfaction to worker grievances and with them end the strikes. Many workers, despite their participation in Popular Front action, were excluded from the agreements, notably those in banking, insurance and the *grands magasins* as well as agricultural workers.¹⁶ Yet even in trades covered, strikes continued through 1936 and beyond as the Matignon Accords failed to usher in an era of social peace.

Absent from most accounts of the Popular Front social movement are the railway workers. In the most recent accounts of the events of May-June 1936 the railways, if they appear at all, are remembered for their role in transporting French people to the coasts during the newly won paid holidays.¹⁷ While Lebrun may have feared the impact of a potential railway strike, cheminots themselves appear to have been reluctant to participate in the strike waves of the summer of 1936. Jacques Kergoat is among the historians who have noted that the entry of the highly unionized cheminots would have had 'major consequences'. In such circumstances perhaps, to paraphrase Marcel Pivert, all really would have been possible.¹⁸ In his account of the Popular Front movement, the cheminot union leader Pierre Sépard reinforces this point, 'as the factory occupation continued and developed, government and railway management feared that the cheminots would engage in their turn in an occupation which, they claimed, would finish by paralyzing the economic life of the country.' Such an approach, however, noted Sépard, did not accord with the cheminot spirit.¹⁹ The Popular Front period marks a significant gap in the histories of cheminot trade unionism, Guy Chaumel,

¹⁶ 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*.

¹⁷ Jacques Girault, *Au-devant du bonheur: les français et le front populaire* (Paris, 2005); Danielle Tartakowsky and Claude Willard, *Des lendemains qui chantent: la France des années folles et du Front Populaire* (Paris, 1986); Michel Margairaz and Danielle Tartakowsky, *L'avenir nous appartient!: une histoire du Front Populaire* (Paris, 2006); Jean-Pierre Rioux (ed.), *Le Front Populaire* (Paris, 2006).

¹⁸ Jacques Kergoat, *La France du Front Populaire*, p.151. 'des conséquences majeurs'.

¹⁹ Pierre Sépard, *Histoire de la Fédération des Cheminots* (CGT IHS Cheminot, Cahiers de L'Institut 17, 3ème trimestre, 2002), p.74. 'comme l'occupation des usines continuait et se développait, gouvernants et dirigeants des chemins de fer craignaient que les cheminots se livrent à leur tour à une occupation qui, disaient-ils, finirait de paralyser la vie économique du pays.'

Joseph Jacquet and more recently Christian Chevandier do not dwell on the period, before advancing to the complex years of occupation and *La Bataille du Rail*. The former union leader and Communist Lucien Midol devotes just six pages to the entire 1934-38 period and only one to the strikes. The main part of Midol's experience of the events as recounted is through his efforts aiding his son to organize striking metal workers in Paris. Midol's own union is entirely absent from the account.²⁰

The silence of the secondary sources reflects the gap in the primary documentation. In large part the cheminots did not take part. However, cheminot unions were not entirely isolated from the spirit of the summer of 1936. May Day saw enormous cheminot demonstrations in the Paris region and in the Nord. *Le Peuple* 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 CGT newspaper reinforced the point, May Day had been of 'a size comparable to the demonstrations prior to 1920.' The La Chapelle workshops in Paris had experienced demonstrations not witnessed since the general strike and 1,200 cheminots had attended a mass meeting that evening.²¹ *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. 2500 cheminots had joined demonstrations in the *Compagnie du Nord cité cheminote*, an important symbolic action taken upon what was to all intents and purposes company property. A further 3000 cheminots had demonstrated at Clichy, Paris.²²

Nor was May Day the sum total of cheminot involvement in the 'social explosion'. In July, in the Nord *département*, a meeting at Hellemmes was attended by some 1200 cheminots. At Lomme, the Lille-Délivrance union branch was, by early July, on its third mass demonstration, the first two having occurred on June 5 and 11. During early marches the cheminot procession was reported to have stopped outside occupied factories while cheminots chanted their support and sang the International. 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

²⁰ Lucien Midol, *La Voie que J'ai Suivi*, pp.164--170, see especially p.168.

²¹ *Le Peuple*, 1/5/1936 & 3/5/1936. 'une importance semblable aux démonstrations d'avant 1920.'

²² *Le Peuple*, 5/5/1936.

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 crowd moved onto the centre of town where 700 cheminots gathered to listen to speeches from local Communists.²³ 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.²⁴ Though the immediate corporative discussions and negotiations regarding nationalization of the railways, the elaboration of the collective contract and the negotiation and implementation of the forty-hour week seem to have been the major concerns, nonetheless, in March 1938, the FdC published a resolution which dealt prominently with the Spanish question. 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 Francist 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.²⁵

Strikes involving workers in industries associated with the railways did occur across France in June 1936, though largely in the Paris region. Employees of the Wagon-Lits company, who operated the Orient Express, had struck as had cleaning staff at the *Gare du Nord*.²⁶ At Nancy, 215 staff at a private company contracted by the *Compagnie de l'Est* had ceased work demanding a forty-hour week and fifteen days' holiday.²⁷ 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 not

²³ AD Nord: 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 pp1--2. 'à bas les fascistes'.

²⁴ On the French Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War see Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, pp.201--209.

²⁵ SNCF: 505LM136, Dossier 12, Conseil national de la Fédération des Cheminots, Résolution général, mars, 1938, pp.2--3.

²⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, Fédération réunifiée 1935-1939, carton 1, Bureau Fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936, pp.1--2.

²⁷ AN: F/14/14928, E150D, Nancy, 17/6/1936.

covered by the terms of the 1921 railway statute. Such strikes were not a phenomenon of 1936. The dossier F/7/13925 at the Paris National Archive contains details of thirty-seven individual strikes of this kind across France between 1921 and 1934. Working for less money than their cheminot colleagues and often for longer hours doing less pleasant work, these workers struck in the aim of gaining wage increases and to obtain a working statute similar to that enjoyed by the cheminots. Foreign workers, banned from working directly for the main rail companies, were employed by contractors. On only one occasion does a report on these strikes mention national union involvement in an attempt to resolve disputes, this involved Marcel Bidegaray of the FNCC. Otherwise, on Departmental railway lines, local unions seem to have been left to themselves to resolve disputes. In the case of private companies, union involvement of any kind seems to have been almost entirely absent, the only exceptions being local leaders of metalworker unions who would occasionally become involved.²⁸ The national cheminot leadership had long neglected workers in these areas. As strike actions occurred in the context of the Popular Front movement the concern of the Federation was to ensure that actions moved in acceptable directions, toward collective contracts with employers under the aegis of the FdC.²⁹

An indicator of the mood of the Federation towards strikes in private companies is suggested by the desire to ensure that cheminots would not act as strike breakers, a possibility voiced by both joint leaders Séward and Jarrigion. A worrying development was reported from Noisy-le-Sec where just such a situation was threatening to develop. A delegate on the Federation's national Federal Bureau argued that this was due to pressure being exerted by the rail company concerned. Jarrigion announced to the Federal Bureau in early June that an agreement had been reached with the rail companies that any such use of cheminots by the authorities to undermine striking workers would cease.³⁰

The FdC Federal Bureau meeting of 8 June 1936 was informed of the desire of the CGT leadership not to see the strike action extended into the public sector.³¹ This point had been strongly made by the cheminot leadership in *Le Peuple* on 5 June. The Federation called upon its members to implement the *ordre du jour* of 'Confidence and Discipline',

²⁸ AN: F/7/13925.

²⁹ see the discussions in CGTIHS: RdM, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936.

³⁰ CGTIHS: RdM, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936.

³¹ CGTIHS: RdM, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936, p.2.

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.³²

It is clear that at this point in early June, the FdC leadership were having trouble maintaining order amongst the rank-and-file.

The Matignon Accords

Just such a concern with the maintenance of order was echoed in the report of a meeting between the Federation leadership and key members of the Blum government in June 1936, held at the private residence of Léon Blum. The only account of this meeting appears in Sémard's posthumously published history of the Cheminot Federation. Present for the Federation were eight members of the Bureau Fédéral, divided equally between former *confédérés* and *unitaires*. Two of the delegates, Midol and Demusois, were PCF Deputies, Sémard a former PCF leader. The government was represented by Blum; Finance Minister Vincent Auriol; Minister of Public Works, Bedouce; Minister of the National Economy, Spinasse and Blum's Chief of Staff and transport expert, Jules Moch. According to Sémard, with strikes taking place across France, the government wanted to know what it would take for the Federation to keep the cheminots at work. The union leaders made clear their demands, key of which were twenty-one days holiday and the implementation of the forty-hour week. Despite some hesitations from Spinasse, who doubted the fairness of allowing the cheminot twenty-one days paid vacation while the rest of the French labour force was demanding only fifteen, the measures were readily agreed to by the government. Sémard was blunt in informing Blum of the pressing need for urgency in satisfying the demands if the Federation were

³² *Le Peuple*, 5/6/1936. 'La Fédération des Cheminots est avisée que quelques mouvements protestataires ont été déclenchés, ou menacent de l'être sur certains réseaux [...] Tout en comprenant l'impatience légitime des cheminots, elle ne saurait admettre que des camarades, sans mandat de leur Fédération ou de leur union, se présentent dans des centres étrangers et fassent pression dans le but d'y déclencher une agitation'.

to have the necessary authority to reign in the militancy of their members and to avoid an occupation and closure of the railway network.³³

Sémard gives no date for this meeting. It is not mentioned in any of the three books which Moch produced covering this period. If this meeting did indeed take place as Sémard claims the potential place in which it fits into the chronology of the Popular Front is of considerable interest, and potential importance. Were it to have occurred prior to 4 June the existence of an agreement between the incoming Blum government and the Railway Federation may in part explain Léon Blum's confidence in his dealings with President Lebrun and his readiness to observe the correct constitutional propriety in assuming power on the 6th. Armed with assurances that one of the nation's largest trade unions would not strike, Blum could approach these meetings with the knowledge that the vital transport network was secure. The fact that the meeting occurs at Blum's home rather than at the Hôtel Matignon may add weight to the pre-June 6 reading. The location of the account in Sémard's narrative, however, occurring after the subject of the Matignon Accords is raised, suggests strongly that the meeting took place subsequent to this accord. The fact that Bedouce, a Radical and Minister of Public Works in the Popular Front government, is present also suggests a post-June 6 date. Spinasse's recorded observation over the inequity of the twenty-one day holiday demand compared to the fifteen days accorded to other industries is perhaps confirmation of a post-Matignon meeting. Jules Moch has written of the chaos in the government once the Matignon Accords were signed with worker delegations appearing from all over France anxious for the Prime Minister to oversee negotiations between themselves and their *patrons*. Writing in his memoirs he recalled how, 'one discovered them [the worker delegations] in all the rooms, corridors and on the stairs.'³⁴ The meeting between the Federation and the government may have occurred in this context, that it is recorded as having met at Blum's home rather than the Matignon may be the result of Sémard inflating the importance of the cheminot delegation, or it may more plausibly speak to the confusion and lack of space at the Matignon.

In any event, there was no railway strike in 1936 or 1937 (1938 will be discussed below) even as the Popular Front ran into increasing difficulties. Yet the cheminots did

³³ Pierre Sémard, *Histoire de la Fédération des Cheminots*, pp.74--75.

³⁴ Jules Moch, *Une Si Longue Vie* (Paris, 1976), p.126. 'On en découvre dans toutes les salles, couloirs et escaliers.'

perhaps better out of the social legislation than any other French workers, the concern that the union might strike meant that, as Sémard noted, ‘it was a period when we obtained everything we demanded.’³⁵ Ironically, given the situation elsewhere in the French labour movement it was through carrying on working and not going on strike that the cheminots were able to gain significant improvements in their working conditions, improvements that went considerably beyond what was enjoyed by workers in other sectors of the economy. The organizational strength, size and potential militancy of the cheminot trade union had worked strongly in its favour. It was a major victory for the leadership and one which they lost no time in making known to their members as cheminot militancy threatened to develop beyond the Federal Bureau’s control.

The FdC moved quickly to publicize the positive results of the negotiations. On 14 June, the detailed article *Ce qu'obtiennent les travailleurs du rail* was prominently published in *Le Peuple*. Details of the outcomes of 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.’³⁶ The same message had been strongly delivered by Sémard at an enormous meeting of cheminots in Paris two days previously on 12 June.³⁷ On 26 June, the *Tribune des Cheminots* again reiterated all that had been achieved under the headline ‘une première victoire’.³⁸ The Federation worked hard to publicize 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 who, 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.

The wider CGT had grounds to be equally bullish in the period following the Matignon Accords of 7 June 1936. The events of May had forced a profound rethink in the Blum government's approach to economic policy. As Adrian Rossiter has underlined, of the policies implemented and carried through in the first four months of the existence of the

³⁵ Pierre Sémard, *Histoire de la Fédération des Cheminots*, p.75. c'était une période où on obtenait ce qu'on demandait.'

³⁶ *Le Peuple*, 14/6/1936. 'grâce à la puissance de notre Fédération syndicale [...] grâce à la cohésion et la discipline de tous ses adhérents.'

³⁷ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en Grève*, p.144.

³⁸ *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 26/6/1936.

Popular Front government, from paid holidays to collective bargaining to the forty-hour week and devaluation, none of them had featured in the *programme commun* published at the start of 1936.³⁹ Of these, it was the forty-hour week which became the symbol of the Popular Front social legislation. This was the culmination of a longstanding labour demand for a reduction in working time.⁴⁰ Though featuring in the SFIO's 1932 Huyghens programme as well as in agreements with the PCF in 1935, within the Popular Front programme the commitment had been reduced to a vague formula, 'Reduction of working hours without salary reductions.'⁴¹ The PCF, mindful of the need to keep both workers and middle classes together as part of the anti-fascist strategy, attempted to occupy a middle position on the issue prior to June 1936. Addressing cheminots at Lille-Délivrance at the end of May 1936, newly elected deputy and long-time member of the Federation's Bureau Fédéral, Antoine Demusois, argued that though 'a supporter of the forty-hour week, without reductions in salaries,' it was necessary, as a first step in this direction, to see existing working time legislation fully enforced, that is to say the forty-eight hour week.⁴² Demusois's message to the assembled cheminots further highlights the difficult position in which Communists found themselves. In front of his cheminot audience, with strikes abounding across France, the speaker argued that the cheminots 'should not wait for the government to keep its promises, they must, through immediate and coherent action, win a rapid and total victory.'⁴³ This hardly married with the caution urged regarding working hours and did not accord at all with the public pronouncements of the FdC leadership, as we have seen. Yet popular pressure ensured that when cheminots delegates met representatives of the government, the forty-hour week was at the top of their agenda.

³⁹ Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy and the Matignon Negotiations', *The Historical Journal*, 30, 3 (1987), 663–684 (663).

⁴⁰ See Gary S. Cross, *The Quest for Time: The Reduction of Work in Britain and France* (Berkeley, 1989).

⁴¹ quoted in Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy', p.664. 'Diminution des heures de travail sans diminution de salaires.'

⁴² AD Nord: M595/92, Commissariat de Police de Lomme à M. le Préfet du Nord, 30/5/1936, p.2. 'partisan de la semaine de quarante heures intégrale sans diminution de salaires'.

⁴³ AD Nord: M595/92, Commissariat de Police de Lomme à M. le Préfet du Nord, 30/5/1936, p.1. 'ne doivent pas attendre que le gouvernement tienne ses promesses, ils doivent par une action immédiate et cohérent, remporter une victoire rapide et totale.'

Forty-Hour Week Negotiations

In September 1936, a working committee was established to oversee the application of the forty-hour week in the railway industry.⁴⁴ Robert Le Besnerais, as representative of the railway companies, invited the National Federation to join this committee, an offer which was accepted by the union. Reporting to the Ministry for Public Works in October 1936, Le Besnerais recorded his satisfaction with the close working partnership between union and management on the committee.⁴⁵ Such optimism regarding the negotiations was more than matched by union representatives. When in December 1936 Le Besnerais was replaced at the head of the Company delegation by Henri Gréard, Pierre Sémard thanked the departing Le Besnerais for 'his benevolence which had contributed to the results obtained by the personnel over the course of these last months'. Sémard went on to assure Gréard of the union's 'spirit of confidence and the desire for collaboration which animates the delegation'⁴⁶ Union and Company delegates negotiated for three months over competing implementation plans, by 14 January, following eight plenary sessions and twenty-six meetings of the *sous-commission*, a decree text for the implementation of the forty-hour week had been agreed.⁴⁷ Due to the close cooperation and planning around the issue the measure was implemented the day the decree was issued, 18 January 1937. By the end of April of that year the forty-hour week was in application across all sectors of the economy.⁴⁸

The railway companies did not welcome these changes to the working week. Having for several years followed a policy of spending reductions, at least in the sphere of personnel, the rail companies were now forced to massively inflate their workforce. An undated 'opinion' from the rail companies, most probably from late 1936, estimated that the cost of implementing the new work time regulations would be 1,100 million francs with an extra 60,000 more agents needed to be hired to fulfil the requirements of the service. With associated building works and other costs the full amount was likely to be

⁴⁴ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil du Direction des Réseaux, Dossier Comité de Direction des Grands Réseaux, memento de réunion, 24/9/1936, p.3.

⁴⁵ AN: F/14/14959, Dossier semaine de 40 heures, Rapport du Directeur du Contrôle du Travail AS application de la semaine de quarante heures aux agents des grands réseaux de chemins de fer, p.2.

⁴⁶ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil du Direction des Réseaux, Dossier Comité de Direction des Grands Réseaux, Réunion, 30/12/1936, p.1. 'sa bienveillance qui a contribué aux résultats obtenus par le personnel au cours de ces derniers mois'; 'esprit de confiance et du désir de collaboration dont la délégation est animé.'

⁴⁷ AN: F/14/14959, Dossier projets et observations, Rapport au Président de la République 14/1/1937,

⁴⁸ See Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire Economique de la France*, Vol. 2, p.243.

3 billion (milliard) francs.⁴⁹ In February 1937, Dautry laid the costs of the measure before the Public Works Committee of the *Assemblée Nationale*. The *État* network, which had employed 60,000 people, had been forced to expand by over one sixth, hiring between 10,000 and 11,000 extra staff.⁵⁰ Such an influx, argued Dautry, was proving a major challenge, and he argued for delay, 'I will not have, before 22 May, neither the trained men nor the tools or extra materials necessary.' The *État* could not, he continued, call on a large qualified pool of labour such as the PLM or the Nord were able with their reserves of *cheminots révoqués* and former miners.⁵¹ Pomaret, the reporter of the railway budget for the finance commission, believed that the impact of the forty-hour legislation had been underestimated, his analysis suggested that 80,000 new agents would be required at an average cost of 20,000 francs per employee.⁵² By April 1937 a report to the *État Conseil de Réseau* put the figure at between 80,000 and 85,000 *cheminots* recruited as a result of the new working time regulations across all networks.⁵³ Building works alone on the *État* to provide increased and improved lodgings had been estimated to require an investment of 35,000,000 francs.⁵⁴ However, despite the difficulties which the rail companies claimed to face, they were having little trouble filling posts, in November 1936 they were hiring 450 people a day and reckoned that they had hired 54,000 in the space of just a few months in preparation for the introduction of the new law; only 4,000 extra posts were estimated to remain to be filled.⁵⁵

Nationalization and the Railways

As discussions over the forty-hour week were on-going, the subject of the future of the railway industry loomed large in the background. The Popular Front programme contained direct references to a policy of nationalizations of certain sectors of the economy. These included nationalization of the armaments industry and greater state control of the Bank of France. These commitments and the wider Popular Front nationalization policy, which was eventually to include the railways under the

⁴⁹ AN: F/14/14959, Dossier Observations des Grands Réseaux, Avis des Grands Réseaux, s.d. pp.1--2.

⁵⁰ AN: C//15196 Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, p.25.

⁵¹ AN: C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, p.25. 'je n'aurai, avant le 22 mai, ni des hommes entraînés, ni l'outillage et les matières supplémentaires nécessaires.'

⁵² AN: C//15196, Tome 2, PV. 3/2/1937, p.45

⁵³ AN: F/14/12484, Dossier Conseil de Réseau (Etat), PV. 30/4/1937, p.3.

⁵⁴ AN: F/14/12484, Dossier Conseil de Réseau (Etat), PV. 1/1/1937, p.56.

⁵⁵ AN: 307AP72, Fonds Dautry, PV. 27/11/1936, p.7.

Chautemps government in August 1937, should not be read, however, as part of an attempt on the part of the SFIO to transform the economy along Socialist or *planiste* principals. The hostility of government partners, the Radicals and the PCF, to nationalization was a key element. However, there was also considerable opposition to economic planning within the SFIO itself, which retained something of its Marxist aversion to reformism within a capitalist economy. As Kuisel has noted, planning 'smacked of the reformism of Thomas and Millerand'.⁵⁶ 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 1936.⁵⁷ In a series of articles in 1935, Blum defined a limited view of the place of nationalization in French Socialist thought, 'nationalization was not socialization [...] merely substituting state control for private ownership did not eliminate wage labour or surplus value.'⁵⁸ For the SFIO, planning could only be of value after the workers' revolution.

Yet nationalizations 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 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ The CGT leadership itself, by 1934, was divided over the issue. While Jouhaux and Belin were supporters, Raoul Lenoir and

⁵⁶ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State*, p.114.

⁵⁷ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, pp.164--166; See also Julian Jackson *The Politics of Depression in France 1932-1936*.

⁵⁸ Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State*, p.114.

⁵⁹ Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France*, pp.138--145.

⁶⁰ George Lefranc, 'Le courant planiste dans le mouvement ouvrier français de 1933 à 1936', *Le Mouvement Social*, 54, (1966), 69--89, (75).

Georges Buisson were opposed. Neither *Le Peuple* nor *La Voix du Peuple* contained articles supporting planning principles through 1934.⁶¹

Yet 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 nationalization of key industries a vital element of any *dirigiste* model. From 1931, notes Jean François Biard, the CGT had begun to identify rationalization with the economic difficulties which France was beginning to encounter. Mechanization and re-organization 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.⁶² 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.⁶³

In March 1937 the Paris Prefecture of Police prepared a report on the question of railway nationalization and on the nationalization question more generally. Jouhaux, noted the report, had declared himself strongly resolved to obtain the nationalization of key industries, including the railways. Importantly, Maurice Thorez had argued that, although the PCF remained hostile to the principle of nationalizations, he was in full agreement with the Radical Party that ‘certain large, public interest concerns, constituted in societies, should normally return to collective ownership.’⁶⁴ 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, nationalization would sweep away ‘the

⁶¹ George Lefranc, 'Le courant planiste dans le mouvement ouvrier français', p.75.

⁶² Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p.115.

⁶³ Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p.142.

⁶⁴ APP: DA866, SNCF Correspondance 1934-1945, AS de la nationalisation des chemins de fer 2/3/1937, p.1. 'certaines grandes exploitations d'intérêt public, constitués en sociétés, devaient normalement revenir à la collectif.'

politics of personal profit or dividends.’⁶⁵ There was a clear gap between what nationalization meant to the FdC and the *Société Mixte* preferred by PCF and Radical Party.

Appearing before the *Commission des Travaux Publics* in February 1937, Jarrigion firmly made the case for the nationalization 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’.⁶⁶ The only solution to the crisis in the industry was immediate nationalization, 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.’⁶⁷ For Jarrigion nationalization would be a means of bringing greater organization 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 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 nationalization, the union did not push strongly a radical re-envisioning 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

⁶⁵ APP: DA866, SNCF Correspondance 1934-1945, AS de la nationalisation des chemins de fer 2/3/1937, p.2. 'la politique de profit personnel ou de dividende.'

⁶⁶ AN: C//15196, Tome II, PV. 10/2/1937, pp.3--4 (4). 'On ne peut imputer 'à la règlementation du travail, au manque de conscience professionnelle ou à l'augmentation des salaires du personnel le déficit des chemins de fer français.'

⁶⁷ AN: C//15196, Tome II, PV. 10/2/1937, p4. 'si on ne fait pas cela, les Compagnies ferroviaire maintiendront leur puissance. D'ailleurs leurs administrateurs [...] n'aspirent qu'à conserver en leurs mains les leviers de commande des principales affaires de notre pays, pour continuer à exercer leur omnipotence sur sa vie économique et sociale.'

there seems to have been little or no discussion of worker control in the railways.⁶⁸ 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 its 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).

Though personnel remained outnumbered on the new management committee, just as they had been on the *Conseil Supérieur*, they still at least had a presence. A vital difference was that the new council was the executive of the SNCF and not simply an advisory body. Union representation here, in the form of Pierre Sémard and Jean Jarrigion, represented a major advance for the CGT, reinforcing the corporative instinct of the cheminots and seeming to hold the possibility of something resembling a partnership between labour and state on the railways. Despite the low levels of cheminot representation, the presence of labour on a genuine managerial committee was the fulfilment of the union's quest for power within cheminot industrial relations which had been the centrepiece of both FNCU and FNCC strategy for at least a decade. The creation of the SNCF also witnessed the elaboration of a new collective contract which replaced the 1921 railway statute and would hold sway until 1950. As Chevandier notes, while this *convention collective* echoed many of the major themes outlined in the statute, it also extended its provisions into new areas, protecting for instance the rights of apprentices.⁶⁹ Article Two of the new collective contract outlined clearly the rights of trade unions and their codified the relationship with management. The contract explicitly recognized the FdC as the legitimate representative of the cheminots and placed management under the obligation to work with the union's delegates. Moreover, in all urgent cases, notably regarding accidents, employers were obliged to liaise closely with FdC representatives. All this was to be undertaken, the convention made clear, in a spirit of collaboration motivated by recognition of the rights and shared responsibilities of railway employees.⁷⁰ As Christian Chevandier has noted, the FdC was extremely satisfied with the outcome of these negotiations. Not only had they achieved a position of considerable power and influence, reinforced by a legal contract, but they had

⁶⁸ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism*, pp.112--113, pp.145--147.

⁶⁹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, p.149.

⁷⁰ SNCF: 505LM136, dossier 14, 1938, relations syndicats/SNCF, Convention Collective, Livre 1, Droit Syndical.

established themselves as the sole representative of the cheminots, to the exclusion of the other cheminot unions, notably the CFTC.⁷¹ The importance of this moment, not simply to the Federation hierarchy but equally to the broader cheminot corporation, may have been sufficient to hold them outside the renewed labour crisis, as strikes redoubled in 1937 as the cost of living spiked and wages failed to keep pace. The 1938 decree laws of the Daladier government, effectively ending the forty-hour week, severely dented this relationship.

November 1938

The decree laws of November 1938 have been seen to mark the moment of *revanche* on the part of business leaders and industrialists against the loss of power and reputation suffered as a result of June 1936. While the Popular Front may be seen as the moment when organized labour exploded into French political life, November 1938 may be regarded as the fanfare of organized capital. Close coordination of policy and strategy between business leaders was nothing new, the *Comité des Forges* had existed for many years and mining companies were accustomed to operating as a bloc in response to state involvement in the industry. Individual business leaders, however, continued to desire to defend their autonomy in dealing with their own enterprises, particularly in the sphere of labour relations. June 1936 was a major shock to French industrialists and led to an increased realization of their shared interests, and a readiness to organize to promote those interests in the corridors of power. In the aftermath of the Matignon Accords, a new body was formed from the old *Confédération Générale de Production Française*, the *Confédération Générale du Patronat Française* symbolizing a more complete organization of French employers' groups.⁷² By 1938, with the arguments for rearmament strongly in mind, discussions about power and the place of labour in industrial society, seemingly substantially altered by the Matignon Accords and the social legislation of 1936 were recast in terms of the debate over patriotic need for increased production of war materials with labour's role cast as a block to productivity. Such arguments were sufficient to convince Daladier who moved decisively to roll back the gains of the Popular Front.

⁷¹ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminot en grève*, p.149.

⁷² Richard Vinen, *The Politics of French Business*, p.38.

The ostensible motivation for the November decree laws was the desire on the part of the Daladier government to respond to the growing threat to French national and international security posed by the Nazi regime in Germany. The decrees promulgated by finance minister Paul Reynaud were, it was argued, vital if France were to meet the rearmament challenge posed by Germany, the threat becoming more apparent following the *Anschluss* of March 1938 and even more so after Munich in late September of that year. Munich represented the ‘high-water mark in France’s retreat before the resurgence of Germany.’ A new policy of firmness was adopted with guarantees being issued to Poland, Romania and Greece.⁷³ Increasingly, as the threat of war loomed large, French public opinion swung behind the government’s more bullish approach to foreign affairs. Support for Munich, argues Daniel Hucker, proved ephemeral. In November 1938, Daladier’s firm response to Italian demands for Corsica, Nice and Haute Savoie was met with firm approval by French opinion.⁷⁴ Daladier enjoyed huge personal support, he was according to Peter Jackson, ‘certainly the most popular national leader in France since Clemenceau.’ During the final months of peace, Radical Party membership grew exponentially, testimony to public support for Daladier and the Republic.⁷⁵

Rearmament had begun to emerge forcefully as a political concern following the election of Adolf Hitler to the Reich Chancellery in 1933. The subsequent hardening and bellicosity of German domestic and foreign policy caused increasing concern among the European powers. The French response was muted although 1934 saw the commencement of Plan 1 in the aircraft industry which aimed to increase production through state contracts with private manufacturers.⁷⁶ The response of the private aircraft manufacturers, however, was ponderous. In the field of naval rearmament, the provisions of the 1930 Treaty of London imposed strict limits upon the building of capital ships. On land, little preparations were in place to ensure that the largest standing army in Western Europe would be properly equipped. The arrival of the Popular Front government in power in the summer of 1936 began the process of rearmament in earnest. September 1936 saw the Blum administration approve a four year, 14 billion franc rearmament programme.⁷⁷ Central to the rearmament strategy

⁷³ Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, p.298, and chapter 9.

⁷⁴ Daniel Hucker, ‘French Public Attitudes Towards the Prospect of War in 1938-1939: Pacifism or War Anxiety’, p.444.

⁷⁵ Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, p.333.

⁷⁶ Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism*, p.34.

⁷⁷ Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford, 1996), p.145.

were proposals to nationalize industries involved in war production, a measure of the Popular Front's desire to make genuine progress with rearmament, though also serving as an important nod to long standing left-wing critiques of the privately owned 'merchants of death.' The nationalization policy received broad support across the French political spectrum, as private companies were widely viewed as having failed to successfully modernize to meet the increasing demands placed upon them. The new government powers to nationalize defence industries were, however, used only sparingly by Daladier at the Defence Ministry.⁷⁸

The cost of defence spending, combined with the continuing negative effects of the economic depression in France, placed the wider Popular Front reform package under increasing pressure, eventually necessitating the 'pause' of the reform programme in February 1937.⁷⁹ The effects of the rearmament programme were critiqued at the time by such figures on the Left as Daniel Guérin. In his polemic on the failure of the Popular Front experiment, subtitled *Révolution Manquée*, Guérin criticized the government's military re-equipment policy as a betrayal of the movement which had brought it to power. The Blum government, he wrote, 'has, to a large extent, contributed to the wrecking of the peace, slamming shut the door, which was yet ajar, on disarmament [...] breaking the development of social conflict by means of the threat of war.'⁸⁰

Following Munich, Daladier broke definitively with the Left and instead relied heavily upon the political Right for support. In early November, he replaced the centrist Paul Marchandeu, who favoured greater state regulation of the economy, with the 'champion of economic liberalism', Paul Reynaud.⁸¹ Daladier had become increasingly intolerant of the collaborative politics between labour and capital through 1938.⁸² The decision to move Reynaud to the Finance Ministry served time on the Popular Front and initiated the government's embracing of a liberal economic agenda. In a radio address upon taking office, Reynaud made clear his identification with French business leaders,

⁷⁸ On nationalizations in the war industries see Jeffrey J. Clarke, 'The Nationalisation of War Industries in France, 1936-1937: A Case Study', *Journal of Modern History*, 49, 3 (Sep., 1977), 411--430.

⁷⁹ Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement*, p.145.

⁸⁰ Daniel Guérin, *Front Populaire, Révolution Manquée* (Paris, 1963), p.12. 'a, largement, contribué au naufrage de la paix, fermé la porte, encore entrouverte, du désarmement [...] brisé l'essor des luttes sociales au moyen du chantage à la guerre.'

⁸¹ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*, p.262.

⁸² Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*, p.261.

'We live 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.'⁸³ Above all the forty-hour week legislation was held up as the major impediment to the meeting of France's security concerns.

Scholarly attention has in particular focussed upon the implementation of the forty-hour law, voted by the chamber and ratified by the senate by 17 June 1936 and implemented in large part from January 1937 onward. Alfred Sauvy was highly critical of this measure, writing in *L'Express* in April 1960, he argued that 'full of generous intentions, the Popular Front had held socialism back by at least a generation, at the same time weakening France in the face of Nazism.'⁸⁴ The effects upon French production of this measure were, according to Sauvy, a serious impediment to economic output. Following the devaluation of September 1936, argued Sauvy in *L'Économie Française pendant l'entre-deux-guerres*, 'the French economy progressed at a lively pace [...] the introduction of the forty-hour law at the beginning of 1937 clearly broke the momentum and turned back the progress.'⁸⁵ The impact manifested itself twice over, in the first semester of 1937 curtailing production despite the presence of significant demand and in 1938 when, following the 'oxygen bubble of the second devaluation...squeezed industries bought less, reducing the unblocking of others and created this time through insufficient unblocking, a new *chômage partiel*.'⁸⁶ Rossiter does not go as far as Sauvy in his denunciation of the measure, but notes that 'one is compelled to admit that it was the most expensive item, both politically and economically, of all.'⁸⁷ Its fatal feature being the way in which it created a vicious circle whereby '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 wage demands.'⁸⁸

⁸³ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*, p.264.

⁸⁴ quoted in Louis Bourdia and Jean Touchard, *Front Populaire, 1936* (Paris, 1961), p.8. 'chargé d'intentions généreuses, le Front Populaire a retardé le socialisme d'au moins une génération, tout en affaiblissant dangereusement la France devant le Nazisme.'

⁸⁵ Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique*, vol.2, p.297. 'l'économie française progressera à vive allure [...] C'est au début de 1937 que l'introduction de la semaine de 40 heures brise net l'élan et renverse le mouvement.'

⁸⁶ Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire Economique*, vol. 2, p.298. 'ballon d'oxygène de la seconde dévaluation [...] les industries comprimées dans leur activité achetèrent moins, réduisent le débouché des autres et créent, cette fois par insuffisance de débouché, un nouveau chômage partiel.'

⁸⁷ Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy', p.683.

⁸⁸ Adrian Rossiter, 'Popular Front Economic Policy', p.684.

Julian Jackson, however, argues that such analyses underplay the significant political pressure faced by the Blum government in May and June 1936.⁸⁹

In November 1938 the Minister for Public Works issued a decree ending the '5x8' working week on the railways. The union response was immediate and furious. Joint leader of the FdC, Jarrigion, issued a declaration whose use of the image of betrayal strongly echoed those employed by his predecessor Bidegaray following the suspension of the eight-hour day in 1922. Jarrigion argued that the 'principle, is the consultation between railway organizations: employers and workers. This principle has been totally destroyed by the intervention of regulations appended to the decree.'⁹⁰ The lack of good faith on the part of the authorities was especially galling for the Federation, 'it is under these conditions that, at the same time as paying tribute [to the cheminots], they attack this category of workers in the strongest manner, even more incomprehensible as they have not ceased to collaborate.' The decree laws, warned Jarrigion, 'far from contributing to the social peace for which we are working [...] can only compromise it.'⁹¹ In *Le Peuple* on 13 November, the FdC announced its fury at the threat of 40,000 cheminot job losses as a direct result of the decree laws.⁹²

As noted above the railway companies had been highly critical of the application of the forty-hour week and its impact upon railway finances. Joseph Jones has noted how in one fell swoop the gains of several years of natural reductions in personnel numbers were undone. Moreover, Jones notes that the cheminot Federation, conscious of the previous failure of the eight-hour day legislation were zealous in policing the operation of the forty-hour week. This, however, was not the view taken by SNCF President Robert Le Besnerais who, in meetings of the SNCF *Conseil d'Administration* between June and August 1938, regularly referred to the willingness of the personnel to negotiate a more flexible approach to the operation of the forty-hour week, more closely aligned

⁸⁹ Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.86, pp.173--177.

⁹⁰ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil de Direction des Grands Réseaux, Déclaration de M. Jarrigion relative aux décrets lois, 16/11/1938, p.1. 'Le principe c'est la consultation des organismes syndicales, patronales et ouvrières. Ce principe a été totalement détruit par l'intervention du règlement annexé au décret.'

⁹¹ CGTIHS: RdM, Conseil de Direction des Grands Réseaux, Déclaration de M. Jarrigion relative aux décrets lois, 16/11/1938, p.2. 'c'est dans ces conditions qu'on même temps qu'on lui discerne un hommage on frappe cette catégorie de travailleurs de la façon la plus forte, la plus incompréhensible tandis qu'elle n'avait cessé de donner sa collaboration.' ; 'loin de contribuer à la paix sociale à laquelle nous travaillons [...] ne peuvent que la compromettre.'

⁹² *Le Peuple*, 13/11/1938.

to the requirements of the service.⁹³ In August he went further, suggesting 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 [i.e. The forty-hour law]. They have promised to meet with their representatives in the *comités de travail* and to give to them, in accordance with the *Direction Général*, directives concerning the cooperation they are to bring to this loosening.’⁹⁴ In their correspondence and their interventions in meetings on the Conseil d’Administration, the representatives of the FdC made very clear their continued support for the forty-hour legislation. On 8 June 1938 the Federation had written to Le Besnerais arguing that the forty-hour week be respected both in the ‘spirit’ and the ‘letter’ of the agreement outlined between the FdC and SNCF. The Federation, however, did not deny that it was necessary to apply the legislation in a manner compatible with the needs of the service, though they argued that the means for achieving this were already contained within the existing agreement.⁹⁵ This text does not entirely support Le Besnerais’s assertion that the Federation was prepared to support a significant re-design of the length of the working day, though it does stress the Federation’s desire to continue to discuss the provisions of the forty-hour law with the SNCF. The ambiguity in the position of the FNCU over the forty-hour legislation firmly mirrors that within the wider French Communist movement. The Communist Party hierarchy, of which Sémard was still a member, had by 1938 firmly positioned itself at the forefront of confronting the challenge of Nazi Germany. Georges Vidal has underlined that, between 1937 and 1939, the party recognized the need to ensure the readiness of France’s war industries, working to increase production and, by 1938, supporting the a negotiated relaxing of the forty-hour law. Such an engagement, however, opened considerable tensions with trade union leaders and particularly with the CGT rank-and-file for whom the forty-hour legislation remained a touchstone, symbolic of labour’s hard won position.⁹⁶ The apparent discrepancies between Le Besnerais’s personal understanding of the union position, gleaned through discussions with Sémard and the non-Communist Jarrigion, and the FdC’s public pronouncements on the question of the forty-hour week may in part be

⁹³ SNCF: 505LM138, Dossier 18, extrait de CA 29/7/1938.

⁹⁴ SNCF: 505LM138, Dossier 18, extrait de CA 3/8/1938. ‘les représentants de la Fédération ont donné leur adhésion à un assouplissement des règles de travail dans le cadre du décret du 18 janvier 1937. Ils ont promis de réunir leurs représentants dans les comités de travail et de leur donner, en accord avec la Direction Générale, des directives quant au concours qu’ils devront apporter à cet assouplissement.’

⁹⁵ SNCF: 505LM139, Dossier 18, Fédération des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer de France à Président de la SNCF, 8/6/1938.

⁹⁶ Georges Vidal, ‘Le Parti Communiste Français et la défense nationale (septembre 1937 – septembre 1939), *Revue Historique*, 630 (April, 2004), 333--370, (355), (361--363).

explained by these tensions within the French labour movement; the FdC attempting to marry the need to satisfy rank-and-file demands with the exigencies of national and international politics.

Nevertheless, the FdC did emphasize its willingness to deal with SNCF managers through this period, and from the union perspective nothing fundamental had changed in this collaborative relationship between August and November 1938. The sense that the government had broken with the letter and spirit of such collaboration, together with a profound sense of betrayal, goes a long way toward explaining the anger with which the Reynaud decrees were met. In a letter to the SNCF President of 25 November, the FdC leadership underlined their dissatisfaction with the decree laws in the strongest terms. They marked an ‘anti-democratic, dictatorial will, of social regression’ aimed against a corporation whom the authorities had only recently been applauding for their spirit of collaboration. The union underlined its efforts at collaboration with the SNCF, even on the most contentious of issues, the workforce, they noted ‘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.’⁹⁷

The Reynaud decrees launched a new wave of labour protest. While the national CGT leadership vacillated, wildcat strikes and lockouts spread through Paris. They were met by determined employer and state resistance.⁹⁸ From November 21, metalworkers and chemical workers struck and occupied factories in Paris, the Nord and Basse-Seine.⁹⁹ In the Nord, with factories occupied at Haute Fournaux, Denain-Anzin and Escaudrin, all in the Valenciennes area, wildcat strikers on the railways from Denain station attempted to galvanize the local cheminots into action. At midnight on 24 November, an attempt was made to occupy nearby Escaudrin station and remove the locomotives to Denain. Though the gendarmerie report that the *Chef du Gare* refused to participate in any such

⁹⁷ SNCF: 025LM203, Fédération des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer de France à M. le Président SNCF 25/11/1938, p.1. ‘volonté antidémocratique, dictatoriale, de régression sociale à l’égard d’une corporation aux efforts de laquelle le gouvernement estimait...récemment devoir rendre un public hommage.’ ‘ne sont jamais refusés à prendre leur part des sacrifices incombant à tous les circonstances en fonction de leur situation sociale, et qu’ils ont offert constamment leurs concours en vue du relèvement de la production et de la réalisation d’économies rationnelles au sein de la SNCF.’

⁹⁸ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.111; Herrick Chapman, *State Capitalism and Working Class Radicalism*, pp.200--201; Guy Bourd , *La D faite du Front Populaire*, p.146.

⁹⁹ Guy Bourd , ‘La gr ve du 30 novembre 1938’, *Le Mouvement Social*, 55 (Apr.,-Jun., 1966), 87--91, (88).

action, all freight traffic was suspended in the area that day 'faute de machines'. All traffic on the line between Somain and Anzin was completely interrupted, a partial strike at Anzin had similarly halted traffic on 23 November. With the miners at the pit in Escaudrin on strike, thirty of the fifty employees at Escaudrin station failed to show for work on 24 November.¹⁰⁰ The railway workers of Anzin, who were in the employ of the mining company, were requisitioned back to their posts on the 25th.¹⁰¹ On 25 and 26 November, a concerted employer response broke the back of the strikes and occupations, during the night of the 24-25 November police troops used gas to break up an occupation at Renault.¹⁰² By the 27th, cheminots at Escaudrin and Abscon were back at work.¹⁰³ At this moment, when the momentum of the strike movement seemed to be shifting against workers and in favour of employers, the CGT national leadership opted for a twenty-four hour general strike to take place on 30 November.

The Reynaud decrees had provoked splits within the CGT over the best response to adopt. Alignments broadly replicated the former *Unitaire/Confédéré* divisions. At the Nantes conference of November 1938, the *Syndicats* group led by René Belin declared itself unhappy with the 'Communist colonization' of the Confederation and voiced its concerns over the dangerous bellicosity demonstrated by *unitaires* towards the Government.¹⁰⁴ Neither desiring a political strike against the government, both Belin and Jouhaux attempted to negotiate a way out through the government's Minister for Public Works, Anatole de Monzie. Daladier and Reynaud, however, were in no mood for discussions. Reynaud is reported by Belin to have declared, 'I wish to finish with a CGT dominated by Communists. They want a fight, they shall have one. The occasion is too good for me to let it pass.'¹⁰⁵ For Bourdé, the role played by the cheminots in swinging decisively behind a general strike was the catalyst that pushed the CGT into action. As he notes, the November 1938 decree laws affected the cheminots more than any other corporation: 'Beyond the new charges faced by all workers [...] railway workers faced an increase in the length of service, the cancelling of certain travel permits, the reduction of paid vacations [...] above all they felt threatened by a massive

¹⁰⁰ SHG: 59E57, Section de Valenciennes, 24/11/38, pp.361--364.

¹⁰¹ SHG: 59E57, Section de Valenciennes, 25/11/38, p.365.

¹⁰² Guy Bourdé, 'La grève du 30 novembre 1938', p.88.

¹⁰³ SHG: 59E57, Section de Valenciennes, 27/11/1938, p.367.

¹⁰⁴ Guy Bourdé, *La Défaite du Front Populaire*, p.11.

¹⁰⁵ 'intervention de René Belin' in René Rémond and Janine Bourdin (eds), *Edouard Daladier, Chef du gouvernement* (Paris, 1977), 198--200, (200). 'Je veux en finir avec une CGT désormais dominée par les communistes. Ceux-ci veulent la bataille, ils l'auront. L'occasion est trop belle pour que je la laisse passer.'

reduction in personnel numbers.’¹⁰⁶ According to *L’Humanité*, 25 November saw large cheminot demonstrations in Paris against the decree laws: 4000 protested at the Gare de Lyon; 5000 at the Gare du Nord; 2000 at the Gare de l’Est and 1000 at Gare Saint-Lazaire. On that day the leadership of the FdC voted to back a general strike by eighty-seven votes to twelve.¹⁰⁷ Following this decision, notes Bourdé, ‘all opposition to the strike fell at a single stroke.’¹⁰⁸ The cheminots leadership were in bellicose mood. Sémard attacked the government’s ‘policy of punishing the railways’ as being ‘a veritable destruction of the railways’,¹⁰⁹ Jarrigion condemned the manner in which cheminots’ rights had been ‘arbitrarily and abusively violated.’¹¹⁰ Their anger was shared by the whole union Executive. Responding to speeches by Daladier, Reynaud and the Minister for Public Works, de Monzie, on the subject of the forthcoming general strike, the Cheminot leadership, the day before the scheduled general strike, issued a call to arms for their members. The efforts of the government to intimidate railway workers, they argued, ‘will have no effect on the mass of cheminots then to demonstrate the bad faith and the will for repression of statesmen.’ The cheminots, argued the FdC, had collaborated with the government in the interests of the travelling public as well as those of ‘la collectivité tout entière’ but the government ‘had brutally broken with this collaboration’¹¹¹ The rank-and-file appear to have shared in this anger. Despite the issuing of requisition orders to all cheminots threatening criminal action if they did not show for work, a large meeting of cheminots on the P-O network on the eve of the strike voted unanimously and defiantly in favour of going ahead with the action. In the face of the requisition orders the cheminots would go to their posts, but would ‘employer la force d’inertie.’¹¹²

In a series of reports to the Minister of the Interior in early December, the Prefect of the Nord analysed the impact the strike had occasioned in his *département*. On 30

¹⁰⁶ Guy Bourdé, *La Défaite du Front Populaire*, p.152. ‘Outre les charges nouvelles propres à tous travailleurs [...] les agents de chemins de fer supportent un allongement de la durée des services, la suppression de certains permis de circulation, la réduction des congés payés [...] surtout ils se sentent menacés par un compression massive du personnel.’

¹⁰⁷ *L’Humanité*, 26/11/1938 quoted in Guy Bourdé, *La Défaite du Front Populaire*, p.153.

¹⁰⁸ Guy Bourdé, *La Défaite du Front Populaire*, p.153. ‘tout le système d’opposition à la grève tombe d’un seul coup.’

¹⁰⁹ *Le Peuple*, 28/11/1938. ‘politique de pénitence ferroviaire’ ; ‘une véritable destruction des chemins de fer.’

¹¹⁰ *Le Peuple*, 28/11/1938. ‘arbitrairement et abusivement violés.’

¹¹¹ *Le Peuple*, 29/11/1938. ‘n’auront d’autre effet sur la masse des cheminots que de démontrer la mauvais foi et la volonté de répression d’hommes d’état.’ ; ‘a rompu brutalement cette collaboration.’

¹¹² CACF: 19940500/0198, Rapport Assemblé des cheminots PO, 29/11/1938.

November, 60% of workers had refused to participate in the action.¹¹³ Traffic on the railways had been normal. In Valenciennes, an attempt by striking railwaymen to obstruct the departure of trains had been broken up by the actions of the *Garde Mobile*.¹¹⁴ 'En resumé', noted the Prefect, 'the action of 30 November marked the profound disaffection of the working masses for any movement foreign to professional demands and for all attempts at disorder.'¹¹⁵ Analysing the actions of the general strike in December of 1938, Pierre Séward admitted that 'the movement did not correspond to what we had hoped it would be from the indications of our syndicats.'¹¹⁶ Historians have gone further, the 30 November 1938 strike was a failure. Defeated workers at Renault were forced to march out of the factory making the fascist salute.¹¹⁷

For Bourdé, however, 30 November did not fail 'faute de grévistes'. In the nationalized industries between 50-100% of workers, depending on the factory, had followed the order to strike. This figure was between 50-80% in the large scale metalworking and chemical factories and in the building trade. Mariners, dockers and to a lesser extent miners, claims Bourdé, had 'strictly applied the CGT's orders.'¹¹⁸ The explanation for the failure was to be found in the determination of the government and employer response. This was particularly apparent in the transport sector where the cheminots, 'requisition orders in their hands' and 'the painful memory of the 1920 repression' in their minds, reported for work.¹¹⁹ At Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, the cheminots, 'covered by individual requisition orders', had reported for work.¹²⁰ From 1936 to 1938, employers had been developing their strategy and plans for *revanche* were well developed. However, as Richard Vinen has noted, in the events of November 1938, 'everything that employers and their organizations were able to do to quell working class discontent and to undermine Popular Front labour legislation was ultimately dependant on the state.'¹²¹

¹¹³ AD Nord: M149/17A, Préfet du Nord à M. le Ministre de L'intérieur, 7/12/1938, p.7.

¹¹⁴ AD Nord: M169/111A, Préfet du Nord à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur, 1/12/1938, p.6.

¹¹⁵ AD Nord, M149/17A, Préfet du Nord à M. le Ministre de L'intérieur, 7/12/1938, p.7. 'la journée du 30 novembre a marqué la profonde désaffection des masses populaires pour tout mouvement étranger aux revendications professionnels et pour toute tentative de désordre.'

¹¹⁶ AD Nord: M595/92, *CGT Cheminots Bulletin d'information No 5*, 20/12/1938, p.7. 'le mouvement n'a pas correspondu à ce que nous laissent espérer les indications de nos syndicats.'

¹¹⁷ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.111.

¹¹⁸ Guy Bourdé, 'La grève du 30 novembre 1938', pp.89--90.

¹¹⁹ Guy Bourdé, 'La grève du 30 novembre 1938', p.89. 'feuille de réquisition en main', 'le souvenir douloureux de la répression de 1920 occupent leurs postes.'

¹²⁰ SHG: 75E1793, Section de Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, 30/11/1938, p.285. 'touché par ordre de réquisition individuel'.

¹²¹ Richard Vinen, *The Politics of French Business*, p.80.

The powerful state response to the strike threat was a theme developed by Sémard in his analysis of the failure of the 30 November action at a speech at the Paris *Maison de Mutualité* in December 1938. While the cheminots had taken part in 'imposing' demonstrations in and around stations across France on 25 and 26 November, the heavy-handed state response had caused many to think twice before coming out on the 30th. On the day of the strike itself, the railways were in a state of siege, including 'police, *gardes mobiles*, soldiers including black troops.' Outside of Paris, considerable force had been mobilized, 'at Cahors...there were 300 black troops, more than there were cheminots'. At Le Mans, claimed Sémard, troops had been armed with machine guns. Pickets had been broken up by bayonet charges.¹²² Sémard expressed considerable anger that colonial troops had been used to suppress French labour demonstrations. Despite such actions, however, he claimed that the major centres, particularly in Paris, had attempted to act.¹²³

The failure of the general strike allowed the government to fully implement the *Plan Reynaud*. Working hours were reduced and a liberal economic strategy was developed in rearmament policy, a stark rejection of the more corporatist approach which Matignon had seemed to inaugurate. Bourdé has noted how the strike's failure allowed the *patronat* to re-establish its authority, 'surveillance, bullying, dismissal of delegates, increasing of hours...the *patronat* took revenge for the great fear it had experienced during the strikes of May-June.'¹²⁴ Many companies, however, held back from such openly antagonistic approaches. Beyond weeding out individual troublemakers, it was enough for them to have re-established power and they adopted more subtle approaches to ensuring that their employees were aware of their place in the hierarchy. Though the Bordeaux section of the *Union des Industries Métallurgiques et Minières* (UIMM) refused to rehire any of its workers, the Fives-Lille company rehired all but eight of its 3700 strong workforce. At the *Établissements Arbel*, Communist ringleaders were

¹²² AD Nord: M595/92, *CGT Cheminots Bulletin d'information No 5*, 20/12/1938, p.7. 'police, gardes mobiles, soldats y compris les troupes noires.'; 'à Cahors [...] il y avait 300 troupes noirs, plus que de cheminots'.

¹²³ AD Nord: M595/92, *CGT Cheminots Bulletin d'information No 5*, 20/12/1938, p.8.

¹²⁴ Guy Bourdé, 'La grève du 30 novembre 1938', p.91. 'surveillance, brimades, renvoi des délégués, allongement des heures [...] Il se venge de la grande peur qu'il a éprouvé pendant les grèves de mai-juin.'

sacked. All other employees were required to ask to have their jobs back.¹²⁵ At Renault, the strike was used as a pretext to implement planned cuts in the workforce.¹²⁶

On 3 December 1938 a conference was held at which representatives of the Ministries of War, the Navy, Air, Labour and the SNCF took part. Examining the events of the autumn of 1938, the conference considered 'that it is suitable to inflict severe sanctions', including harsh administrative punishments as well as 'penal sanctions for refusals to obey requisition orders.'¹²⁷ Those who would be sanctioned were to include anyone who had incited strike action, anyone who had obstructed, or attempted to obstruct the workplace and anyone who had not presented themselves at work on the 30th. Workers who had 'slowed down' their production levels and CGT officials who had distributed union tracts 'sans commentaires' were to be spared sanction.¹²⁸ Across the whole of French industry there were, according to Courtois, '1731 poursuites contre militants' and '806 peines de prison fermes'.¹²⁹ On the railways both Sémard and Jarrigion were removed from their positions on the Administrative Council of the SNCF. Sémard was the target of a criminal investigation and was demoted to the level of 'facteur aux écrites' and sent to a small station in Loches (Indre et Loire).¹³⁰ The Minister for Public Works, de Monzie, claimed that just 2000 cheminots had been involved in the general strike, Ribeill noting that, despite SNCF pressure for 46 cheminots to be sacked, the Minister acceded to only eight of these requests.¹³¹ The SNCF, however, took considerable action on their own accord, Imlay notes that 'over 3000 public transport workers were penalised for participating in the strike' many of these would have been cheminots.¹³²

¹²⁵ Richard Vinen, *The Politics of French Business*, pp.72--73.

¹²⁶ Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France*, p.111.

¹²⁷ SHA: 6N323, D3 Grève du 30/11/1938, Rapport fait au Ministre, 5/12/1938 AS Sanctions applicables au personnel des Etablissements de Défense Nationales ayant participé à la Grève du 30 novembre, p.1. 'a estimé qu'il convenait d'infliger des sanctions sévère, assorties de sanctions administratives sévères, assorties de sanctions pénales pour refus d'obéissance à l'ordre de réquisition.'

¹²⁸ SHA: 6N323, D3 Grève du 30/11/1938, Rapport fait au Ministre, 5/12/1938 AS Sanctions applicables au personnel des Etablissements de Défense Nationales ayant participé à la Grève du 30 novembre, p.2.

¹²⁹ Stephen Courtois, 'Les Communistes et l'action syndicale' in Jean Pierre Rioux, Antoine Prost and Jean Pierre Azéma (eds), *Les Communistes Français de Munich à Châteaubriant 1938-1941* (Paris, 1987), pp.85--98, (86).

¹³⁰ Georges Ribeill 'Répressions dans les chemins de fer français: Une mise en perspective des compagnies à la SNCF, 1938', V Congreso Historia Ferroviaria, (Palma, 14-16 October 2009), pp.1--16 (15).

¹³¹ Georges Ribeill 'Répressions dans les chemins de fer français: Une mise en perspective des compagnies à la SNCF, 1938', p.15.

¹³² Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*, p.270.

The Approach of War

Talbot Imlay has been strongly critical of the Reynaud plan which was inaugurated by the November 1938 decree laws. Assuring investor confidence was placed at the forefront of French economic policy, this, for Reynaud required removing barriers to production and decreasing state involvement in the economy. These, seemingly, had immediate important benefits. Following the decree laws of November 1938 and the defeat of the general strike and with it French labour, Bank of France gold holdings rose from 37 billion to 48 billion by the eve of war. Industrial production had improved from 76 to 90 (base 100 = 1929) between October 1938 and May 1939. Talbot Imlay has noted how, regarding the Third Republic's economic preparations for war, historians have re-evaluated the strength of the Third Republic in its final years.¹³³ Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, for instance, has argued that the French economic preparations for war represented a significant success story for the Republic, comparing favourably with the 'chaos' of German preparation.¹³⁴ Yet, as Imlay persuasively argues, Reynaud's dogmatic embrace of *laissez-faire* liberal economics proved disastrous for French war preparations. Closing down options of state planning and a close interaction between state, business and labour which, for instance, eventually characterized British production, Reynaud's policy abandoned French preparations to 'market forces' which proved unequal to the task. Imlay contends that, 'in a situation of scarcity in which demand far exceeded resources, economic mobilization required important measures of coordination and direction.'¹³⁵ Moreover, the lack of planning eventually impeded war production, forcing arms ministries to look to America to make up the shortfall, degrading France's financial position and undermining the very investor confidence which Reynaud aimed to assure. The lack of confidence, moreover, spread to the heart of the French elite as senior ministers and administrators began to entertain significant doubts regarding France's ability to wage a prolonged war.¹³⁶

¹³³ Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*, pp.234--244.

¹³⁴ Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les français de l'an 40, tome 2, ouvriers et soldats* (Paris, 1990), pp.347--355.

¹³⁵ Talbot Imlay, 'Paul Reynaud and France's Response to Nazi Germany, 1938-1940', pp.506--515, (506).

¹³⁶ Talbot Imlay, 'Paul Reynaud and France's Response to Nazi Germany, 1938-1940', pp.507--508; idem, *Facing the Second World War*, chapter 5; Imlay's position is supported by Martin Thomas's findings regarding appeasement and French policy in the run up to war, see Martin Thomas, 'Appeasement in the Late Third Republic', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19, 3 (2008), 566--607, (586--587).

Reynaud's authoritarian approach toward labour from November 1938 onwards was, in fact, already being called for from within the Defence Ministry from May of that year. The Cheminot Federation, reported an official, had written to the Minister of the Interior strongly protesting the requisitioning of railway workers to work in armaments factories. The Federation, noted the official, 'does not seem to realize the gravity of events', they were actively engaged in discouraging cheminots from applying for transfers. In order to gain the necessary workers from the SNCF it would be necessary to 'act' against the Federation 'd'une façon énergique.'¹³⁷ In early November 1938, the Defence Ministry had identified the possibility of using the highly specialized workers in SNCF workshops for defence manufacturing. It was noted that there was a great deal of spare capacity in these workshops due to the twin measures of increased working hours and the continuation by the SNCF of retrenchment policies begun by the private companies.¹³⁸ Yet by June 1939, even with the excess capacity within the SNCF, Minister of Public Works de Monzie had been unable to convert more than 1300 agents from railway work to the defence sector. At such a pace, the Minister complained to Daladier, 'we will have detached between 2000 and 3000 cheminots, it is a result which corresponds neither to my efforts nor to the necessities.'¹³⁹ The use of railway workers would be a significant means, argued de Monzie, of easing the pressure on private industries; highly skilled metalworkers in SNCF workshops could plug the production gaps. He urged Daladier to give firm instructions to put an end to 'this waste of energy and money.'¹⁴⁰ The lack of planning was, as Ministers in the government realized, hampering the rearmament strategy. In addition, the authoritarian approach adopted by the government had poisoned relations between the state and labour, cheminots proved reluctant to engage with government plans. The FdC did not aid the government in their attempts to convert cheminots to war production work, indeed the leadership actively opposed these measures, in large part a legacy of the authoritarian tendencies evinced by the Daladier/Reynaud measures.¹⁴¹ Following the decrees of April 1939, which it was argued, further 'unjustly and uselessly hit the cheminots', Jean Jarrigion announced that cheminots would not lose their courage, 'their ardour for the struggle can only be

¹³⁷ SHA: 6N325, Fiche de renseignement: Syndicats cheminots. 'ne semblent pas se rendre compte de la gravité des évènements'

¹³⁸ SHA: 6N325, Note pour la Direction des Fabricants d'Armement, 8/11/1938.

¹³⁹ SHA: 6N325, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président du Conseil, 26/6/1939, p.2. 'nous aurons détaché en fin d'année 2 à 3000 cheminots; c'est un résultat qui ne correspond ni à mes efforts, ni aux nécessités.'

¹⁴⁰ SHA: 6N325, Ministre des Travaux Publics à M. le Président du Conseil, 26/6/1939, pp.2--3. 'ce gaspillage d'énergies et d'argent'.

¹⁴¹ see *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 3/4/1939.

sharpened under the blows with which they have been rewarded.'¹⁴² The struggle he alluded to was not that with Germany. That such a position would become entrenched was immediately clear following the events of 30 November 1938. Protests were strongly made against the decrees and the victimization following the general strike by cheminots in Morbihan and the Dordogne from December 1938. In Morbihan the prefect reported that cheminots had declared that 'if they had been disposed to consent to an effort for the economic growth, they cannot allow that the sacrifices imposed on the working class be much heavier than those asked of the *classes possédantes*.'¹⁴³ Despite such anger the union did not entirely abandon its collaborationist policy. When de Monzie approached the FdC in February 1939 to participate in a government commission regarding the implementation of the new working conditions outlined by the 12 November decrees, the union once more agreed that its delegates would take part.¹⁴⁴ Though Jarrigion's name appears, that of Pierre Sémard is not on the list of delegates representing the FdC. A number of former *unitaires*, however, including Raymond Tournemaine, Louis Winberg and Marc Dupuy, were listed.¹⁴⁵

Following the defeat of November 1938, significant tensions developed within the CGT between former *unitaires* and *confédérés*. Among the cheminot rank-and-file at the Gare de Lyon police informers noted a profound disaffection and anger directed toward the union leadership following the defeat.¹⁴⁶ These tensions were significantly exacerbated following the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact on 23 August 1939. In the summer of 1939, PCF membership and influence collapsed as the party abandoned its previous vocal opposition to German aggression and began to denounce the war as an imperialist adventure. Members deserted the party in droves and, following its outlawing by the government, leading party members and militants were arrested in large numbers.¹⁴⁷ Though on 28 August the FdC Executive passed a resolution tabled by Pierre Sémard claiming that the pact, 'could only contribute to the establishment of a durable peace',

¹⁴² *La Tribune des Cheminots*, 15/5/1939. 'leur ardeur pour la lutte ne peut que s'aiguïser sous la porte des coups avec lesquels on les récompense.'

¹⁴³ CACF: 19940500/0198, Dossier PO Préfet de Morbihan à Ministre de L'Intérieur, 14/12/1938. See also Préfet Dordogne à Ministre de l'Intérieur, 13/12/1938. 'que s'ils se sont disposés à consentir un effort pour le relèvement, ils ne sauraient admettre que les sacrifices imposés à la classe ouvrière soient beaucoup plus lourdes à ceux demandés à la classe possédantes.'

¹⁴⁴ SNCF: 505LM138, dossier 5, le Ministre des Travaux Publics au M. le Président de la SNCF, 7/3/1939.

¹⁴⁵ SNCF: 505LM138, dossier 5, Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs de chemins de fer au M. le Ministre des Travaux Publics, 14/2/1939.

¹⁴⁶ CACF: 19940500/0199, dossier région sud-est, Commissaire-Divisionnaire de la gare de Paris-Lyon à M. le Directeur Générale de la Sûreté Nationale, 24/1/1939, p.1.

¹⁴⁷ Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti Communiste Français*, pp.175--176.

opinion against the Communists was hardening. Following the German invasion of Poland, the Federation reversed its position. On 28 September, two days after the dissolution of the PCF by the French government, all *ex-unitaires* were removed from positions of authority within the FdC.¹⁴⁸ Jean Jarrigion became sole leader of the Federation, Sémard was to be imprisoned by the French government along with numerous other Communists and was executed by the Germans in 1942.

Conclusion

June 1936 seemed to mark the flowering of the strategy pursued by cheminot trade unions in the interwar period. United and with an enormously increased membership, together with a sympathetic socialist-led government, the *Fédération des Cheminots* opened the door to a policy of positive collaboration with a railway company management that was very much on the back foot. During 1936 and 1937 relations between cheminots and the private railway companies were conducted very much on the Federation's terms. The elaboration of the collective contract, while in large part merely confirming the previous relationship between trade unions and railway managers, nevertheless gave the FdC the added confidence of having negotiated recognition on their own terms. While the basis for previous relations between unions and management had been defined solely by management and the state, and was thus conducted firmly on management's terms, the new procedures were worked out by companies in concord with the a powerful FdC. The negotiation of the forty-hour week also represented a major success for the Federation as their delegates negotiated its implementation and then oversaw its operation. Disappointments ensued, however. Particularly notable was the manner in which the nationalization of the railways fell considerably short of FdC desires. Nevertheless, with the creation of the SNCF, the union leaders Jean Jarrigion and Pierre Sémard represented railway workers on the national *Conseil d'Administration* of the newly created nationalized railway. From the outset the FdC had representation, albeit as a minority voice, at the centre of railway industrial politics.

The independent representation of cheminots at the heart of industrial politics had been at the heart of CGT and CGTU trade unionism through much of the preceding fifteen years, even if the underlying motivations for it altered over time. In 1937 this central aim seemed to have been achieved. Yet the gains won proved fragile. The

¹⁴⁸ Christian Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève*, pp.159--160.

precariousness of the situation appears to have been recognized by the Federation themselves who, if Le Besnerais is to be believed, were even willing to countenance a loosening of the totemic forty-hour law legislation, so long as this loosening was overseen by Federation delegates, in order to maintain their position of influence within railway industrial politics. This attitude is of considerable significance, though with the proviso that the only sources for it are the words of the Director of the SNCF and Federation claims following the defeat of the 30 November 1938 general strike. Historians have claimed that the French labour movement, particularly in its ideological commitment to the shorter working day, significantly hampered France's attempts to meet the Nazi challenge. Some have gone further, suggesting that the enforced (if necessary) relaxation of the forty-hour legislation poisoned worker morale and contributed to the moral and social collapse of the Third Republic well before the military defeat. The FdC experience suggests, on the other hand, that this major trade union was prepared to work for the national interest so long as the principles of negotiation and shared responsibility between management and workforce were respected. It was the arbitrary actions of French government and employers which ruptured this understanding and ultimately damaged France's war preparations. Though the cheminots still did not entirely abandon the principle of collaboration, the underlying goodwill of the 1936-37 period was gone.

Conclusion

In 1938 the director Jean Renoir released his film version of Emile Zola's classic novel set on the railways, *La Bête Humaine*. Transported in time to the France of the late 1930s, Renoir's re-imagining of the story of the engineer Jacques Lantier (Jean Gabin) has been read by scholars as a key document expressing Renoir's disillusionment with the promise of the Popular Front's political and social project.¹ Despite the transformative promise of the Socialist-led coalition, visions of the 'old' France loom large in Renoir's work, for instance in the stratified class relationships and the inequalities of power within French society. These combine to threaten the job of a station master when he presumes to reprimand a wealthy and influential passenger for failing to obey the rules. Equally imposing is the presence of the wealthy aristocratic railway director who continues to hold sway over the lives of railway employees. Equally revealing in Renoir's film is the iconic presence of carriages emblazoned with the logo of the former *État* network, which, despite the creation of the SNCF, appear only to confirm the lingering influence of the old order.

Renoir's depiction of the *cheminot* and their world is also instructive. The emphasis throughout is on the professional ethos of the railwaymen, their obsession with their machines (a trope which is key to the original *Bête Humaine*) and the centrality of work and the railways to their lives and thoughts. Indeed at one point Lantier admits to his fireman Pecqueux that he considers himself as 'married to Lisou [his locomotive], *ça me suffit*.'² Indeed, politics is entirely absent from Renoir's vision of the *cheminot* world. The only glimpse of the wider social world of the *cheminots* throughout the film is a brief scene at a recreational event where the *cheminot* band plays at a dance. At a moment when roughly seven out of every ten French railway workers was a member of the National Federation, Renoir's workers seem untouched by the concerns of national politics and trade union activity.

It is easy to read too much into such fictional representations, but Renoir's depiction of an apolitical, professionally-oriented *cheminot* workforce reflects in many ways the

¹ Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester, 2000).

² Quoted in Michel Ionescu, *Cheminots et cinéma: la représentation d'un groupe social dans le cinéma et l'audiovisuel français* (Paris, 2001), p.34.

judgement of historians of the French labour movement. Cheminots are seen as a dominated and, ultimately, compliant group, fully committed to a narrow politics of collaboration with management and state in a non-confrontational reformism. This thesis has argued that such an analysis misreads the meanings of trade union activity in interwar France and, in particular, the place occupied by Communists within the frameworks of industrial relations in these years. Above all, through privileging strikes as the key index of worker militancy, previous interpretations have not done justice to the complexities of the day-to-day preoccupations of labour movements in the interwar era.

The extension of Communist influence within cheminot trade unionism arose in the context of a competition for power within railway industrial relations. Communist ascendancy was established, first through a firm identification and, subsequently, through the clear-sighted pursuit of cheminot corporative interests while, at the same time, demonstrating the connection of these interests with broader national and international debates. The ability of the FNCU to frame cheminot interests within the contours of national debates over the place of the railway industry within the national community was equally critical to the success of Communist organizers in consolidating their influence both among cheminots and within industrial society more broadly. From 1928 onwards, Communist trade unionists worked hard to cement their position as the representative voice of the cheminots. This led to a concentration, first on the establishment, and then on the defence of their position within the bureaucracies of the private companies and, from 1938, the SNCF. Their success in doing so was, in turn, pivotal to the growth of grassroots Communism within France.

In sum, placing the pursuit of legitimacy, authority and representation at the heart of the analysis offers us an important means of reconceptualizing the history of French Communism and trade unionism in the interwar period. The experience of Communists on the railways shines a revealing light on one vital trend in French Communist practice, an awareness of which goes some way to making sense of PCF strategy at two particularly decisive historical moments when Communists made inroads into the corridors of power in France: the Popular Front interlude of 1936-1938 and the 'battle for production' of 1944-47.

This thesis has, in addition, explored the idea and nature of ‘modernization’ in interwar France. Following recent scholarship it has argued that we need to complicate examinations of the period which divide France into opposing ‘modernist’ and ‘traditionalist’ camps. The French railway industry, which might have been thought of as a bastion of traditionalist thinking, was in fact profoundly influenced by the discourses of modernization and the need for a transformation of French society. Most clearly captured by the figure of Raoul Dautry, such thinking was a key element in an industry that was strongly marked by a technocratic ethos. Alongside the French nuclear industry, the SNCF would go on to become, particularly with the advent of the TGV, one of the foremost symbols of the self-consciously modern and technocratic image of France after 1945.³

Finally, in its emphasis on the role of the Left in general and the trade union movement in particular as important agents in the development of these modernization debates, this thesis parts company, albeit only partially, with some of the recent important work exploring the modernizing creativity of the 1930s.⁴ In its preoccupation with the contested nature of trade union power and the changing dynamics of industrial relations in the interwar period, the thesis has argued that political questions were central to the railway unions’ organizational debates and that competing visions of the future of France were divisive and shot through with assumptions about hierarchies, order and stability.

³ On the nuclear industry and French national identity see Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War Two* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

⁴ For instance, Jackie Clarke, *The Age of Organization*; Philip Nord, *France’s New Deal*.

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