

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.

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