Fellow Travellers

Thomas Beaumont

Published by Liverpool University Press

Beaumont, Thomas.
Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939.


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72685.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72685
Introduction

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

The relationship forged between communist militants and railway workers in the period between the two world wars would have long-lasting consequences for industrial relations and left-wing politics in France. The choices made by communist militants among the cheminots in these years were profoundly influenced by two key factors. First, a working environment that was shaped by the professional ethos of railway labour and, second, by the long-lasting legacies of the devastating 1920 strike defeat, which effectively curtailed the railway workers’ willingness to openly confront management and the state for much of the rest of the period covered by this book. In such circumstances, communist activists looked to the everyday politics of the workplace as the key focus of their activities. In so doing, communist activists on the railways
set down deep and lasting roots of support. They maintained this support even through the sectarian period of the Comintern’s shift to ‘class-against-class’, deepening their participation within railway industrial relations and engaging with managers and state officials. They would build upon this crucial experience during the years of the Popular Front (1934–1938). Here, in a transformed political and social landscape, France’s railway employees joined alongside their fellow workers in shaping a new social contract for workers, extending the principle of democratic representation into the workplace. While the Popular Front experiment proved short-lived, its influence was long lasting. In the post-Liberation period, the key tenets of the Popular Front experience re-emerged within the nationalised SNCF, shaping the particular character of railway industrial relations — the peculiar mix of collaboration and hostile confrontation between management and workforce that continues to make the French railways one of the most contested sectors of the modern French economy.

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

The Professional World of the Railway Workers

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

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

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

---


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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

Ultimately, as this book makes clear, communism spoke to the experiences of rank-and-file railway workers. Railway activists drew upon and defined a complex repertoire of subaltern militant practices which challenged the authority of company and state.

**Railway Workers and the Interwar Labour Movement**

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

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

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

---


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

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

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

---


17 For a discussion of membership information see chapter three.

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

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

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

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

---


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

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

Structure of the Book

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

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

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

Chapter three analyses the debates surrounding this switch, and points to the many continuities between ‘syndicalist’ and ‘communist’ organisations. Chapters four and five examine communist trade union practices through the 1920s from a number of different angles, as the Communist Party and the communist leadership of the new Fédération des Cheminots Unitaire (FNCU) sought to adapt to the new realities of industrial relations after the defeat of the May 1920 strike. Facing an employer backlash, and a newly recalcitrant rank and file, communist activists on the railways had to improvise alternative means of maintaining grass roots militancy in the workplace. Such activities were not sufficient, however, to prevent cheminot involvement in France’s Ruhr occupation, or to engender significant rank-and-file support for the PCF’s anti-Rif War campaign in the mid-1920s, as chapter five demonstrates.
Through much of the 1920s, the communist-led FNCU sought to maintain its revolutionary identity as a fighting organisation, eschewing involvement in the official channels of railway industrial relations. Chapter six analyses the major shift that took place in the FNCU’s approach during the period of ‘class-against-class’. The late 1920s witnessed the union perform a significant ‘turn to the workplace’, demonstrating a new, pragmatic engagement with railway affairs and the everyday realities of the cheminot working environment. Such a move led to a marked growth in FNCU influence within the workplace, but also raised significant tensions within the communist leadership over the threat that such practices posed to the union’s revolutionary identity.

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

While working to maintain rank and file discipline, the cheminot leaders pressed the Popular Front government for full implementation of cheminot demands. Through the collective contract, the application of the 40-hour week under FdC supervision, and the nationalisation of the railway network with the FdC represented on the board of the new SNCF, the Popular Front period saw the fulfilment of the aims of both communists and non-communists as set out over the previous decade or more. Two guiding principles came to define union strategy on the railways through the 1920s and 1930s. First, the extension of working-class power within the industry, notably the pursuit of independent representation for the cheminots at the highest levels of government and within the rail companies. Second, and related to the above, a significant advance in democratic representation within the workplace itself and a strong cheminot voice in all matters relating the day-to-day operation of the railway network. The 1921 Railway Act had laid the groundwork for a social contract on the railways and the engagement of the FNCU from the late 1920s onwards had carved out a role for communist-led labour within this structure. However, it took the coming
of the Popular Front government and the wider climate of May and June 1936 for the former unitaires to abandon their hostile participation in railway industrial politics. Operating now from a position of power, the newly united FdC engaged largely on their own terms with railway companies and the state. This Popular Front’s social-democratic experiment was to endure, with the cheminots’ support, through to November 1938, when it was overturned by ministerial decrees that ended the totemic 40-hour week legislation. In the struggles to save the 40-hour week, and the Popular Front’s legacy, railway workers were once again at the heart of the popular struggle for the first time since 1920. The workers’ defeat in the abortive general strike of November 1938 created a significant breach between the railway workers and the increasingly authoritarian Republic.