For a brief period, the events of May–June 1936 transformed the social and political landscape in France. Following almost two decades of employer ascendancy and the relative impotence of the labour movement in France, divided as it was into often warring communist and non-communist factions, a re-united and supremely confident CGT seized back the initiative. A massive surge in rank and file militancy following the election of the first Socialist prime minister in the nation's history led to widespread strikes across French industry and commerce beginning in May 1936 and carrying on through the following months. Alongside the strikes French workers adopted the relatively novel tactic of occupying their workplaces, raising among some the hopes, and fears, of an impending revolution. Beginning among aircraft workers in Le Havre and Toulouse on 11 May the strike wave quickly spread, first through other aircraft factories before broadening out through other industrial sectors. By the end of the month the strikes had reached the Parisian banlieues and had increased dramatically in scale. On 1 June there were ten occupied workplaces in the Paris region. By midday on 2 June this had reached 66, and by that evening 150 workplaces had been occupied.1 As economic activity began to grind to a halt, the newly elected Popular Front government responded. On 6 June the newly elected Prime Minister Léon Blum announced in parliament that the government would be immediately implementing a programme of social legislation. Employers were thrust onto the back foot. In secret talks the following day with representatives of major industrialists at the prime minister’s official residence, the Hôtel Matignon, the Popular Front government exacted significant concessions which fundamentally recast social relations in the workplace. As a result of these concessions, French workers now had the right to join unions, elect shop stewards to represent them in negotiations

with management and gained pay increases across the board. This sudden, unsolicited extension of trade union power within the workplace was one of the major achievements of the Popular Front government. It was as, Herrick Chapman notes, a ‘stunning breakthrough for the CGT’. The Matignon Accords were announced on Monday 8 June, yet they failed initially to curtail the strikes. Occupations persisted through June, finally petering out in early July, at which point 12,000 workplaces had been affected by the strikes, with 9,000 occupied.

Further events continued to reconfigure the dynamics of power within workplaces across France. Collective contracts were drawn up between workers and their employers. Negotiated by CGT delegates and subsequently policed by union shop stewards, the collective contracts terminated the previously unassailable authority of employers in the workplace. Shortly afterwards, legislation was passed introducing the 40-hour working week, a totemic achievement which in turn was introduced and operated under the watchful scrutiny of the CGT. Taken as a whole, these achievements fundamentally recast the working environment, reconceptualising it as a legitimate political space. The social explosion of May–June 1936 demonstrated that the *patron* could not expect to be at ‘home’ in the workplace in the same way in which he was ‘at home’ with his family. The ‘authoritarianism of the *patron* was replaced by something akin to a social contract… the strike’, argues Chapman, ‘was a rebellion against employer autocracy a struggle to make the aircraft factory a more secure and sensible place to work.’ And, as Antoine Prost emphasises, what was the case for the aircraft workers studied by Chapman also holds true for French workers more broadly.

The social explosion and subsequent reforms in industrial relations of June 1936 fundamentally transformed the Popular Front. What had begun as an anti-fascist political alliance was transformed into an experiment in industrial social democracy. The extension of democratic principles into the workplace was largely unprecedented, the result of rank and file action channelled by grassroots activists into an unstoppable force for change. This social democratic experiment held sway, not without tensions, for more than

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two years until, in November 1938, it collapsed in the face of a determined employer backlash carried out with the full support and encouragement of a newly energised, economically liberal government led by Edouard Daladier. State coercion was placed at the service of employers to ensure that working-class opposition was broken and employer autocracy restored. The defeat of the 30 November general strike marked the end of the Popular Front democratic experiment.

Throughout the heady days of the early summer of 1936, however, one sector of the French economy remained notably untouched by the strikes that were paralysing industry. Through May and June 1936, the nation's railways continued to function as normal. There were no strikes, and no depots or workshops were occupied. The cheminots continued with their work as normal. This fact was clearly the source of some later embarrassment for post-war historians of cheminot trade unionism. The Federation's official history makes no mention of the cheminot absence, merely skipping over the Popular Front years to focus instead upon the cheminots' heroic wartime experiences. In cheminot autobiographies, including that of the railway workers' leader Lucien Midol, the cheminot absence from the summer strike wave also goes unrecorded. Some historians have regretted the lack of a railway strike. Jean Kergoat argued that a general strike and occupation of the railway network would have transformed the situation, presumably in a more revolutionary direction. Other historians have seen in the cheminot refusal to strike an indifference, even hostility to the Popular Front's social explosion. With the strikers being previously unorganised workers without a history of union activity and without the job security and occupational benefits already enjoyed by the cheminots, they were, argued Gérard Noiriel, viewed with suspicion by those on the railways.7

Such a view is unfair on a number of counts. First, as we shall see, France's railway workers were closely engaged in the anti-fascist campaigns of this period, and notably played a significant role in extending aid to the Spanish Republic during the Civil War, focussing in particular on the Spanish railway workers. Communist municipalities, including those dominated by cheminots, adopted many hundreds of Spanish child refugees from the conflict. Significantly, railway workers were at the heart of the Popular Front experiment in industrial social democracy. Central to this chapter is the contention that the period 1936–1938, from the June strikes and Matignon Accords to the abortive general strike of November 1938, was at base an attempt to fundamentally transform social relations in France. Beginning as an anti-fascist alliance, the Popular Front government was transformed by the strike wave of May-June into

an experiment in industrial social democracy.\textsuperscript{8} Understood in this light, the absence of the cheminots from the events of May–June 1936 becomes less of a puzzle. As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, railway workers and, crucially, their communist trade union representatives had from the latter part of the 1920s onwards come to conceptualise their role within railway capitalism as predicated upon the extension of worker power and trade-union legitimacy within the industry. This was viewed as constituting a direct challenge to the unqualified authority of rail company owners and managers. Having established an independent space for union action within the industry prior to June 1936, cheminots could therefore initially afford to take a back seat.

Yet, in November 1938, in stark contrast to June 1936, French railway workers placed themselves at the forefront of attempts to defend the totemic social legislation which the strike waves of the summer of 1936 and the Matignon Accords had done so much to inaugurate. In November 1938 the infamous révanchiste of the French patronat, with the support of the French state, took place against the Popular Front social legislation. In a series of decrees in early November, the newly appointed Finance Minister Paul Reynaud announced the abrogation of the totemic 40-hour week legislation. The response of the labour movement was an eruption in spontaneous wildcat strike actions and, eventually, the calling of a national general strike for 30 November 1938. In his classic study of this last stand of the Popular Front, Guy Bourdé emphasised the centrality of the cheminots to the unfolding of events. Without the unambiguous support of railway workers, 70% of whom were organised within the CGT, the strike would have been unlikely to have taken place at all.\textsuperscript{9}

The general strike of 30 November was, of course, a complete failure – in the face of individual requisition orders, the threat of imprisonment, and a military occupation of key railway centres, cheminots were compelled to report for duty on the railways. The massive state response in support of employers, together with disastrous timing on the part of the CGT leadership in calling a general strike just as the wave of opposition to the decree laws appeared to be falling off, equally account for the failure of the opposition movement. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, right up to the eve of 30 November and even on the day of the strike itself, significant numbers of the cheminot rank-and-file as well as the union hierarchy were

\textsuperscript{8} In this it can be seen in a broader context of European movements in the interwar period, see Stefan Berger, \textit{Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany} (Harlow, 2000), p. 125.

fully committed to industrial action in defence of the Popular Front. For Bourdé, however, the apparent reversal of position represented by this new-found militancy did not in fact amount to a major reorientation in the outlook of the railway workers. Rather it was material interests that were placed at the fore. Cheminots, argued Bourdé, played a leading role in calling for a general strike because, of all workers, they were the most affected materially by the Reynaud decrees of November 1938.

These were not, however, the terms in which cheminots understood their political engagement. In response to the November 1938 decree laws the cheminot leadership made explicit the material impact upon their members, to be sure. But in their public pronouncements and in correspondence with railway managers and the French state, the core of their opposition focussed upon the principal of shared power and collective responsibility between management and workforce. It was this principal that cheminots felt had been at the heart of the Popular Front experiment, an experiment in which the cheminots could be seen to play a leading role between 1936 and 1938.

While not neglecting the material gains of the Popular Front years, this chapter stresses rather the symbolic dimension of Popular Front policy. By emphasising the centrality of demands for expanded power and dignity for men and women in the workplace, it demonstrates that, far from being marginal participants, the example of the cheminots takes us to the heart of the meaning of these years for a great many workers. For the Cheminot Federation, Popular Front legislation was symbolic of a fundamentally transformed social republic in which workers played a significant role in the public sphere. It was in defence of this conception of national economic organisation that the railway workers attempted to act in November 1938.

Towards the Popular Front

Between 1928 and 1933, Communist parties around the world had followed the Comintern strategy of ‘class-against-class’. While the line softened somewhat from 1931, at the beginning of 1934 the central tenets of ‘Third Period’ tactics remained in place. International events through 1933 and 1934, however, had a transformative impact upon the Comintern approach. As Jonathan Haslam emphasised in an important article, Hitler’s election as Chancellor of Germany in early 1933 and the repression unleashed against German communists and trade unionists threw Comintern strategy into ‘disarray’.10 Events in France contributed to the questions being asked of the

continued applicability of ‘class-against-class’ in the light of international circumstances. On 6 February 1934 a demonstration of the right-wing leagues turned violent with a sizeable group marching upon the National Assembly building. These actions caused Daladier to resign as prime minister to be replaced by the right-leaning Gaston Doumergue. One week later, on 12 February, counter-demonstrations were organised by the CGT and the CGTU against the leagues. Though the leaders of the two confederations had organised two distinctive demonstrations, the efforts of CGTU and CGT officials to keep their respective rank-and-file members apart failed. The two marches merged together in a united display of left-wing anti-fascism. The CGT also called a general strike for 12 February which yielded powerful results. According to Michael Seidman, 45 percent of French workers participated in the strikes, their numbers swelling the demonstrations to 300,000 in Paris, ‘anti-fascism easily outmatched at least sixfold the numbers of its enemies in the streets’.

The new strongly felt urgency of anti-fascist organisation together with a desire, in Xavier Vigna’s estimation, ‘to exit from the economic crisis by reinforcing the social dimension of the republican regime’, brought grassroots CGT and CGTU members together, bypassing the continuing mutual hostility of their union leaders. The clamour for unity among trade unionists was matched within the political parties of the left. At their May 1934 conference, one-third of SFIO deputies voted in favour of united anti-fascist action with the PCF, a point used in Moscow by the new head of the Comintern Georg Dimitrov to press upon Stalin the desirability of a decisive shift in the Comintern line away from ‘class-against-class’ to an anti-fascist Popular Front alliance. For his part, Maurice Thorez soon became a committed devotee of the new line. By the time of his arrival in Moscow on 30 April 1934 he was considered by Dimitrov’s then personal secretary Alfred Kurella to be a convinced supporter of a new Popular Front Comintern line, including communist participation in a Popular Front government. With demands from within the Comintern eliding with shifting Soviet foreign policy objectives, notably the desire for a renewed alliance with France, Stalin was reluctantly convinced of the merits of this

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11 On the 6 February riots, see Chris Millington, ‘February 6, 1934: The Veterans’ Riot’, French Historical Studies, 33, 4 (Fall, 2010), 545–572 (545); Jackson, The Dark Years, p. 72.
new position. The Popular Front strategy was officially announced at the Comintern’s international congress held in Moscow in July 1935. The left in France moved far in advance of Comintern policy, however. An alliance between SFIO and PCF was concluded in July 1934 and a broad coalition of left and centre, including the Radical Party, was finally inaugurated by Maurice Thorez at a speech in Nantes on 24 October 1934. The political alliance forged would, in May 1936, go on to convincingly win national elections resulting in SFIO leader Léon Blum becoming France’s first Socialist prime minister.

While the general strike and demonstrations of 12 February 1934 proved enormously successful, mobilising hundreds of thousands of French workers, results among the cheminots were patchy. Both CGT and CGTU leaders nationally called upon railway workers to respond en masse to the fascist threat by participating in the 24-hour stoppage. The outcome, however, was disappointing. For the very most part, cheminots reported for work as usual. As the prefect of Indre-et-Loire was informed by local police reports on the day, the railways in the department maintained a normal service. The same was true across France. On the Eastern railway company, a total of 1,734 workers were disciplined for having participated in the strike, though the vast majority of these (1,254) had only ceased work for between 15 minutes and half an hour. On the PO (the company which employed large numbers of cheminots in Tours), 706 were similarly disciplined. These figures have led leading historian of railway trade unionism, Christian Chevandier, to conclude that 12 February 1934, at best, only saw the token involvement on the part of the cheminots, though measured against the previous 14 years of inactivity even such small numbers of participants could be seen as marking a significant development. The picture from local archives allows us to slightly nuance Chevandier’s overall picture, however,

18 AD I-L, tM237, Commissaire spécial à Préfet Indre-et-Loire, 12/2/1934.
and to suggest that the cheminots were less passive on 12 February than has commonly been thought. Certainly, participation in strike activity was low, but railway workers were, nonetheless, in certain areas, an imposing presence in the day’s demonstrations.

Like many across France, railway workers in Tours did not wait for the official national strike day to make known their opposition to the perceived fascist coup. On the evening of 9 February, as workers filed out of the railway offices and workshops, a large joint demonstration between unitaires and confédérés was organised. The cortege paraded through the streets of the town, carrying aloft placards calling for the ‘dissolution of the fascist leagues’ and ‘down with fascism’. The march passed off relatively peacefully, although there were tense moments, notably when the marchers passed in front of the local headquarters of Action Française. At another point a bystander who shouted insults at the marchers was forced to beat a quick retreat, taking refuge in a local hotel whose ‘shutters were hastily closed’ as he ran inside to escape the crowd. When the march reached its end point, the assembled railway workers were addressed by communist and non-communist speakers who, it was reported, congratulated the workers for having demonstrated to the fascists and the ‘camelots du roi’ that the streets of Tours ‘belong to the workers’.22

On 12 February itself, the general strike entirely shut down the mail, and only a skeleton staff of operators maintained an emergency telephone service. Roughly a thousand workers gathered in the early evening at the local Bureaux des syndicats to hear speeches, and several present were disappointed by the absence of the railwaymen from their number. Forming a demonstration of roughly 400, the marchers then set off for Place de la Gare, ‘pour retrouver les cheminots’. Arriving at around 5pm, when many cheminots were clocking off for the day, the cortege made a tour of the square, ‘their ranks swelling by a large proportion’. By the time the marchers set off again their numbers had grown to 3,000.23

Such instances were not enough to satisfy the Cheminot leaders, however. CGT leader Jean Jarrigion himself chided railwaymen for their lack of engagement in the anti-fascist demonstrations that had taken place across France. Writing a few months later in the Cahiers du bolchévisme, the Communist Party’s theoretical journal, Lucien Midol struck a more positive tone. Midol emphasised the historic commitment of certain groups of

23 AD I-L, tM297, Commissariat de Police à Prefet Indre-et-Loire, 12/2/1934. The 3,000 figure is given in AD I-L, tM297, Commissariat de Police à Prefet Indre-et-Loire, 13/2/1934, p. 1.
cheminots to the anti-fascist cause. In particular, he reminded readers of the actions taken by railwaymen in the south-east of France against Mussolini’s fascists in 1926. Railwaymen, he claimed, continued to work in this international spirit, joining campaigns in support of Dimitrov and Thaelmann. Midol also suggested that workers in border towns were using their positions to smuggle political literature into and out of France. Writing in the same edition of the Cahiers, CGTU General Secretary Benoît Frachon was, however, less positive. He reflected the frustrations of many in the Communist Party when he wrote that there were those ‘who hold over the totality of the railway workers, “who do not want to fight”, who are “passive”, responsibility for the weakness of the movement’. Frachon called for ever greater efforts by communist militants among railway workers.

While February 1934 may have yielded disappointing results, the following months nevertheless witnessed a rapid politicisation of the cheminot rank-and-file. At the root of the marked growth in cheminot militancy through 1934 and 1935 was the anger generated by a series of government decree laws targeting cheminot pay and pensions, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Railway workers of all political persuasions united in their opposition to the government cost-cutting measures. Joint meetings were held between CGT and CGTU local sections to protest the decree laws. The Ministry of the Interior recognised increasing levels of militancy among cheminots. This was a cause for concern, especially as the more moderate CGT was judged to be increasingly ‘outflanked by the base’. The FNCU was doing much better in profiting from the unity movement, a fact which according to the Ministry was pushing the FNCC into action, as the CGT union realised that unity was clearly going to happen ‘with them or despite them on the entirety of the French railways’. 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.

continued to unite cheminot positions through 1935. In September of that year, 700 railway workers attended a meeting of the Interfederal Committee to protest the decrees and to call for unity among railway workers. This was just one of a number of such meetings held by cheminots across France at this time. Significantly, opposition to the decree laws did not simply serve to unite previously opposed unitaires and confédérés on the railways. Falling as they did upon a wide range of public sector workers, the decree laws also fostered greater contacts between the cheminots and state sector employees.

Through 1934 and 1935, the new atmosphere of unity and solidarity in the face of the threat of fascism merged with growing anger and rank and file militancy aimed at railway company management and the right-wing governments of Pierre Laval and Gaston Doumergue, who were considered to be using ‘fascist’ and ‘dictatorial’ methods to cut rail company costs on the backs of railway workers. These concerns combined into an unstoppable force in favour of trade union unity on the railways, pushed by rank-and-file workers. In December 1934 cheminots on the Midi formed a unified Federation. Through the course of 1935 other regional Federations followed suit until in December of that year a national congress saw the fusion of the CGT and CGTU Federations. Pierre Semard and Jean Jarrigion emerged as leaders of the reunited Fédération des Cheminots (FdC). On the regional level this joint leadership was echoed, with former unitaires and confédérés sharing the leaderships. Former unitaires maintained a slight majority within the re-formed national Federation, making up around 54% of the membership.

1936

Few predicted the scale of the Popular Front’s electoral success at the national elections in May. The anti-fascist coalition gained a significant parliamentary majority over the combined forces of the political right. Furthermore, the French electorate turned to the parties of the Left in record numbers. For the first time the Socialist party emerged from a general election with more seats than the centrist Radicals. The most significant gains were made by the Communist Party, whose parliamentary representation expanded massively from ten seats at the 1932 elections to 72 seats and

28 AD I-L, t1M238, Réunions Publiques 1935, commissaire de police du 1 arrondissement à M. le Commissaire Central, Tours, 1/9/1935.
29 AD I-L, t1M238, Réunions Publiques 1935, 20/7/1935.
more than 1.5 million votes – a higher percentage of the total vote than that obtained by Edouard Daladier’s Radical party. Among the PCF’s deputies were leading figures in the cheminot trade union. Lucien Midol, was one such individual, retaining his seat in Seine-et-Oise, and Antoine Demusois who was also elected as a member of parliament for the same department. Pierre Semard, now joint leader of the re-united Fédération des Cheminots was elected as a Conseiller Général in the Seine department.

The situation facing the new government was hardly propitious. The success of a left-wing political alliance stimulated a panicked flight of capital out of France. The stock market also tumbled, and the value of the franc fell. International auguries were equally bleak. In an attempt to settle French and international opinion, the new Prime Minister Léon Blum underlined that he would stick rigidly to constitutional propriety and would attend the requisite one-month period before officially taking office. Amid the tensions generated by the hopes of radical change mixed with fears that the government would be forced to renege on its promises, strikes broke out in the French aircraft industry. From here the wave of strikes spread out rapidly. Shorter and Tilly calculate that for the year 1936, 2.5 million workers participated in 17,000 strikes with three-quarters of this number occurring in June of that year. In turn, over three-quarters of these June strikes consisted of factory occupations.

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’, 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.

As previously discussed, traffic on the national railway network continued unaffected by strike action. Nevertheless, French state officials and the

incoming Popular Front ministers kept a watchful eye on the railways, fearful of how a nationwide railway strike might transform the situation. Railway workers were far from uninterested bystanders during the events of May and June 1936. As in other sectors of the economy, membership of the CGT on the railways, already at high levels relative to other professional groups, expanded significantly. By the summer of 1936, 70% of all railway employees were members of the FdC. Higher-grade white-collar workers from the Fédération des Cadres also put aside their long-held differences with the communists and joined the CGT.

May Day saw enormous cheminot demonstrations in the Paris region and in the Nord. The 2 May issue of Le Peuple, the CGT newspaper, carried a photo of a large-scale demonstration outside the PLM workshops at Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, from where the 1920 General Strike had spread across the French rail network. On 3 May, the paper returned to the theme of the renewed sense of militancy detectable among railway workers, noting that May Day demonstrations among railway workers had been ‘of a size comparable to the demonstrations prior to 1920’. The La Chapelle workshops in Paris had experienced demonstrations unseen since the general strike and 1,200 cheminots had attended a mass meeting that evening.37 Le Peuple was able to further underline the importance of the day’s events for the labour movement, this time linking the actions with the general strike of 1910 through its coverage of cheminot demonstrations at Tergnier, site of the outbreak of that action. 2,500 cheminots had joined demonstrations held at the Compagnie du Nord’s cité cheminote, an important symbolic action taken on what was, to all intents and purposes, company property. A further 3,000 cheminots had demonstrated at Clichy, Paris.38

Participation in May Day demonstrations was not the sum total of cheminot involvement in the ‘social explosion’ of 1936. In July, in the Nord département, a meeting at Hellemmes was attended by some 1,200 cheminots. At Lomme, the Lille-Délivrance union branch was, by early July, on its third mass demonstration, the first two having occurred on 5 and 11 June. During early marches the cheminot procession was reported to have stopped outside occupied factories while cheminots chanted their support and sang the Internationale. On 9 July, 200 cheminots processed behind the red flag from the company cité towards the centre of the commune of Lomme, on the outskirts of Lille. The cortege stopped briefly outside the home of the sous-chef de gare, where insults were chanted before proceeding to the home of a local notable who had hung a tricolour from his window. Cries of ‘down with fascists’ were hurled for several minutes before the

37 Le Peuple, 1/5/1936 and 3/5/1936.
38 Le Peuple, 5/5/1936.
crowd moved onto the centre of town where 700 cheminots gathered to listen to speeches from local communists. Anti-fascism and the defence of democracy were central to Popular Front political culture, as they were, too, for the cheminots. Cheminots were equally involved in taking up the cause of Spanish Republicanism and the defence of Spanish democracy against Franco’s forces, as we shall see.

It is also the case that strikes involving workers in industries associated with the railways did occur across France in June 1936, though largely in the Paris region and among those workers not directly employed by the major railway companies. Employees of the Wagon-Lits company had struck, as had cleaning staff at the Gare du Nord. At Nancy, 215 staff at a private company contracted by the Compagnie de l’Est had ceased work, demanding a 40-hour week and fifteen days’ holiday.

The key point about such actions, and these were not isolated, is that they affected workers in private companies working under contract with the large rail companies and who were not covered by the terms of the 1921 railway statute. The CGT Cheminot Federation took careful notice of such strikes, union leaders moving to ensure that the strike actions moved in directions approved of by the CGT – that is towards collective contracts with employers under the aegis of the Fédération des Cheminots. In seeking to resolve strikes among non-statutory railway employees, one of the major concerns of the Federation leadership was the potential role individual cheminots might be compelled to play as strike breakers by their employers. Just such a situation occurred at Noisy-le-Sec in June 1936, where a number of cheminots had been ordered to carry out the work of striking package handlers. Both of the joint leaders of the national Cheminot Federation, Pierre Semard and Jean Jarrigion, condemned such practices while recognising the real pressures which rail companies could bring to bear on workers in such situations. In order to protect railway staff from being placed in such circumstances, the Federation entered into direct discussions with the railway companies on the issue, Jarrignon announcing to the Federal Bureau in early June 1936 that such practices would cease.

41 AN F/14/14928, E150D, Nancy, 17/6/1936.
42 See the discussions in CGTIHS, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936.
43 CGTIHS, Fédération Réunifiée, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936.
As the historian Jacques Kergoat has emphasised, a railway strike in June 1936 would have had ‘major consequences’. Perhaps in such circumstances, to paraphrase Marcel Pivert, all really would have been possible. This was not a point lost on those responsible for governing France in the summer of 1936. As strikes spread through Paris and out across France reaching Lyon metalworkers on 3 June, the Elysée Palace became increasingly nervous. In his history of the Popular Front, Jules Moch recorded that President Lebrun was extremely fearful that the strikes and occupations might spread to the French railways, which had as yet been unaffected by the social explosion. There was indeed some cause for concern; on 5 June a serious threat from Parisian transport workers to strike forced the national CGT deputy leader René Belin to address an emergency meeting of these workers. Encountering a strong sentiment which argued for transport workers to play their role in the historic events, Belin was, nonetheless, able to calm the situation and keep the capital’s arteries open. Nevertheless, fears that Paris might run short of bread in the event of an impending transport strike moved Jules Moch together with a CGT official to undertake a late-night dash into the nearby countryside to secure supplies of fuel for Parisian bakers from an occupied factory. For his part Belin, however, describes Moch’s account of this threat as ‘melodramatic’.

Directly moved by fears of an impending railway strike, President Lebrun summoned Blum to a meeting to discuss the crisis on 4 June. Up to this point, Blum had been assiduous in keeping rigidly to constitutional propriety which mandated that the new government should be invested on 6 June. As a concession to Lebrun’s request that the Socialists take command of the situation, Blum agreed that the ministers of the interior and of labour would take their posts that evening. Jules Moch, Blum’s chief of staff, took up his role at the Hôtel Matignon on 5 June, with the rest of the government being invested, as planned, the next day. The following day, 7 June, the famous Matignon Accords were signed between representatives of the CGT and the employer organisations, aiming to give satisfaction to worker grievances, and thereby end the strikes. Many workers, despite their participation in Popular Front action, were excluded from the agreements,

48 René Belin, Mémoires du Secrétariat de la CGT au Gouvernement de Vichy, p. 97; Jacques Kergoat, La France du Front Populaire, p. 115.
notably those in banking, insurance and department stores, as well as agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{49}

In the immediate wake of the negotiation of the Matignon Accords, the government moved quickly to head off any potential railway strike. Six leading members of the Cheminot Federation, including Pierre Semard, were invited to the home of Léon Blum to discuss the crisis with key members of the Popular Front government. Present at the meeting, in addition to Prime Minister Blum himself were Finance Minister, Vincent Auriol; Minister for the Economy, Charles Spinasse; Minister for Public Works, Bedouc and Jules Moch, the SFIO’s transport expert and Blum’s chief of staff. The sole item on the agenda was what it would take to keep the railway workers at their posts. The cheminot delegation arrived with a clear set of demands, including three weeks’ paid holiday, as compared to the two weeks’ granted to other French workers. Despite some reservations from Spinasse on this point the government readily acceded to the Cheminot demands.\textsuperscript{50} It was a period in which in spite of not going on strike, as Pierre Semard noted, the railway workers ‘obtained everything we demanded’.\textsuperscript{51}

The timing of the agreement was propitious indeed. Through early June, protest movements had been developing among groups of railway workers, acting on their own initiative and not sanctioned by the Federation, seeking to launch a railway strike. On June 5 the Federation leadership had felt the need to emphasise in print the need for cheminots to remain calm and confident in the national Federation. Under the title ‘Confidence and Discipline’, the Federation leadership wrote how

The \textit{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.\textsuperscript{52}

Such were the concerns of an impending cheminot strike that on 8 June the Federal Bureau was informed by telegram from the national CGT leadership that on no account should the strike wave be extended into the public sector.\textsuperscript{53} On 14 June, the detailed article ‘Ce qu’obtiennent les travailleurs du rail’ was prominently published in \textit{Le Peuple}. Details of the outcomes of

\textsuperscript{49} Jacques Kergoat, \textit{La France du Front Popularie}, p. 118; On agricultural workers, see John Bulaitis, \textit{Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front}.

\textsuperscript{50} Pierre Semard, \textit{Histoire de la fédération des cheminots}, pp. 74–75.

\textsuperscript{51} Pierre Semard, \textit{Histoire de la fédération des cheminots}, p. 75.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Le Peuple}, 5/6/1936.

\textsuperscript{53} CGTIHS, \textit{Fédération Réunifiée}, carton 1, Bureau fédéral, PV. 8/6/1936, p. 2.
discussions between the union, management and the state were discussed, all successfully obtained, the FdC underlined, ‘thanks to the strength of our Federation… thanks to its cohesion and the discipline of all its members.’ Semard had made the same point at an enormous meeting of cheminots in Paris two days previously on 12 June.

Tensions remained high, however. With strike movements continuing throughout France through June and into July, the railways continued to be carefully monitored. Uncertainty surrounding the intentions of the cheminots led to a good deal of nervousness on all sides. In the fraught atmosphere of the summer of 1936, rumour and the misinterpretation of events occasionally threatened to upset the efforts of the CGT and government to maintain calm on the railways.

Just such an event occurred on 15 June. At 5.30pm the secretary of the Etat Region of the FdC received a phone call from Raoul Dautry, Director of the Etat network. Arriving at Dautry’s offices at Gare Saint-Lazare, the Federation representatives were stunned to hear news that railwaymen at the massive depot at Sotteville on the outskirts of Rouen had voted to strike the following morning. Concern mounted as further news arrived that a strike at Rennes had only narrowly been averted after an emergency meeting held by the local union official. Reports arriving on Dautry’s desk that evening appeared to point to a major rank-and-file movement developing on the Etat, and the Federation leadership knew nothing about it. A phone call to Rennes helped calm the mood in Dautry’s office. The local union official confirmed the mass meeting but insisted it had been routine, called to keep local workers abreast of negotiations between union and management. While all seemed calm in Rennes, the situation in Rouen remained unclear. No contact could be made with the local Federation organisation and so Robert Lutgen, a member of the regional bureau, was dispatched that evening to Normandy to speak in person to the local union secretary. It was not until 11.30pm that Lutgen was able to locate his man. The local union secretary was astonished to see the Federation official and even more so to hear news of the impending strike among his workers. He completely refuted the claim.

The following morning Lutgen took the train into Rouen, listening carefully to the conversations of workers heading to their jobs for any sign of a threatened railway strike. Hearing nothing to alarm him he next headed to the Sotteville depot. Finding all the workers at their post, Lutgen met with the Depot manager and the regional railway inspectors. It quickly became

54 Le Peuple, 14/6/1936.
apparent that the strike had never been a reality. A local railway inspector had misinterpreted a meeting of railway workers at Sotteville and, upon hearing their demand for a meeting with managers had panicked and rushed off a letter to Dautry informing him of an impending railway strike. Lutgen, according to the account he later prepared for the ministers of the interior and public works, proceeded to give the company inspector a dressing down. He strongly reproached the man for having acted so precipitously and for having not raised the matter with local union delegates. Addressing the government ministers in his report of the incident, Lutgen voiced concern about the spread of such ‘rumours’ and ‘false news’. He worried that in the heightened atmosphere, such gossip could be used by those who sought to sabotage the Popular Front. Rumours, he argued, could ‘create a state of nervousness’ which might degenerate into conflict. Such conditions, he cautioned, would be exploited by those seeking to undermine the Popular Front.56

The episode demonstrates just how tense the atmosphere was on all sides during the summer of 1936. It also demonstrates just how worried CGT leaders were about the fragility of the Popular Front social legislation, and reveals how they feared those opposed to the Popular Front might seek to engineer its downfall. A further window into such thoughts is provided by Raymond Tournemaine, one of the most senior figures within the Cheminot Federation. In a speech to Parisian railway workers in March 1937, Tournemaine reflected on the cheminot leadership’s fears of a strike in June 1936: ‘If at this time a strike had been called, the Popular Front would have been broken, and the workers treated like those in neighbouring countries.’57

Facing an upswing of cheminot discontent in early 1937 following the ‘pause’ in social legislation by the Blum government and anger as rising inflation ate into wage rises, another leading CGT Cheminot figure at the same meeting raised the spectre of the failed rail strikes of the past, ‘we must not return to the years of 1910 and 1920’, he underlined.58

The false news of a railway strike on the Etat network also demonstrates how central the Federation had become to social relations on the railways in June 1936, and how much railway directors like Raoul Dautry now relied upon the CGT to resolve personnel issues. Contacts between union delegates and management had long been a feature of the railway industry, as we have seen. However, after Matignon the balance of power in these relationships shifted significantly in favour of the CGT. This was not just a feature of union–management relations at the national level. It was also a

56 AN 20010216, Dossier 1588, Report 16/6/1936, pp. 1–3.
57 AN 20010216/5, dossier 76, 12/3/1937.
58 AN 20010216/5, dossier 76, 12/3/1937.
key feature of the relationship between workers and managers at the local level. The confrontational relationship of previous years gave way to a more collaborative partnership, though not one that was wholly without tensions. At the depot in Tours, local CGT delegates welcomed the new collaborative, constructive approach of the local Inspecteur d’arrondissement. The delegates welcomed the Inspector’s conversion to the spirit of the Popular Front, and underlined that ‘if the companies wish to apply honestly and in good faith the engagements which they have signed up to, they will find us to be loyal and scrupulous collaborators.’ In their approach, the cheminots argued they were acting not only in the name of the cheminots, but also for the success of the railways, the functioning of which ‘profits the whole nation.’

On 26 June, the *Tribune des cheminots* again reiterated all that had been achieved under the headline ‘une première victoire’. The Federation worked hard to publicise their successes, tying them into a narrative of discipline and order aimed at ensuring that the rank-and-file members retained confidence in the strategy of negotiations being conducted by the FdC and as a result, it was hoped, would remain at their posts. The stakes were high in this regard: failure to demonstrate that they could control their membership would significantly weaken the FdC’s position in future negotiations. This was a vital consideration as the union worked to establish itself as the undisputed sole legitimate representative of cheminots in France. This aim was achieved with the signing of the collective convention between the FdC and the newly created SNCF in 1938. The contract replaced the railway statute and would remain in force until 1950. Article two codified the relationship between management and workforce, with the CGT recognised as the sole representative of the railway workers. Employers were now obliged to liaise closely with CGT representatives. All this was to be undertaken, the convention made clear, in a spirit of collaboration founded upon the recognition of the rights and shared responsibilities of employees and management.

60 *La Tribune des cheminots*, 26/6/1936.
Spain

While the cause of anti-fascism within France’s borders demanded a robust extension of the democratic sphere, internationally the anti-fascist cause demonstrated the strength of cheminots’ sense of belonging to an international working-class railway family as French railway workers were moved en masse to aid their fellow ferroviarios in Spain. Contacts between the French FdC and the Spanish railwaymen’s union had existed for a number of years. Following the outbreak of hostilities communications were continued regularly, and representatives of the two unions travelled back and forth across the Pyrenees.62 Railway workers in the south of France were well used to crossing back and forth across the Spanish border, whether for work on holiday, on union business or all three. As late as May 1936, delegates from the Midi Union’s regional congress made the relatively short trip across the border to the town of Puigcerdà for a post-congress holiday.63

In November 1937 a delegation from the Cheminot Federation visited Spain to demonstrate in person the solidarity of the cheminots with their fellow Spanish railwaymen and with the Republican cause in Spain more broadly. 12 delegates set off from Paris on 2 November, their journey taking them through the key Republican strongholds as well as to the front line of the conflict. The visit by representatives of the French railway workers was greeted with massive enthusiasm by their Spanish counterparts. With their journey undertaken largely by rail – in a railcar due to the lack of coal – the cheminot representatives were greeted by huge numbers of Spanish railway workers and their families at each station. 1,500 turned out to greet them at Valencia’s station alone and in Madrid the Frenchmen were escorted from their hotel back to the station by ranks of their fellow Spanish workers singing the Internationale and the Marseillaise. In the booklet published to publicise the visit, the railwaymen laid out in detail their impressions and experiences in Spain. Particularly affecting was their visit to the front and their reports of fascist atrocities committed against Republican sympathisers in the town of Belchite where the male population was reported to have been massacred by Franco’s troops. As a result of the town’s resistance to the fascists it had been bombed into ruins by the air force, the bombers flying as many as 18 separate sorties against the town in the course of a single day.64 The delegates also visited Albacete (a key organisational centre for the International Brigades), Barcelona

64 Fédération des Cheminots, *La vérité sur l’Espagne Républicaine*, p. 28.
and Madrid where they had the opportunity to rekindle friendships with Spanish railway workers who they had met on previous visits to Spain during the 1930s, one of whom was now one of the leading organisers of the Republican resistance in the city.65

The delegates in their report to the cheminot readership laid out what had been achieved through the solidarity of the French railway workers with Spain, but called on them to do more to aid the Republic against its enemies in ‘International Fascism’. Ensuring that they encouraged their fellow workers to subscribe to the 1-franc-a-month stamp was an important step, as was the encouragement of their wives to knit items of clothing for the men in the trenches. Above all, however, the delegation called upon the French government to end its policy of non-intervention and to come to the aid of the Republic in Spain by providing weapons, war materiel, food, and other basic supplies such as coal. Ending non-intervention was a theme taken up again by the Cheminot Federation at their congress in March 1938. In a pamphlet published after this congress the key resolutions were publicised. The union leadership strongly condemned the weakness of the government position regarding the Spanish Republican forces, particularly as German and Italian forces were forcefully and openly intervening on the side of the Francoist rebels. The conflict, noted the FdC, presented a major threat to peace and to France’s own security, both in terms of the shared border with Spain and the threat it posed to links with North Africa. The Cheminot Federation called for the opening of the border with Republican Spain and the establishment of trading links with the Republic. Finally, the union called for an international conference to defend peace.66

Following the assault by the rebel forces led by Franco against the democratically elected Republican government, railway workers in France rallied to the beleaguered Republican cause. Leading Spanish railway men visited Paris and were given a rousing reception by their French comrades. Following the visit a subscription service was launched for Spain by the Cheminot Federation raising money which the Federation was using to send supplies of food to Spain.67 Cheminot largesse also helped to evacuate 500 women and children from Madrid who were housed in an orange plantation at the small town of Mario de la Constancia, 18km from Valencia, supported by donations from French cheminots. In France itself, the cheminot Orphelinat was also pressed into service to aid Republican Spain, in this case providing a refuge for 24 children who had fled the fighting in Spain.

65 Fédération des Cheminots, La vérité sur l’Espagne Républicaine, pp. 40–41.
67 Fédération des Cheminots, La vérité sur l’Espagne Républicaine, p. 91.
The creation of the SNCF was a significant Popular Front development for railway employees. The legitimacy of private capital operating a public service had troubled Republicans since the time of Gambetta and the SFIO had maintained a hostile front against the private rail companies in the form of Jules Moch through the interwar years. The creation of the SNCF in 1938 was in many ways the culmination of a steadily augmenting process of state involvement in railway management dating from at least World War One. However, it was the coming of the depression which fatally undermined railway company independence.

The Popular Front programme unveiled prior to the elections in May 1936 contained direct references to a policy of nationalisations of certain sectors of the economy. These included nationalisation of the armaments industry and greater state control over the Bank of France. These commitments and the wider Popular Front nationalisation policy, which was eventually to include the railways under the Chautemps government in August 1937, should not be read as part of an attempt on the part of the SFIO to transform the economy along Socialist or ‘planiste’ principles, however. The hostility of the Radical Party and PCF government partners to nationalisation was a key element. Significant, too, was the considerable opposition to economic planning within the SFIO itself, which retained something of its Marxist aversion to reformism within a capitalist economy. As Richard Kuisel has noted, planning ‘smacked of the reformism of Thomas and Millerand’.

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. In a series of articles in 1935, Blum defined a limited view of the place of nationalisation in French Socialist thought, ‘nationalisation was not socialisation […] merely substituting state control for private ownership did not eliminate wage labour or surplus value’. For the SFIO, planning could only be of value after the workers’ revolution.

Yet, nationalisations linked to the planned economy remained an important element within CGT thinking at the highest level with Georges Lefranc and CGT leader Léon Jouhaux being key supporters. Strongly inspired

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. 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. By 1934 the CGT leadership was itself divided over the issue. While Jouhaux and Belin were supporters, Raoul Lenoir and Georges Buisson were opposed. Neither *Le Peuple* nor *La Voix du Peuple* contained articles supporting planning principles through 1934.

As planning principles lost ground within the SFIO, they rapidly gained support within the CGT. The CGT published its own Plan in 1934, which was refused by the Socialist Party. However, the union movement continued to develop its thinking around economic planning, with nationalisation of key industries a vital element of any dirigiste model. From 1931, notes Jean-François Biard, the CGT had begun to identify rationalisation with the economic difficulties which France was beginning to encounter. Mechanisation and re-organisation had caused production to race ahead of wages, argued the Confederation, leading to a crisis of overproduction. The remedy would be an increase in wages together with working time reductions. 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.

In March 1937 the Paris prefecture of Police prepared a report on the question of railway nationalisation and of nationalisation more generally. Jouhaux, noted the report, had declared himself strongly resolved to obtain the nationalisation of key industries, including the railways. Importantly, Maurice Thorez had argued that, although the PCF remained hostile to the principle of nationalisations, he was in full agreement with the Radical Party

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73 George Lefranc, ‘Le courant planiste dans le mouvement ouvrier français’, p. 75.
74 Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p. 115.
75 Jean-François Biard, *Le socialisme devant ses choix*, p. 142.
that ‘certain large, public interest concerns, constituted in societies, should return to collective ownership.’ This was a significant declaration and proof of the meeting of PCF leadership with wider discourses which animated French popular culture. The PCF leaders, in full pursuit of the anti-fascist alliance, were unwilling to cause disquiet in middle-class opinion with attacks upon private property; yet, the special issue of the railways allowed for a more muscular approach. For their part, the Fédération des Cheminots were far more radical. The involvement of the state was a necessary measure to bringing a greater degree of coordination to transport policy and, in addition, nationalisation would sweep away ‘the politics of personal profit or dividends’. There was a clear gap between what nationalisation meant to the Fédération des Cheminots and the mixed society preferred by the PCF and Radical Party.

Appearing before the Commission des Travaux Publics in February 1937, Jean Jarrigion, the joint leader of the CGT Cheminot Federation, firmly made the case for the nationalisation of the railway industry. He first of all countered the company arguments that personnel costs were the major source of their financial difficulties. For the four years prior to 1937, Jarrigion argued, there had been a recruitment freeze on the railways, personnel levels were lower than those in many European countries. Equally, salary levels were in many cases much lower than in other European states. Over the same period, productivity on the French railways had increased significantly. The deficit facing the railway industry, argued Jarrigion, could not be attributed ‘to work regulations, to a lack of professional conscience or to worker salary increases’. The only solution to the crisis in the industry was immediate nationalisation, an argument which Jarrigion couched in the language of narrow company concerns against the national interest: ‘if we do not do this, the railway companies will maintain their strength. Moreover, their directors only aspire to conserve in their hands the commanding levers of the principal businesses of our country, to continue to exercise their omnipotence over economic and social life.’ For Jarrigion nationalisation would be a means of bringing greater organisation to French economic life and a greater measure of justice to society.

The Popular Front strategy of the PCF led the former unitaire leaders, now in the CGT, to fully embrace the politics of collaborationism. Though

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79 AN, C/15196, Tome II, PV. 10/2/1937, p. 4.
both unitaire and confédéré groups were disappointed by the outcome of negotiations which led to the creation of a société mixte rather than a full nationalisation, the union did not push strongly a radical alternative vision of the place of workers in the economy. The chief concern of the FdC was to see the state take on responsibility for the running of the railways in concert with representatives of passengers and the workforce. Unlike in the aircraft industry, there seems to have been little or no discussion of worker control in the railways.  

The Federation had supported the SFIO’s proposals, in large part based on Moch’s 1931 project. But the package which emerged from negotiations between companies, government, and parliament, with marginal government majority shareholding (51%) and the continued space for private finance, was not rejected by the union, despite grumblings over the Sabotage de la Nationalisation par le Capitalisme Ferroviaire (SNCF). The CGT did now have representatives sitting upon the Conseil d’administration of the new body, the union leaders Semard and Jarrigion. The presence of labour on a genuine managerial committee represented a significant step forward for the strategy aimed at the pursuit of power and influence at the heart of the industry in which both communists and non-communists had been engaged over the previous decade.

While the Popular Front government was grappling with the process of transforming the French railway network into a public society, the working lives of the cheminots were being transformed by the introduction of the totemic piece of Popular Front labour legislation, the 40-hour week. This key piece of legislation had not formed any part of the common programme upon which the Blum government had been elected in May 1936; rather it had been forced upon the government as a result of the June strikes. Historians have been unanimous in condemning the measure, noting its negative impact upon the French economy as it attempted to respond to the exigencies of government rearmament policies. In the depths of depression, the life breathed into the economy by the September 1936 devaluation was sucked out by the law of January 1937. The implementation of the law created a vicious inflationary spiral, as Adrian Rossiter has argued, ‘in expectation of higher labour costs because of the imminent reduction in the working week, the bosses indulged in prophylactic price rises, which in turn justified higher

wage demands.' On the railways, Joseph Jones has argued that higher labour costs proved disastrous for the financial position of the industry. In one fell swoop, the gains of years of natural reductions in personnel numbers were undone. Moreover, labour unions were in no mood for compromise. Conscious of the manner in which arbitrary government action had rescinded the eight-hour day, cheminots were zealous in their policing of the new working week. Yet, as historians have become increasingly aware, labour’s attachment to the 40-hour legislation was not quite as straightforward as it has often been painted. The attitudes of cheminot union leaders in the negotiations over the implementation of the law and the ongoing discussions over its implementations through 1937 and 1938 sheds light upon the position of the railway workers in this regard.

Through the course of 1936 the Cheminot Federation, having been invited by the rail companies to participate in discussions, threw itself enthusiastically into negotiations over the introduction of the 40-hour week on the railways. Optimism was high on all sides. The head of the industry delegation, Robert Le Besnerais, recorded with satisfaction the cordial relations between union and management representatives. For its part, the Cheminot Federation demonstrated a magnanimity towards management which had been far from characteristic of the previous decades of railway industrial relations. When, in December 1936, Le Besnerais was replaced at the head of the company delegation by Henri Gréard, Pierre Semard delivered a fulsome tribute to Le Besnerais, going on to assure Gréard of the ‘spirit of confidence and the desire for collaboration’ which animated the union delegation.

Having spent three months negotiating over competing plans regarding the implementation and operation of the 40-hour week, by 14 January a decree text had been agreed by all parties. As a result of this close

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86 CGTIHS, Conseil du direction des réseaux, dossier comité de direction des grands réseaux, momento de réunion, 24/9/1936, p. 3.
87 AN F/14/14959, Dossier semaine de quarante heures, rapport du directeur du contrôle du travail à sujet de l’application de la semaine de quarante heures aux agents des grands réseaux de chemins de fer, p. 2.
88 CGTIHS, Conseil de direction des réseaux, dossier comité de direction des grands réseaux, 30/12/1936, p. 1.
89 AN F/14/14959, Dossier projets et observations, rapport au Président de la République, 14/1/1937.
cooperation the decree came into force on 18 January 1937, several months ahead of the full extension of the 40-hour week to the whole of the French economy. After the national agreements local arrangement had to be made for the introduction of the 40-hour week. Contrary to a widely held view, local unions did demonstrate a willingness to oversee the operation of the 40-hour week in a pragmatic fashion. Following Blum’s radio broadcast of February 1937 in which he announced a ‘pause’ in Popular Front social legislation, the local cheminot delegates at Tours made their own appeal to local railway workers in support of the Popular Front, announcing that the cheminots needed to ‘support and aid our Popular Front government.’ The cheminots, the union delegates argued, ‘must with all our hearts ensure that our successes do not lead to any disorganisation of the functioning of the railways’. In such circumstances, the local Federation delegates announced that they were working in collaboration with managers to ensure that workers’ rest days under the 40-hour week were properly distributed across the whole week to ensure that the railway service did not suffer any lack of available staff at key points over the week.

November 1938: Defeat of the Popular Front

The autumn of 1938 saw a new policy of firmness on the part of the Daladier government in the sphere of international policy. The Munich agreement of late September 1938 had marked ‘the high-water mark of France’s retreat before the resurgence of Germany’. Now the French government issued guarantees to Poland, Romania and Greece. Daladier’s more bullish approach to foreign affairs proved popular in the country. Support for Munich, argues Daniel Hucker, proved ephemeral, the government’s firm response to Italian demands over Corsica, Nice, and Haute-Savoie met with strong public approval. For Daladier, meeting the international challenges faced by France necessitated a decisive break from Popular Front economic organisation. In early November the prime minister served time on the Popular Front experiment, removing the centrist supporter of greater state regulation of the economy, Paul Marchandeau, and replacing him with the ‘champion of economic liberalism’, Paul Reynaud. In a radio address upon

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taking office Reynaud made clear his position. ‘We live’, he announced, ‘in a capitalist system. For it to function we must obey its laws. These are those of profits, individual risk, free markets and growth by competition.’ Upon taking office Reynaud moved quickly. In mid-November a series of decrees was issued by the government which aimed a decisive blow against Popular Front social legislation, in particular against the 40-hour week, which became for both sides of the debate a symbol of the gains (or losses) of 1936.

As Jones makes clear, the Cheminot Federation were zealous in overseeing the operation of the new working-time regulations but the argument that this resulted in an intransigent defence of the legislation against the interests of the railway industry would not have been recognised by the head of the newly created SNCF, Le Besnerais. In meetings of the SNCF’s Conseil d’Administration in July and August 1938, Le Besnerais regularly spoke warmly of the openness of the personnel to discussions over a more flexible interpretation of the 40-hour week. In the August meeting he announced that ‘the representatives of the Federation have given their agreement to a relaxing of the working regulations created by the decree of 18 January 1937. They have promised to meet with their representatives in the comités du travail and to give them... directives concerning the cooperation they are going to bring to this loosening.’ The extant documentation, if not entirely supporting Le Besnerais’s position, does at least demonstrate that the Cheminot Federation recognised the need for flexibility in the operation of the 40-hour law. In June 1937 the union leadership had written to Le Besnerais announcing the need for both the spirit and the letter of the law to be maintained. They argued strongly that the flexibility the SNCF agreed was necessary was, in fact, contained within the negotiated decree itself, discussions could, therefore, continue on that basis. By August, however, if Le Besnerais’s view is to be trusted, the union had let it be understood that it was prepared to go much further in this regard.

These complexities within the Federation’s position suggested by an apparent adaptation of the cheminots’ ideas between June and August in many ways reflects the wider ambiguities which Georges Vidal has identified within French communist politics at this time. Following 1936 the Communist Party in France had placed itself at the forefront of calls for a firm response to Nazi Germany. The communist hierarchy followed through

98 SNCF 505LM139, dossier 18, Fédération des Travailleurs de Chemins de Fer Français à M. le Président de la SNCF, 8/6/1938.
with the logic of this position, recognising the need to ensure the readiness of France’s war industries and to strengthen France's overall economic position as a central element in meeting the German menace. From 1937 the party called on its militants to work to raise production and, by 1938, the party leadership supported a re-negotiation of the 40-hour laws. With this policy the party, however, ran into the determined resistance of its rank-and-file militants, particularly those active in the trade unions. The ambiguities of the cheminots' position on the issue of the 40-hour law may itself emanate from similar difficulties between leadership and the rank and file, with the union hierarchy attempting to find a way of negotiating between the strongly held views of the rank and file and its position of responsibility at the heart of railway politics.

What is clear, however, is that the engagement of the Federation over this issue was recognised and praised by both SNCF managers and state representatives. The Reynaud decrees struck at the heart of this collaboration. The decree laws launched a new wave of labour protest. While the national CGT leadership vacillated, wildcat strikes and lockouts spread through Paris and beyond. They were met by determined employer and state resistance. From 21 November, metalworkers and chemical workers struck, and factories were occupied in Paris, Nord and Basse-Seine. The railways were this time affected. In the Valenciennes area, for instance, wildcat strikers moved to occupy the local railway network. Traffic on several lines was severely interrupted in the area of the crucial railway hub of Somain. Rank and file activism continued to put pressure on the CGT, Léon Jouhaux and René Belin at the head of the Confederation being unwilling to sanction a general strike and suspicious of such movements, believing them to be inspired by communist militants. The tipping point was reached when the railway workers’ Federation voted overwhelmingly to support calls for a general strike. On 25 November enormous demonstrations by cheminots took place in Paris. 4,000 protested at Gare de Lyon, 5,000 at Gare du Nord, with 2,000 more a hundred metres or so further along the Boulevard Magenta at the Gare de l’Est. That day the Federation leadership voted by 87 votes to 12 in favour of a general strike. As Guy Bordé notes, within the CGT ‘all opposition to the strike fell at a single stroke’.

103 Bourdé, La défaite du front populaire, p. 153.
Within the Cheminot Federation both former unitaires and confédéérés were in bellicose mood. Semard charged the government with having promulgated a policy which represented ‘a veritable destruction of the railways’.\textsuperscript{104} Jarrigion condemned the manner in which the rights of the cheminots had been ‘arbitrarily and abusively violated’.\textsuperscript{105} The rest of the executive struck a similar tone. In a letter to \textit{Le Peuple} the Federation announced on 29 November that despite cheminots having worked in the national, collective interest, the government had chosen to ‘brutally’ break with this collaboration. Efforts on the part of the government to intimidate the workers, announced the union, would serve only to reinforce the will of the cheminots and to demonstrate ‘the bad faith and the repressive aims of statesmen’.\textsuperscript{106} On the eve of the strike, the rank and file seemed to share in this bellicosity. On the former Paris-Orléans network a large meeting of cheminots voted unanimously to proceed with strike action. In the face of requisition orders the cheminots would report for work, but would ‘employer la force de l’inertie’ in opposition to SNCF and government policy.\textsuperscript{107}

The general strike of 30 November 1938 was a failure. Yet, this is not to be explained through a lack of identification with the Popular Front, rather the CGT call to arms ran into massive state reaction. Troops, including soldiers from the colonies, were used to ensure the national transport arteries remained open. Soldiers were used to break up demonstrations.\textsuperscript{108} The prominent role of cheminots in the build up to the 30 November general strike has been explained by a key historian of the event as due to the fact that of all French workers, cheminots had the most to lose. They were particularly targeted by the decrees having gained significantly from the Popular Front’s social legislation.\textsuperscript{109} In many ways this fits into the key paradigm within the history of the cheminots which sees railway workers as, above all, motivated by the maintenance of their limited corporate interests. As such it suggests a distance between railway workers and the wider Popular Front ‘spirit’.

It is certainly true that railway workers stood to lose the most as a result of the Reynaud decrees, but this is not how their opposition was framed. The response of the cheminot leadership was expressed firmly in terms of their desire to defend the democratic ethos of Popular Front industrial relations. The 1938 strike action is best understood as a clash over two divergent

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Le Peuple}, 28/11/1938.
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Le Peuple}, 28/11/1938.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Le Peuple}, 29/11/1938.
\textsuperscript{107} AN 19940500/0198, rapport assemblé des cheminots Paris-Orléans, 29/11/1938.
\textsuperscript{108} AD N, M395/92, CGT Cheminot bulletin d’information no 5, 20/12/1938, pp. 7–8.
\textsuperscript{109} Guy Bourdé, \textit{La défaite du front populaire}, p. 152.
conceptions of French industrial relations. On the one hand, employers and state aimed to re-establish the uncontested authority of the *patron* within a reorganised free market economy.\textsuperscript{110} On the other, the French labour movement, both communist and non-communist, aimed to defend the social-democratic ethos of Popular Front industrial politics. On the railways, both Semard and Jarrigion made clear that what was at stake were not particular benefits or privileged working conditions, over which they were prepared to give ground, but rather the wider principle of collaboration and cheminot representation within the workplace. Once more the key theme was opposition to arbitrary power, now identified with the ‘illegal’ and ‘fascist’ decree laws.

In a furious response to the introduction of the decree laws in mid-November, Jean Jarrignon made explicit the Federation’s feelings. For the cheminots, ‘the principle is the consultation between railway organisations: employers and workers.’ For Jarrignon this principle was at the centre of their opposition to the decree laws, it was a principle which Reynaud had ‘totally destroyed’. Jarrignon argued strongly against the government line that the decree laws were necessary to ameliorate the French economy. The cheminots, he noted, had never ceased to collaborate with management; indeed the SNCF hierarchy had been fulsome in its praise for the cheminots in this regard. The decree laws, he warned, could only serve to compromise the social peace for which all were working.\textsuperscript{111} In a letter of 22 November the Federation once more sought to undermine the rationale of increased economic efficiency behind the decrees. Emphasising again the cheminots’ collaboration with the SNCF, even on the most contentious of issues, the union leadership noted that the workers ‘had never refused to take on their share of the sacrifices… and they have constantly offered their collaboration with a view to raising productivity and to achieve rational economies within the SNCF’.\textsuperscript{112}

In short, according to the cheminot analysis, the Reynaud decrees could not be explained in straightforwardly economic terms; yet again the cheminots highlighted the praise which SNCF managers had heaped upon the fruits of cheminot collaboration. The decrees represented, for the cheminots, a state-sanctioned power-grab, once more giving employers the uncontested upper hand in the workplace. According to the FdC, the Reynaud decree


\textsuperscript{111} CGTIHS, Conseil de direction des grands réseaux, déclaration de M. Jarrignon relative aux décrets lois, 16/11/1938, pp. 1–2.

laws were ‘anti-democratic’, motivated by a ‘dictatorial will’ and aiming at ‘social regression’.\textsuperscript{113}

The Reynaud decrees’ rupture with the collaborative and democratic approach to industrial relations of the Popular Front period and the enormous victimisation which followed in the wake of the failure of the 30 November general strike profoundly impacted upon the fabric of French society. As Talbot Imlay has demonstrated, the liberal economic regime inaugurated by the decree-laws proved disastrous for French war preparations. The poisoned relationship between French elites and the working-class population occasioned by the power contests of the Popular Front era would have significant implications for France’s ability to respond to the Nazi menace, even if the defeat of June 1940 is explicable primarily in military terms.\textsuperscript{114}

The Nazi–Soviet Pact

In late August 1939, with war seeming increasingly inevitable, the Comintern issued instructions to its member parties in Europe calling upon them to ‘continue even more energetically the struggle against the aggressors, especially German fascism’.\textsuperscript{115} This position, however, was soon to change drastically. On Stalin’s direct orders, following the secret signing of the non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, the Comintern issued new instructions to the global communist movement on 9 September. Workers and Communist parties were instructed to renounce all support for the war, breaking dramatically with the previous Popular Front line.\textsuperscript{116} These instructions threw the European Communist parties into huge confusion. As late as 2 September, the PCF deputies had voted in favour of war credits and even after the Comintern instructions arrived belatedly in France, leading members of the PCF continued to insist upon their primary opposition to fascism. Finally, on 21 September, the PCF leadership under Comintern pressure finally announced its opposition to the war and declared


the conflict to no longer be part of an anti-fascist struggle. The PCF’s volte-face threw its political and labour wings into disarray. The situation became bleaker still when the Daladier government proscribed the PCF and its affiliates, making the Communist Party an illegal organisation on 26 September. As Serge Wolikow emphasises, this move on the part of the government was not in fact a direct response to the communists’ new attitude to the war, but rather a continuation of the anti-communist policies that the Daladier government had been implementing since August.

The result of the government persecution and the shock of the shift in the official communist attitude to the war left rank-and-file militants and union activists facing difficult choices. As Herrick Chapman has underlined, while some closed ranks in the face of the government attack, most ‘were put in an untenable situation politically and forced into either internment, clandestine activities or a quiet withdrawal from trade union politics’. In all cases, the result was a major decline in communist influence within the workplace.

Not all observers backed the government’s repression of the PCF. The move was strongly protested by Léon Blum who, in the pages of the Socialist party newspaper Le Populaire argued that while individual communists might be guilty of treason, the Party as a whole should not be targeted. ‘The only punishment it should face’, argued Blum, ‘is universal reprobation.’

Though on 28 August the FdC Executive passed a resolution tabled by Pierre Semard claiming that the pact ‘could only contribute to the establishment of a durable peace’, opinion against the communists among the cheminot leadership was hardening. Following the German invasion of Poland, the Federation reversed its position. On 25 September a motion condemning the Nazi–Soviet pact was passed by the Federal Bureau by a large majority. Only Midol, Tournemaine and Jourdain voted against. The following day, 26 September, the PCF was declared an illegal organisation by the Daladier government. Two days later the FdC removed all ex-unitaires from positions of authority within the union. The new Federation leadership described the pact as ‘formal proof of the treason


120 Le Populaire, 27/9/1939 in AN 496AP/27 Fonds Daladier, 3DA12Dr2.

against peace committed by those who claimed to call for proletarians to struggle against fascism, and Hitlerism in particular'.

Pierre Semard was forced to observe these events from the small railway station in the rural town of Loches in Indre-et-Loire. Semard had been relocated to Loches, a relatively out-of-the-way location, by the SNCF as punishment for his role in the 30 November strike. Demoted to a lowly position within the railway hierarchy, Semard ruefully noted in the diary he kept during this period that he found himself back in the same post in which he had begun his railway career twenty years before. Semard’s demotion from a seat on the SNCF board to a rural station just outside Tours received comment from his new co-workers. His station master asked him pointedly why he had allowed ‘ideas’ to ruin his position at the commanding heights of the railway industry. Semard was arrested on 20 October 1939. Imprisoned by the Third Republic on the eve of France’s defeat, he was later transferred to Epernay, where he was shot by the German occupation forces on 7 March 1942. Immediately, news of Semard’s execution was communicated across France by the clandestine Communist Party. The text of Semard’s final letter written in the hours before his execution was widely circulated. On the Liberation of France, Semard was adopted into the pantheon of communist resistance martyrs, with a memorial work written by André Marty and a major funeral held in Paris on 10 March 1945, even as the war was still ongoing.

In early October 1939, the now lone Federation General Secretary Jean Jarrigion announced the expulsion of the former unitaires from the FdC. ‘Notre Fédération affirme’, wrote Jarrigon, ‘que les intérêts corporatifs ne sauraient pas être subordonnés à des intérêts extra-syndicaux.’ A letter from a former unitaire, A. Jaux, was published in the Tribune a few months later. Jaux, had been a member of the Communist Party for 20 years having joined as a 21-year-old in the aftermath of the First World War. ‘I joined the revolutionary movement and supported the Russian revolution because, for many militants of the time, the Russian revolution represented an ideal, a beacon.’ For Jaux, however, the Nazi–Soviet pact represented a betrayal, ‘driving me to renounce twenty years of activity and dedication to this ideal’.

122 AN 496AP/27 Fonds Daladier, 3DA12Dr2, ‘Reactions au mouvement de la dissolution du Parti Communiste’.
126 La Tribune des cheminots, 2/10/1939.
He announced that he had resigned from the party. This piece echoed a number of letters written by mobilised cheminots published by the Tribune in the months following the expulsion of the unitaires. The cheminots wrote approving of the Federation’s actions. One informed the leadership that he was ‘happy to see their newspaper become syndicalist once more’. Another wrote that they were ‘very contented with the clean out [nettoyage] that you have undertaken’.

The communists’ pragmatism, in many respects the hallmark of their political and industrial activity among the railway workers through the interwar period, failed them in September 1939. The Nazi–Soviet pact derailed communist activity on the railways. Yet, the swift recrudescence of clandestine activity on the railways under the occupation and the re-emergence of the PCF as the dominant voice of the cheminots with the Liberation is testament to the deep roots put down by the party among these workers during the interwar period. It was a legacy that the events of 1939–1941 could not expunge.

Conclusion

Far from being tangential to the Popular Front years, as they appear in many accounts, this chapter has argued that, rather, the experience of the railway workers in France sheds important light upon the wider significance of the period 1936–1938. By foregrounding the contest for power, legitimacy and representation at the heart of the meaning of the Popular Front experiment, the example of the cheminots demonstrates a key element of the aims and ambitions of French workers. In the assault upon the citadels of arbitrary employer power represented by June 1936, the cheminots could afford to take a back seat having already carved out an important and independent space for worker representation within the railway industry prior to this moment. The long experience of muscular trade unionism in confrontation with management and state, however, ensured that cheminot representatives were well placed to make significant gains amid the febrile June atmosphere. A new atmosphere of collaboration permeated railway industrial relations between 1936 and 1938 as communists, on the one hand, followed the logic of the altered Comintern line and, on the other, reinforced by an enormous membership, supportive state and, after 1937, a place at the heart of the SNCF executive, engaged for the first time from a position of strength. Such strength, as it turned out, was transitory. The collaborative industrial policy of the Popular

127 La Tribune des cheminots, 1/3/1940.
128 La Tribune des cheminots, 1/11/1939.
Front was predicated upon the support, or at least the neutrality, of the state. Once this keystone was removed in November 1938, the cheminots’ position quickly unravelled.

The example of the cheminots also sheds important light upon a significant current operating within French communism in the interwar years. While historians rightly emphasise the impact of the Popular Front period upon communist leaders and militants, the picture which emerges from the railway industry suggests that such developments require nuanced interpretation. Railway communists in the period prior to 1936 had been confronted with the type of industrial relations frameworks which marked the Popular Front, but had to respond to them without the support of a friendly state or the collaborative and optimistic spirit of 1936. The realities of competitive railway industrial relations and a cheminot population inclined to take railway politics seriously meant that the communist-led CGTU Cheminot Federation felt unable to neglect the everyday necessities of trade union activity on the railways. In such circumstances the unitaires drew creatively upon the existing imagery and language of communism, re-configuring what they condemned on the part of the CGT as collaborative reformism as ‘hostile participation’, engagement being understood as another front in the ongoing class war.

While 1936 may have been the moment in which the majority of communists became willing to engage with management and ‘ring doorbells’ at government ministries, it is clear that a significant section of the French communist movement was already engaged in precisely this activity from the late 1920s.