
H-France Review Vol. 21 (September 2021), No. 157

Thomas Beaumont, *Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. x + 271 pp. \$45.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781789620801.

Review by Ludivine Broch, University of Westminster.

In the title of his compelling book, Thomas Beaumont frames his study of communist trade unions and industrial relations in the French railways between two crucial dates: 1914, as the beginning of the First World War, and 1939, as the beginning of the Second. Using this interwar chronological framework is an excellent choice on his part. Not only is it familiar to many historians of the twentieth century, but it signals two crucial years in which France plunged into years of military conflict, moments when the railways, which were absolutely central to its national defence as well as its economic life, were arguably its most precious asset. The men (and some women) working on the railways were thus propelled to the very heart of modern industrial warfare, and their experiences, mindsets, and mentalities were very much shaped in those years by their unique role within the nation.

But there are two alternative dates which might better help us understand the story which Beaumont is telling us: 1920 and 1936. These two key dates in labour history in France, and are particularly helpful for understanding railway activism and militancy. In fact, French railway historians have often focussed on these dates, not least the well-known historian of communism in France, Annie Kriegel, whose published doctoral thesis was precisely on the railway strikes in 1920.[1] Both years--1920 and 1936--experienced massive social unrest and nation-wide strikes across France. In 1920, these strikes were spearheaded by the French railway workers, also known as the *cheminots*. In 1936, however, the French railway workers were all but absent from workers' strikes across France.

What happened between 1920 and 1936 to explain this radical shift amongst railway workers, from their widespread enthusiasm for radical and revolutionary reform to a visible absence from mass militant protest? This question has previously been posed by scholars, and railway workers' absence from the 1936 strikes has even been a form of embarrassment for some historians of railway trade unionism.[2] Some have explained this by an initial embrace of communism within the railway milieu, followed after 1920 by a distancing from, and disillusionment with, communist political agendas. Yet Beaumont revisits this argument about links between railway workers and communism in the interwar years, showing a much stronger, albeit more flexible relationship between them.

An initial enthusiasm for revolutionary, communist militancy emerged in the railways between 1917 and 1920. Indeed in those few years surrounding the end of the war, railway trade unionism changed quite significantly. First, in 1917, the *Fédération des cheminots* became the first single, unified railway trade union under the leadership of Maurice Bidegaray. In just three years, its numbers swelled from 70,000 to 300,000 members. If it initially leaned towards the reformist tendencies of the *Confédération générale du travail* (the largest trade union known as the CGT), by 1919-1920 the tone amongst railway unionists became one of radical protest and revolution, a tone which was certainly in the mood of the times with the birth of the Comintern and labour protest movements across Europe. The French railway workers' role in the eruption of strikes in 1920 is a testament to this mood, and to the switch in the *Fédération* itself in those first years.

The repression of the 1920 strikes was, however, brutal. Following the strikes, around 18,000 railway workers lost their jobs, 200 were arrested and some, like communist trade unionist Lucien Midol, went into exile. The victimisation of railway workers after 1920 had a profoundly dislocating effect on the community, causing a rise in suicides and lasting traumatic memories. The retraction of the eight-hour day, which had only just been gained, seemed further evidence of the failure of radical protest. Repression was felt beyond the railway community, and the communist wing of the CGT--the *Confédération générale du travail* or CGTU--which was founded a couple of years, later reflected the schism which had emerged within trade unions as a result. The CGTU would then undergo, over the course of the interwar period, a decline in membership.

Had the communist impulse in the railways also been squashed by the huge wave of repression by the private railway companies and the state following the 1920 strikes? Could this explain the absence of railway workers in the 1936 strikes? The repression did have lasting and traumatic effects on the railway community, but Beaumont shows us that communist inroads remained powerful, and more importantly flexible, during the interwar years. Indeed communist union leaders in the railways did not simply follow a single party line emanating from Moscow. Even before 1920, the influence of French syndicalism was still felt in their tactics and discourse. This flexibility and adaptability were key to communist activity in the railways during the interwar years. If they did not recommend strikes and sabotage, the language and images of revolution remained very vivid in their writings and negotiation tactics, thereby sustaining radical ideas throughout the so-called "reformist" years of the interwar period. Indeed, the railway communist-led trade union (the *Fédération nationale des cheminots unitaire* or FNCU), which was aligned with the communist CGTU, saw its numbers grow.

By paying careful attention to the specificities of industrial realities and relations in the railway world, communists in the railways shifted strategies and approaches in order to renegotiate industrial relations between workers, companies, and the state. In fact, if in 1920 the railway community was divided and defeated, it was the communist leaders and local activists who helped rebuild the credibility and influence of railway unions. By 1936-1938, railway unions were in a position of considerable strength. On the verge of nationalisation--the *Société nationale des chemins de fer français* (SNCF) was created on 1 January 1938--they had managed to secure crucial and promising relations with the state.

In examining these shifting strategies, Beaumont not only shows the different forms of activism undertaken by communists in interwar France and also crucially nuances the apparent absence of railway workers in the 1936 strikes. Not only were they present in some circumstances, but

they were also heavily and actively involved in a series of negotiations and discussions which looked to change industrial relations under the Popular Front. In 1936, communists were in a position of strength within the railways. Their influence had been tactfully altered to suit both communist political convictions and unique railway circumstances. It was only in 1939-1941 that their position in the railways--like in many other working-class groups--would be seriously compromised by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. But the roots of communist influence had been built so widely and firmly in the interwar years that, by 1944, communist activism in the railways was ready to boom, as it did over subsequent years and decades.

Aside from contextualising the communists' success in the railway unions in the interwar period, Beaumont also points to some of the more complicated encounters between communist political mantras and railway culture. One of my favourite chapters is Beaumont's reflection on internationalism in this period. Because of its ability to connect peoples, nations, continents, and empires, the railway is a fundamentally international industry. Borderlands in particular revealed not just the more porous relations between different national networks, but also between workers. But if this seems to align itself quite well with the internationalist language of the Communist Party, the reality was that railways were also intrinsically national. Foreigners were not allowed to work on the French railways; the relationship with Moscow was not uncomplicated; and there was little international solidarity amongst the railway rank-and-file, even during the (brilliantly explained) Ruhr campaign and Rif War. The internationalist tone of the Communist Party seems to have struggled to engage railway workers more broadly, reminding us of the uniqueness of this community, as well as the broader complexity of the development of internationalism in a deeply nationalistic period, something which was not limited to the railway world.

Fellow Travellers provides a hugely important re-reading of railway unionism in this period and makes an extremely convincing point about the solidity, continuity, but also flexibility of communist roots within the railway world throughout the twentieth century. This certainly gives us a greater understanding of the long-term entanglement of the railways and the Communist Party which continues to this day, as well as of the spread of communism within different work forces and communities in Western Europe. If the shift in railway engagement in the 1920 and 1936 strikes seemed difficult to explain, this is no longer the case. Readers might perhaps have liked a small bibliography of the main characters he draws out, such as Pierre Sémard, Lucien Midol, Jean Jarrigon, and others who might be less known to non-specialists--but this is a minor point. Anyone interested in French industrial relations, the history of communism in France, internationalism, and working-class history should read this book.

Ultimately, Beaumont shows how the history of railway workers, sometimes considered rather "niche," is a rich gateway into revisiting politics and culture, gender and class, industrial relations and internationalism in the early twentieth century. I was left wondering about some of the less well-known workers, such as the women working on the railways who also seem to be somehow entangled into the trade unions, as well as the workers in the Algerian railways, mentioned fleetingly. I firmly hope that further studies will continue to unravel the stories of the railway and its workers.

NOTES

[1] Annie Kriegel, *La Grève des Cheminots: 1920* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1988).

[2] Christian Chevandier raises this question in his book *Cheminots en grève, ou, La construction d'une identité: 1848-2001* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002). Meanwhile, Beaumont explains, the official history of the Fédération des cheminots, the major railway trade union created in 1917, skipped over this episode entirely. Thomas Beaumont, *Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p. 205.

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ISSN 1553-9172