

COLLECTIVE TRADE UNION ACTION AND REPRESSION IN BRITISH RAILWAY COMPANY WORKSHOPS, 1840-1914

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Panel: Railway Organisations and the Responses of Capitalism and Governments, 1830-1940: A National and Internationally Comparative View

1 Introduction

This paper is about trade union and worker action in Britain's railway company workshops and the repression that these workers met from their capitalist employers, the State and the law during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. During that long era industrial relations in Britain generally saw a great deal of change and development. Both employer, and to a lesser extent, government, repression of workers was a common feature of this period although the form it took and the reasons why it was enforced changed markedly. Ostensibly the workshops and manufactories of Britain's railway operating companies appear to be a strange place to look for employer or government repression and workforce reaction. There were only about fourteen strikes held in those works during the period under examination. But as will be seen, employer repression and employee reaction was far more subtle, but nonetheless there, than these more usual expressions of worker action as seen in strikes and other dramatic responses. This paper will now go on to review some of the relevant historiography before exploring worker organization, employer and government reaction and workers' counter-reaction.

2 Trade Unionism, Capitalism, the Law and the State in Britain during the 'Long' Nineteenth Century – Traditional and more recent historiography

The traditional historiography of trade unions and the labour movement during this 'long' nineteenth century has, most usually, been one that charts the rise of unionization, socialism and a noble workforce. These are often portrayed as being pitted against the joint, often overwhelming, and highly repressive forces of capitalism and, far more rarely in this historiographical tradition, Law and the British State. From the latter nineteenth century onwards historians of the Left have taken this 'the workers' valiant struggle against capitalist/state repression' view. Such later Victorians and Edwardians as Sidney and Beatrice Webb and that other married socialist team of historians, Barbara and John

Hammond, did this in their many, many books.¹ Others such as G D H Cole and those from amongst the ranks of the early economic historians presented similar ideas.² This

vision has continued under later writers on British trade unionism such as Henry Pelling and Philip Bagwell, including his publications on the growth of railway trade unionism, *The Railwaymen*, 1963.³

In this view 'collective trade unionist action' is very much that, with workers acting together to resist their employers and gain basic rights, through strikes and work-to-rules. The capitalists retaliated with 'lock outs' (closing down their mills and works in order to prevent the loss of capital and wider business damage that a strike of workers would produce); mass dismissal of their workforce and the appointment of new, 'black-leg' labour. Or they took a more conciliatory route, winning over their workforce through the introduction of arbitration and other schemes that promoted a peaceful relationship between capital and labour. British law and the state are frequently glimpsed in this vision, but most usually as a shadowy, imprecise force, seemingly making legislation and court decisions in a remote and unconnected place. In this 'labourist' vision the British State is heavily biased against collective trade unionism and the workers, but are gradually forced by the labour movement into making concessions towards greater equality of treatment for capital and labour.

Some of this Left-wing 'labour' historiography went even further than this, attributing workers who failed to take up this campaign with a 'lack of class consciousness'. The notion of 'the aristocracy of labour' was key to this, with historians such as Eric Hobsbawm arguing that leading skilled workers of the mid-Victorian era, including those of railway workshops, abandoned their fellow workers as they gave up class action in return for rewards of better pay and status from their employers that the economic boom of that period made possible.⁴

Very traditional labourist historiography therefore portrays a dichotomous industrial world of 'them' and 'us'. Of trade union action and capitalist repression. It is an overdrawn, unsubtle picture that tends to leave important actors in this play of trade unions and employers, the state and the law it produced, out of the equation. Most particularly in the case of the men of the Railway Company Workshops this approach portrays them as inactive, supine, class traitors.

During the 1980s and 90s two new important strands emerged in labour/trade union historiography that began to provide a more balanced, subtle form of analysis. First of all some historians worked towards producing a schematised and comparative understanding of the development of trade unionism across a number of nations. This drew an almost inevitable trajectory of the development of collective bargaining and other schemes that promoted industrial relations between employers and their workers that were to become

¹ J L and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer, 1760--1832: The New Civilization*, 1920; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920*, 1920.

² G D H Cole, *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement*, 2 Volumes, 1938.

³ Henry Pelling, *A Short History of British Trade Unionism*, 1987 and P S Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, 1963.

⁴ E J Hobsbawm, 'Artisans and Labour Aristocrats', in E J Hobsbawm (ed.), *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour*, 1984, p.264.

far less distinguished by strikes and lockouts.⁵ The second historiographical strand of the 1980s and 90s also abandoned the more ‘doctrinaire’ labourist ways, exploring working-class culture and collective work-place action, rather than taking the traditionalist view of trade union strikes versus the oppressive capitalists/capitalist state.⁶ Vital in calling for a more cultural, post-structuralist turn to explorations of British labour, in an earlier work Patrick Joyce was also important in seeing the actions of labour as part of a complex relationship between workers and their employers.⁷ Even more particularly the new historiographical advances of the 1980s and 90s examined ‘work’ itself, seeing how the labour process and culture of work helped shape and form the relationship between capital and labour.

Cultural approaches are very useful in analysing the worker and trade union collective action within these railway company workshops for they, in their turn, only go so far. Both the ‘traditional’ labourist and this newer historiography with ‘the cultural turn’ focus nearly entirely on the relationship between capital and labour. In both the role of law and the state are marginalised, being seen as a distant force that occasionally intervened in matters of capital and labour

A fairly recent development in historiography by Mark Curthoys helpfully considers this developing relationship between labour, capital, and the British state during the Mid-Victorian era, although I will argue that some of the factors that Curthoys saw at work during this era led on to developments in the latter Victoria and pre-First World War eras.⁸ In this, the role of the State, government and civil servants, rather than just trade unionists and capitalists, are seen as being most crucial in bringing about a new era in work and labour.

Considering a longer history of this capital, the British State and labour, Curthoys sees in the mid-Victorian legislation of the 1870s a new era for worker unionization, employers and the State. The Trade Union Acts of 1871, 1875 and 1876, gave British trade unions legal recognition for the first time. In particular it gave trade unions a collective legal status.

This new era of labour law also did away with some of the more notable legal inequities between capital and labour, although, as Curthoys acknowledges, some of these were short lived, specific court cases often undermining legislative advances. Some of the more repressive acts such as the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, that made any form of strike action illegal and liable to imprisonment with hard labour, were repealed during the 1820s. Similarly the Master and Servants Laws of 1823 and 1867 were repealed and replaced by the Employers’ and Workmans’ Act of 1875. The Master and Servants laws

⁵ Hugh Armstrong Clegg, *A History of British Trade unions since 1889*, 4 volumes, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994.

⁶ Patrick Joyce (ed.) *Work and Patrick Joyce, Visions of the People: Industrial England and the question of class, 1848-1918*, 1993 especially section 2: Moralising the Market – Work and the Social Order, and chapter 5 ‘Building the Union: ‘The Gospel of absolute and perfect organisation’.

⁷ Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics*, 1981.

⁸ Mark Curthoys, *Government, Labour and the Law in Mid-Victorian Britain: Trade Union Legislation of the 1870s*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2004.

ensured that any worker terminating his employment without permission was seen to be in breach of contract receiving a prison sentence with hard labour if found guilty. Employers could not be sued for ending his contract with an employee until the new act of 1875.

For Curthoys, while this new era by no means saw the end of worker repression, nor were these advances entirely secure, court cases undoing some of these advances, it did usher in a new form of relationship between capital and labour. This was increasingly to be under the ‘watching’, if not always the ‘watchful’ eye of the British state, legislation at sometimes protecting and improving the lot of workers, then, especially during times of labour unrest, throwing the balance in the relationship between capital and labour once again on the side of capital.

The 1870s were nonetheless a watershed, especially regarding law and the state. As Curthoys argues, ‘Yet the confidence of politicians such as Disraeli, who in the mid-1870s was congratulated on having resolved the conflict between capital and labour was not entirely misplaced’... it went on to provide the framework of collective labour law and industrial relations until the early twentieth century.⁹ In addition to this, Curthoys argues that this new era in mid, later Victorian and arguably Edwardian government established wider change, ‘Collective labour [having] long been recognised as a peculiarly sensitive indicator of wider trends in public policy and of the character of the state itself.’¹⁰ In order for government to intervene and provide legislation to recognise trade unions as collective legal entities during the 1870s Curthoys argues that the mid-Victorian state had had to overcome, or at least put into abeyance, two of its fundamental ideologies. These were the ‘laissez faire’ of ‘orthodox political economy’, (in this case this was accomplished by a ‘slight of hand’), and the notion that law was to protect the individual rather than the collective, such as trade unions.¹¹ Curthoys comments that the mid-Victorian trade union legislation of the 1870s was seen by the Edwardian jurist and commentator A V Dicey as the commencement of the rise of collectivism in Britain.¹² I would also like to argue that it set the pattern, but not always the tone, for industrial relations in Britain as the Victorian period gave way to the Edwardian.

I will also argue here that this legal recognition of worker trade unionism ‘collectivism’ did indeed increase as the Victorian went on. This should not be simply confined to a consideration of the legislation that dealt with the position of trade unions and their rights to collective action. It must be extended to include other important legislation that so clearly affected the lot of British workers and the relationship between the workforce and their employers. Here legislation concerning welfare rights and employer’s liability in the case of accident at work were of great importance.

In addition to this, I feel that it is necessary to put Curthoys’ work into a wider perspective, considering, especially that relationship between capital and labour, and in this case, the relationship between these very powerful representatives of contemporary capital and their workforces. The British state of the mid to later Victorian period may

⁹ *Ibid*, p.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.2.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.2-3.

¹² *Ibid*, p.2.

have been, in Curthoys' words, progressive, leading the way in legislative intervention into wider areas of work and labour, but this was constantly undermined by two factors, the legal cases that employers brought (a factor that I cannot comment from the perspectives of the railway workshops) and by employer resistance (a factor that I can say a good deal on).

Increasingly employers together with employers' organisations such as the Engineering Employers' Federation, asserted their right to resist and even repress collective worker action and to above all gain 'the power to manage'.¹³ While this was only a marginal problem for the railway companies at this time, the fact that the men of their workshops were part of this wider, engineering labour market ensured that this desire to manage and control the workforce was important there too.

For railway workers and those in the railway company workshops therefore, much of the government legislation of the 1870s that Curthoys sees as signalled the start of a new era of conciliation and tolerance was disregarded, even flouted by their employers. Government legislation might have given trade unions a collective legal status, but that did not require employers, such as railway companies, to give them their recognition or to negotiate with them. On Britain's railways and at their works, employee repression in the form of lack of recognition not only continued into the Edwardian period, but with the Taff Vale Decision of 1901, probably got worse. The railway conciliation scheme was eventually established by the British government in 1907. It gave the ASRS negotiating rights for all its members except for those in the railway company workshops. In 1913 the ASRS together with the 'Craft Union Committee' of the thirty different skilled trade unions that were based in the railway company shops, began to clamour for recognition. They were not to succeed in this until after the First World War. Wartime conditions in the railway workshops did not end the rail workshop men's demands. In fact they heightened them. In Britain during the First World War the control of the nation's railways became the preserve of the 'Railway Executive'. Workshop industrial relations came under the control of the 'Committee of Production', a nationwide body established under the Munitions Act of 1915. This committee for the first time in the history of the railway works officially recognised shop committees and the skilled crafts men employed within the shops. Skilled men of the railway works were represented by the 'Craft Union Committee', also known as 'The Railway Shop Union Organisation Committee'.

After the War, the Railway Executive returned the control of the railways back to the various individual companies that owned them. Collective bargaining systems were introduced too, but not until 1922 when Britain's railways were grouped into four more viable railway companies.¹⁴

¹³ E Wigham, *The Power to Manage: A History of the Engineering Employers' Federation*, 1973.

¹⁴ National Archives RAIL1025/98, *Decision of the Industrial Court, No.728*, (July 1922), p.61; NA RAIL250/470 Great Western Railway Staff Matters and NA RAIL390/319, *Report on the Utilisation of London and North Eastern Workshops*, 29th May, 1923.

3 ‘At the Works’: Worker Organisation in Britain’s Railway Company Workshops

Britain’s railway company workshops, now, sadly, for the most part gone, were an interesting phenomena of the nineteenth century. Created by various of the private railway companies that constructed and ran the lines of the country’s railway network throughout the period 1826-1910, there were in total over twenty different workshops across Britain with many other much smaller maintenance depots placed strategically along the various railway companies’ networks. These railway works ranged in size from the wayside repair shops of the Midland and Northern Joint Railway at Melton Constable in Norfolk, to the massive Great Western and London and North Western Railway Company works at Swindon and Crewe respectively. Both of these installations employed well over 7,000 men and were some of the largest industrial centres in Britain as late as 1907.

These workshops both built and maintained their various companies’ locomotives and rolling stock, railway company directors deciding not to rely on private locomotive building firms such as Kitson’s of Leeds as their capacity was already taken up with supplying the overseas demand for locomotives and other forms of railway equipment. In effect the railway works were ‘an industry within an industry’ being engineering plants under the management and control of a railway operating organization. In some ways therefore the railway company workshops were ‘neither fish nor fowl’, being part of wider railway enterprise yet not typical of it, and engineering plants that were reliant on a very different type of enterprise for their continued livelihood. This was to have important repercussions for the nature of industrial relations within the Works, railway companies often attempting to use strategies and policies that were applicable to railway operating but not to an engineering setting.

During the earliest days of the great problem for railway company managers in the engineering workshops that they created was that it was the craftsmen of their works that controlled so much of the labour process there. With the exception of newer labour processes introduced into the workshops, it was the craft unions and their members had the knowledge of how a job was to be done, not the railway company managers, even when they consisted of some of the leading engineers of the time. For the craft unions of the railway company shops however what was remarkable was how quickly the managerial strategies of Britain’s railway companies managed to take so much of that knowledge and power from them. As will be seen, the companies often managed to do this, not simply without a fight, but with complete cooperation on the part of the skilled men of the Works. The initial potential strength of the railway company workshops craftsmen together with an examination of the managerial strategies that the various railway companies employed to end this will be reviewed in the next two sections of this paper.

4 Craft Worker organisation in the Early Railway Company Workshops

4.1 Craft Unionism

One of the most notable factors about unionization in the early railway company workshops was not just that it existed, but that, numerically and **strategically**, it was quite strong. At Crewe for instance, over 500 out of 1,200 workforce were members of craft unions in 1851. This was reduced to nearly 20 per cent of those employed at the Works by 1885, and 34.3 per cent by 1891.¹⁵ It should also be noted that by this time an increasing section of workshop staff were semi or unskilled and therefore not eligible for craft union membership. This pattern of craft unionization was also seen in other railway company workshops, especially Swindon.

From the establishment of the railway company workshops members of their workforces were very active members of these craft unions. Recruited from various engineering firms across the country, the incoming workforce brought their craft unionism with them. Many of these unions, such as the Friendly Society of Boilermakers and FS of Ironfounders, had been formed much earlier in the nineteenth century. Even the Steam Engine Makers' Society, so obviously a result of the new locomotive construction industry, dated back to the 1830s.

Some historians, particularly those of a more Leftist stance, have criticized the craft unions and the period of 'Model Unionism' that has been seen to characterize the mid-Victorian period. Consisting solely of skilled craftsmen and therefore not defending their semi and unskilled fellow workers, these unions were also seen as being over-conciliatory towards their capitalist employers. To some eyes, these were the 'aristocrats of labour' who were enjoying the benefits of Britain being, at this point, the Workshop of the World, and that Workshop being dependent upon their skills.

It is true that these craft unions rarely went out on strike, although it was not unknown, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers actually being formed as the result of a widely supported strike in 1850-1. But to dismiss the craft unions of the mid-Victorian period because of their reluctance to take more extreme action is to completely overlook the nature of craft unionism, the power of the labour market that they realized they held, and the strategies that they employed as a result of this. These factors will now be explored.

4.2 The Labour Market

Craftsmen of railway company workshops were part of a very different labour market to general railway operating staff. Initially, the railway company workshops recruited their labour force from other engineering works where they had learnt their craft. Even once the railway company works became some of the largest providers of engineering craft workers through their extensive apprenticeship schemes at times of economic buoyancy, when such abilities were in great demand throughout British industry, dictated that the

¹⁵ Amalgamated Society of Engineers' Annual Reports held the AEUW Headquarters and the Steam Engine Makers' Society monthly reports held at the Bishopsgate Institute Library, Liverpool Street, London.

company shops could not be completely dependent on their own ‘home grown’ talent. In addition to this the skills that these men possessed, so important in railway manufacturing were also highly transferable. They could find employment in any engineering workshop across the country, even the world.¹⁶

In contrast staff in the operating and maintenance sections of railways were usually recruited and trained by the railway company that employed them. Initially this was because the railway industry was brand new. Few if any workers had the abilities and knowledge that were needed to run a railway. Often this knowledge was very specific to particular railway companies, each company having different work practices, rules of conduct and details such as signaling. Knowledge and experience gained in one railway company was not always readily transferable to another, although when labour was in short supply someone with railway experience was better than another with no railway experience at all. Thus general railway workers became part of an internal labour market within their particular company. Having recruited and trained their workforce Britain’s railway companies ensured they kept them. Recruitment and training cost money. As a result wider forms of railway work usually offered key incentives to their workforce in order to retain them. Railway companies created their own ‘internal’ labour market, where internal promotion and reward were used to keep workers in the railway company and experience was not easily used elsewhere.

In contrast, with their highly transferable skills the craftsmen of the works able to find employment outside the railway industry. They were members of an external labour market. Not only were their skills in great demand, but their craft trade unions also supplied them with both the information and the means to move on and seek employment elsewhere if they wished to. Unions such as the Steam-Engine Makers’ Society published monthly reviews of where work for specific trades were available and also supplied members with ‘bed and board’ in local pubs if they wanted to go ‘on tramp’, traveling to get one of these jobs. Later these unions gave their members the train fare to move on.¹⁷ This, together with the control of the number of apprentices and ensuring that only skilled, qualified men who had completed their apprenticeship were taken on in their workshops, limited the number of craftsmen available. This in turn made sure that their wage-levels were kept to a premium.

4.3 Craftsmen’s Control of the labour process

The workshop organization of this newly recruited workforce in the railway company workshops was another problem for the various railway companies. In many production processes in these works, shop-floor labour supervision was for many years not carried out by company officers but by craftsmen who managed small teams of similarly skilled men. Sometimes these men were subcontractors. They were paid a fixed sum for whatever they were manufactured and then they engaged a workforce to serve them. The

¹⁶ British Library of Economic and Political Science (hereafter BLEPS) Webb MS Trade Union Collection, E, Section A< Vol, XVI, Derby ASE respondent said that the workers had been, ‘brought up as lads here’. See also NA RAIL1025/96 Appendix 29, ‘Statement showing the long service of railway shops staff’.

¹⁷ Ibid.

subcontractor agreed the amount that he would give his subemployed workers, hopefully making a profit once he had paid them.¹⁸

There was a good reason why the management of the Works did this. It was the craftworkers, not the managers, who possessed the knowledge of the craft and production processes that were needed for manufacturing the equipment, locomotives and rolling stock that the companies needed. In all other areas of railway enterprise which was new and established to be very much under the planning and control of railway managers. Initially recruited from other engineering enterprises there it was the skilled workers who possessed the knowledge and the autonomy. A series of craft union rules and traditions, developed by all leading craft unions, proscribed the 'whole inner life' of the workshop. In individual workshops where craft union members were predominant, unionized workers ensured that only skilled craftsmen were recruited and that there only a limited number of apprentices were permitted. This was to ensure that the knowledge of how a job was to be performed, or an item was made remained the preserve of the craft union membership. In addition to this, limiting the number of men entering their crafts and their workshops meant that these skilled men's abilities always tended to be in shortage, forcing wage levels up as a result.¹⁹

The majority of skilled men during the earlier days of the railway workshops, before more complex machinery and machine-tools were introduced, made, owned and used their own tools. As a result not only were these craftsmen's skills rare and exclusive, the very means of producing items were their's and their's alone. Craft tools were not only expensive to acquire, but also required knowledge and ability to use. Both these factors made these craftsmen very valuable to their employing railway company.

While determining the price offered for each task was often not in the craft unions' power, certain factors such as method of execution and pace of work were. This was a result of the craft unions' ability to restrict the numbers entering the Works, and to be selective about the apprentices and the character of other craft workers, but of the rules of behaviour that this form of trade unionism established. Craft trade union rules, subscribed to by all their members, required members to In effect the rules and traditions of craft unionization created the working class culture of each individual workshop. This 'cultural inner life' of the various workshops also determined that direct managerial control was kept to the minimum. In the larger of the railway works, even during their earliest days, individual workshops might employ large numbers of men, often of one craft or allied crafts. Boilershops and fitting-erecting shops, where the locomotive was finally and carefully constructed, predominately consisted of boilermakers, riveters and fitter-erectors, with apprentices and labourers assisting them. There it was not only nearly impossible for managers who were not craftsmen to supervise the workforce, but the fact that the craftsmen worked in small autonomous workgangs meant that their skill and knowledge were kept to this exclusive group, and away from the management. Workshop culture further protected 'the knowledge'. Much of this consisted of the traditions of

¹⁸ For instance see NA RAIL264/254 The Fawcett List of the GWR Swindon Workshops.

¹⁹ K Hudson, *Working To Rule. Railway Workshop Rules: A Study in Industrial Discipline*, Bath, 1970. For the level of unionisation see Drummond, *Crewe*, Appendix 2 Table 4.

initiation into the craft, but others such the ridiculing and poor treatment of apprenticeships; ceremonies of rights of passage, from apprenticeship to journeyman or ‘ringing out’ (i.e. hammering on metal objects) a young man as he left work to be married; even taking teabreaks exclusively in work gangs, developed a craft identity that was important in guarding the knowledge and keeping it within the members of the craft union.²⁰

4.4 Limits of Worker organization and power

While their position in the wider labour market, the fact that their skills were in great demand during the mid-Victorian period, and the level of traditional and craft control that they enjoyed in ‘managing’ the production process in these railway workshops meant that the craftsmen of the shops appeared to have a good deal of power and control in the workplace, there were factors that already undermined their position. This was increasingly to be the case as the nineteenth century went on and the twentieth century began.

One of the problems with this workshop craft unionism was that while it was numerically comparatively strong (it should be remembered that the first general railway union, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, was not formed until 1870 and even then met much opposition from railway company management), it was also highly sectional. A least four different craft unions represented the skilled men of the railway workshops by 1870. This was to rise to six by 1890. Craft unions included the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, that included the skilled fitters, fitter-erectors, turners and those who manned some of the more complex machine-tools of the period; the Steam-Engine Makers’ Society, the Friendly Society of Boilermakers, the Iron-Founders and a carpenters and joiners trade union. The variety of craft unions represented the range of skills that were employed in the railway workshops that were large production centres that manufactured all manner of railway equipment from the steam locomotive and carriages, to bridges and signaling, right down to the smallest component or item that the railway demanded.

The sectionalism of the railway workshops’ early craft unionism therefore undermined both the worker ‘action’ in the form of the labour market strategies that they employed, and the solidarity of the workforce. A factor that will be commented on later when the strategies that railway company management used to undermine these trade union organizations will be considered.

In addition to this, the railway companies refused to recognized their unions or the men collectively even after (and for a long time after) the legislative advances of the 1870s that Curthoys discusses. In addition to this, the men of these works, along with other railway workers throughout Britain, were subject to other great inequalities in British law between capital and labour, including the master and servants laws. As a result of this one man of Crewe works who left his employment during the 1860s was sentenced to hard labour under this legislation. More usually while noting that men had absconded, and

²⁰ This is all detailed in Drummond, *Crewe*.

even knowing where they had gone (according to the Crewe Works' registers one 'went with the Aunt Sally people'), the management did little to punish them.²¹

The next section of this paper will go on to review how managerial strategies rapidly and steadfastly undermined, even destroyed, worker organization at the Works. While this, at one level, might be considered to be railway company repression of its workforce organizations, the means that the companies employed was often too subtle and frequently, too well supported by their employees, to really merit this term. Other strategies and means that certain of the railway companies adopted in their workshops were clearly outright repression. This was not just of their workforces inside the shops, but outside, extending to all aspects of these workers and their family's lives, including their politics and their religion.

However arguably the most successful strategy that Britain's railway companies adopted regarding their gaining closer control of the skilled men of their workshops was their construction of these new railway factories in rather isolated but strategic points on their networks, and the building of towns and settlements to provide accommodation for their workforces and their families. One of the advantages and means of independence that the craft workers of the shops had was the fact that their skills were highly transferable and that they easily and happily moved on to find work elsewhere. It is possible to argue that through the location of these workforces in these new, rather isolated railway towns, Britain's railway companies succeed in reducing these men's involvement in the wider, external engineering labour market. Most of these new railway towns were 'model' settlements. The workforce and their families were housed in small, neat country-like cottages. Schools, churches, hospitals and civic or literary institutes were provided. There was even a clean and constant water and gas supply. For a few pence a week a worker and his family would be sure of medical care. Life in the railway towns were so much better than in the cities or countryside where many of these workers had come from. These new worker communities had many good reasons to be thankful for **their** railway company. In 1838 the LBR reported of Wolverton, one of the earliest railway colonies in England, 'we are beginning to find the economic benefits to the establishment...there is not a single person who would not willingly and gladly perform extra service when called upon.'²² In building the railway towns, the railway companies had created a captive pool of skilled labour. By the 1880s trade union leaders in Derby and Crewe were reporting that their members were reluctant to take any industrial action or to move elsewhere, 'they had been in the works all their lives and knew no other.'²³

²¹ LNWR Crewe Works Registers, National Archives, RAIL410/1972-1921

²² PW Kingsford, 'Labour Relations on the Railways, 1835-1875', *Journal of Transport History*, Vol.1. (1953), p.77.

²³ British Library of Economic and Political Science, London School of Economics, Webb MS Trade Union Collection, E, Section A, Vol. XVI, p, 205, Crewe ASE Respondent.

5 Capitalist Repression?: Managerial Strategies in Britain's Railway Company Workshops

It has already been seen that in the early railway company workshops, the possession of the knowledge and control of the tools to do the job, coupled with wider demand for their skills and their position in an external labour market gave the Works craftsmen a good deal of potential power in managing the workplace. They also had a high degree of collective support and action in the subtle strategies these craft unions employed in controlling their labour market. Railway company management wanted to gain control in their own workshops. They used three strategies to do this. These were increased company rather than craft union supervision of the production process in the Works with foremen and piecemasters employed by the company directly overseeing the labour process; the imposition of company, as opposed to craft union, workshop rules, and finally, further division of the labour process or the introduction of new means of production that removed production from the skilled craftsmen. This last strategy was often accompanied by increased 'piecework', workers being paid for each item they manufactured.

The form of supervision selected to manage production in the workshops during the earliest period of their history appears to have been dependent on a number of factors concerning the particular craft's local labour market, the risks involved in the production process and the level and constancy of product demand. At Swindon for example the 'Fawcett List' reveals that in the early works subcontracting was confined to six out of fourteen shops. These were wheel-forging, general forging, founding and boilermaking.²⁴ All these carried a great deal of risk in their execution, subcontracting passed the cost of failure in the production process from the railway company to the subcontractor. Subcontracting was also useful at these new workplaces as contractors would often recruit members of their families or members of the community that they had moved to the railway town from. There was, of course, the lure of profit for these subcontractors. The same strategy of subcontracting, this time with piecework (being paid by the piece) was also used at the Midland railway company workshops at Derby for the same reasons, but it lasted much longer there than at Swindon. By 1865 all subcontractors there had been replaced by foremen, they were directly employed by the railway company. This did not occur in Derby until the 1890s when a more systematic form of piecework was introduced.²⁵

At all other railway workshops, and in the eight shops that were not under the control of subcontractors at Swindon, the foreman was the leading workshop supervisor. Initially many of these men were members of the craft union that their workforce supported, but quite quickly this was no longer the case. Increasingly foremen were directly employed by the railway companies, being required to implement the policies and strategies of the

²⁴ NA RAIL 264/254

²⁵ See M and B Jefferys, 'The Wages, Hours and Trade Customs of the skilled Engineers in 1861', *Economic History Review*, 1st Series, Vol, XVII (1947), pp.27-44. NA RAIL527/1618, Piecework price book at Darlington Works of the North Eastern Railway Company for 1864; BLEPS Webb MS Trade Union Collection E, Section A, Vol, XVI, p.209

Works managers. In addition to this, while most foremen were skilled in a least one craft of the shop that they managed, over time their roles as managers limited their craft skills. They became more reliant and dependent for their futures on the railway company, and with this, arguably more willing to implement company strategies and means of work and workplace control.

As a means of reducing craft autonomy, autonomy and control in the production process, the managerial practice of substituting craft union workshop rules with company rules was most successful. Company rules aimed to replace craft pride and solidarity with pride and identification with the railway company. As a result of this Eric Hobsbawm has argued that, 'the labour policies of the railway companies sometimes look s though they had been specifically designed to replace craft autonomy and exclusive control by managerial control...'²⁶ In the first instance, the 'inner life' of these workshops, and of the worker groups in these shops, were replaced as company rules, in insisting that workers took their tea and meal breaks in official canteens, rather in the workers' shops and work areas, attempted to undermine their comraderie. At Derby works even the men's family unity was threatened by the company employing employing family heads a subcontracting piecemaster.

Hobsbawm argues that craft pride was subverted into pride in the company by workshop rules obliging skilled workers to supply their own tools. In fact company obligation merely enforced craft union tradition and, as I argued earlier, in no way removed worker discretion and ability. What did slowly but steadily undermine both worker pride and certain crafts was the increased use of tools and machines that were owned by the railway company. Through this, craft workers still possessed the skill and knowledge, but were dependent on the company for their means of production. They were less likely to be able to move on to other workplaces, or even threaten to do this, if they did not own their own tools. Increased specialization of production methods, and of machine-tools in the various railway company workshops also ensured that the skills and abilities of craftsmen in the Works were less and less transferable.

The final managerial strategy for gaining further control in the railway workshops was to subdivide the production process. This not only limited the knowledge and experience needed to perform any key task, but also allowed management to prescribe and cost the job. While piecework, being paid for each item or piece of work, was introduced into certain areas of manufacturing in the railway workshops form the 1840s, more systematic piecework became common by the 1890s. As early as 1860, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers discovered that the 'larger locomotive building centres returned a higher than national average proportion of workers on piecework.'²⁷ There was a good reason for this, the need for many large numbers of items and components lent itself to piecework in the shops. Piecework systems in the railway company workshops became very complex, allowing for the pricing of many items manufactured there. At Darlington Works in the 1860s for instance a piecework book composed by the management gave a price for

²⁶ Hobsbawm, 'op cit', p.264.

²⁷ Jefferys, 'op cit'

every aspect of producing every component of the locomotive.²⁸ More complex forms of piecework, introduced into most company shops during the 1890s, further subdividing the production process and forcing men to work at an even faster pace.²⁹ The ability to plan their work and produce a finished item ceased for many skilled worksmen. The control of the pace and method of producing items passed into the hands of management. Knowledge of how to make items was being lost by the skilled men of the Works to their managers.

Company managerial methods also led to the loss of knowledge, skill and expertise amongst craftsmen. As early as 1848 the LNWR works at Crewe had a large team of skilled fitters, also known as ‘vicemen’, working on piecework producing only one locomotive component or carried out one small stage in a production process.³⁰ Experience and understanding of full manufacturing process was lost to these craftsmen. By the 1890s most of the railway company workshops had managed to make even the highest skilled section of their manufacturing process, that of building the prestigious steam locomotive, multi-staged, with workers repeatedly carrying out one part of loco building, rather like men working on assembly lines producing cars.

Other managerial means were used to reduce craft workers’ skill further in the railway company workshops. The increased use of automatic machine-tools, manned by semi-skilled and not craft workers, was important in this and happened from the earliest days of the railway company shops, although it gained pace during the 1880s.

By the Edwardian period this development of systematic or bonus piecework systems into the various railway company workshops was even more extreme, with railway companies producing and enforcing the use of piecework price books that fixed the cost of every item and every action of work carried out in their workshops. The ‘assembly line’ system was introduced even more rigorously in shops where locomotives were being built. However in those workshops where locos were being repaired a less controlled and more leisurely system was still used, although there was much bureaucracy that traced the pace of maintenance and production, a factor that further restricted the skill and discretion of the skilled, crafts works’ men. A further factor that undermined craft skill and autonomy, and with it these workers’ ability to resist employer repression, was the further division of the production process and the introduction of semi-skilled workers, even ‘boys’, to carryout these stages of maintaining or building locomotives. By the early twentieth century this use of semi-skilled workers was becoming marked in most railway company workshops, while in the production shops which increasingly relied on machine-tools, further introduction of ‘automatic machine-tools’, such as capstan lathes, brought even more semi-skilled men to carryout tasks that were previously the role of craft workers.

²⁸ NA RAIL527/1618 Piecework book for Darlington Works, 1864. The NA also has another piecework book, of a very different form and date, NA RAIL527/1936 for about 1911.

²⁹ For more on this see D K Drummond, *Crewe, Railway Town, Company and People*, Scholar Press, Aldershot, 1995 and D Drummond, ‘Specially Designed? Employers’ Labour Strategies and Worker responses in British Railway Workshops, 1838-1914’, in Charles Harvey and John Turner(eds.), *Labour and Business in Modern Britain*, 1989.

³⁰ F B Head, *Stokers and Pokers: Orr the LNWR Company; the Electric Telegraph and the Railway Clearing House*, 18489, David and Charles Reprint, Newton Abbot, 1968, p.110.

Another important feature to note of industrial relations during the Edwardian period was the escalation of worker resistance and action. This was a period of escalating strikes and action prompted not just by the ever-increasing cost of living that workers and their families were experiencing in Britain during this time, but by the growth in socialism and syndicalism too. This resulted in many strikes on the railways during this time period, including the first National Railway Strike in 1911. However while the men of the railway workshops were indeed part of this wider 'railway labour force' they did not necessarily become part of this general growing trade union militancy.

It has been argued that this process of deskilling, and hence the loss of even more craft worker autonomy and power, within the Railway workshops, speeded up even more during the First World War. There was also 'dilution', the introduction of unskilled workers in the place of the skilled as women were recruited into the Workshops, in some cases where there had been no carriage or upholstery shops, for the first time in the Works' history. However this was only a temporary stage as women were engaged to carry out the munitions work that the railway works were engaged in during the hostilities. After the war, the Railway workshops returned to the production they carried out prior to the Great War, and the women and munitions left. The craftsmen and semi-skilled workers of the railway company workshops, although of lesser ability, standing and power than they had enjoyed before the War, were nonetheless still skilled and capable of resisting, at least in some way, their employers' repression.

6 Worker Collective Responses to Railway Company Managerial Strategies and Railway Company Reaction

All these managerial strategies to further limit and control the autonomy of the men of the railway company workshops did not go unnoticed or unopposed of course. They were not, as one trade unionist writing during the 1884 commented, 'so many pieces of human machinery' to be used by the railway companies at their will.³¹ Despite their growing lack of power the men of the Works developed their own strategies to try and resist this. While these did not challenge company power head on, these strategies did draw on the long legacy of trade unionism, especially craft unionism, and in many railway towns, nonconformity, which the skilled men of the railway company shops had brought with them when they settled in these mid-Victorian new towns. This allowed the men of the Works and of the railway towns to maintain the independent working-class culture that they long enjoyed, and, in time, to question and undermine railway company dominance there.

It has already been noted that the railway companies' creation of the railway town, essentially a dormitory settlement for the men of their workshops and their families, led to their creating a local confined labour market for these skilled engineering workers. Many have argued that this brought about a population in these railway towns that was extremely deferential towards the 'parent' railway company. To be sure many in these towns were susceptible to the 'command' of their company and its leading managers, the

³¹ *The Crewe Chronicle*, 22nd September, 1884.

Chief Mechanical Engineer of the Swindon Works, Daniel Gooch, becoming the Member of Parliament for the town from 1865 to 1880. In other famous railway centres ‘company interest’ dominated municipal politics (George Hudson and Leeman at York for instance).³² However, other town’s people, as we will see later in the case of my home town of Crewe, were not so open to this. Part of the reason for some workers, both at the Works and in the railway towns, being able to maintain some independence was because they not only possessed a needful skill, but also developed a lively and often very strong working-class culture in their craft unions, political parties and meetings, and for many, in their nonconformist chapels.

Inside the railway works themselves working-class culture, particularly in the form of craft unionism, did continue, but was often subordinated to the railway company. Workplace-based collective action was often only successful when it spilt over into mass political action in the local railway town community. We will see this later in the two ‘Intimidation Affairs’ that took place in Crewe during the 1880s.³³

It was difficult to counter more direct forms of managerial control over the labour force, particularly the work-based authority of the foreman or the piecemaster. Refusal to work for a low piecework price could bring instant dismissal, while collusion between men to slow work down in order to produce a more favorable pace of work also had the same result. However occasionally workshopmen did take mass action to try and resist piecework. At York in 1881, members of the ASE struck work to prevent its introduction, while part of the ‘Second Intimidation Affair’ in Crewe in 1889 was against the increased use of piecework.

Craft unionism and solidarity was maintained in specific workshops in each railway works. This was most usually in those shops where men of the same trade and union worked together employed on a time-basis, manufacturing higher value items that were essential to railway function, such as the steam locomotive. Often the men of these specific shops worked in gangs under the command of a similarly skilled senior who was also a member of their craft union. Under such conditions the men of these shops managed to continue the independence of their work from company management for some time, but it was when this, coupled with their working-class political and religious action, grew and challenged railway company power that the companies turned a far less subtle outright form of repression. This can be seen in two instances, one a series of worker collective actions that was concerted across a number of different railway company workshops during the 1850s, 60s and 70s; the other in later protests centred in Crewe during the 1880s.

From the establishment of the railway workshops, the ordinary members of the craft unions attempted to use the company-established system of industrial relations, notably the petitioning system, to try to gain their own collective demands and trade union recognition. The earliest example of this occurred at Swindon in 1843, shopmen making a collective appeal for improved piecework prices. In 1853, men of the NER’s York and

³² F W S Craig, *British Parliamentary Election results, 1832-1885*, 1977 and C H Feinstein (ed.) *York, 1831-1981: one Hundred Years of Scientific Endeavour and Social Change*, York, 1981; L V Grinsell, *A History of Swindon*, Swindon, 1950, p.103.

³³ Drummond, *Crewe*.

Gateshead works made similar appeals, their Locomotive Superintendent Fletcher being instructed by the company's directors, 'not to take any united application or to meet any men as a body...' in order to try and counter this collective worker action.³⁴

The most dramatic demonstration of how the ordinary members of the works could collectively attempt to bring about change in their work regime came with 'Nine Hours Movement' of 1871. Practically every company railway workshop took part in this, the Workmen petitioning their various companies' directors for a shorter working week while holding mass public meetings to support their call. At Ashford, Earlestown, Stoke-on-Trent, Swindon and Wolverton workshop meetings were less obviously a product of the action of the ordinary members of the trade unions, but at York, Darlington and some workshops in Swindon, the Movement was accompanied by demands for advances in wage levels for the workshop fitters and turners. This policy was supported by the ASE at this time. At larger meetings at Crewe and Derby, the workmen's leaders were even more radical in their demands, their trade unionism and their politics. At Crewe for instance, 5,000 men met on the town square to be addressed by local ASE branch officials, religious and political leaders, many of whom were future members of Crewe's Liberal party. Derby's Nine Hour Movement march to the works manager's house was organised by the recently formed Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants.³⁵ The ASRS was to be key to politics in the Derbyshire city for many years after this.

Successfully attaining their immediate goal, the 'Nine Hours Movement' in Britain's railway workshops appeared to have been disbanded in 1871, but in 1881, a body dubbing itself 'The Nine Hours Movement of the ASRS' called on the men of the various railway workshops to press for employer recognition of their own trade unions and the ASRS, a trade union for those operating the railways. The Movement was soon stopped. Fletcher, the Superintendent of the NER company intercepted the organisation's broadsheets and informed his fellow superintendents in all other railway company workshops of their aims. This began systematic victimization of the leaders of the 'Movement' and it was soon crushed.

There is further evidence however of other forms of worker resistance to railway company 'repression', in this case resistance to the refusal of certain railway companies to implement the Employer's Liability Act of 1880. Considered in the light of Curthoys' arguments, this act can be seen as further evidence of mid and later Victorian British governments pursuing a more open and supportive policy towards trade unionism. In all three railway companies 'contracted out' of the act, arguing that both they and their workforces were content with the welfare provision that was already made for anyone injured while at work under the company-provided welfare schemes. Significantly it was a welfare system that company employees were obliged to make a contribution to.

³⁴ NA RAIL527/1901 Details of the Nine Hour Movement, 1881, records of the North Eastern Railway Company: NA RAIL527/23 North Eastern Railway Company, Locomotive and Stores Committee, 19th June, 1853, Minute No 31; Also see *The Beehive*, 11 November 1871, p.4 for details on Manchester, Derby, Crewe, Ashford, Wolverton and Wolverhampton and *The Beehive*, 18th November 1871, p 4 for Stoke-on-Trent and Newton and *The Beehive*, 6th November 1872 for Crewe and Derby again: PS Bagwell, *The Railway Men*, vol.1, p.51 also provides detail.

³⁵ *The Beehive*, 11 November, 1871 p.4.

Again it was the ASRS and not the craft unions of the railway workshops, that mounted resistance to this. The government aim of employer limited liability was to make employers pay for worker injuries that were the result of their poor management or carelessness. Cost, the government hoped, would make the employers careful. But in the contracting out schemes of these three railway companies, the cost would be shared by company and employees, limiting this incentive. A ballot was held to test workers' opinions of this contracting out on each of the three lines. On the LNWR the ASRS not only held mass meetings at Liverpool and Crewe, but also established that company officers had traveled the company line coercing men to vote in favour of contracting out. Employees of the railway company, both generally and in Crewe Works, memorialized the company directors on this matter. Both this and the ASRS campaign failed. Contracting out was introduced. The Directors did not even read the men's appeal.³⁶

Perhaps the best example of responsive worker collective action, that had clear craft union involvement, were the two 'Intimidation Affairs' that took place in Crewe during the 1880s. Significantly, this mass action on the part of the men of the railway company workshops was in response to a very clear case of railway company repression. In summary, the First Intimidation Affair in the town took place in 1884-5, the second in 1889. 1884 was first parliamentary election where a large number of men employed at Crewe Works had the vote. It was clear that they would be the deciding factor in the election. The LNWR company, confident that the candidate they supported would win the parliamentary seat in 'the railway company town of ours', adopted the Tory candidate as 'the Independent Railway Company' candidate. The Chief Mechanical Engineer of Crewe, Francis William Webb, recruited many of the Works' foremen to support this candidate. Starting with stark warnings to Works' men who attended meetings to hear the Liberal candidate the foremen took their role seriously and began to coerce known Liberals and nonconformist men in their workshops. In time this allegedly escalated to the forcible dismissal of over two hundred known Liberals from Crewe Works. This included the 'Blue Ribbon Gang' a work group in one of the most prestigious fitting-erecting shops. They had named themselves after a Gospel-Temperance organization, the Blue Ribbon Army, that had promoted a religious revival in the town. With such values these men were likely to be Liberals while the wearing of a blue ribbon in their lapels made them easy targets for victimization. It was alleged that even after they had been dismissed the railway company kept up its persecutions, posting 'Railway Company police' outside of the shops that some of these men had set up in a desperate attempt to maintain their families, the railway police warning any works' man who ventured near to the shop that they too would lose their livelihood if they went inside. While it is possible to trace two hundred Liberal works men being dismissed from the Works, this was a time of economic downturn when many were required to leave, all the members of the 'Blue Ribbon Gang' are listed in the Crewe Works registers of the period as being fired from the Works.³⁷

The Second Intimidation affair of 1889 took place as a result of the LNWR coercing its workforce regarding their membership of a company pension scheme. Once again it is

³⁶ *The Crewe Chronicle*, 26th October, 1889.

³⁷ From Drummond, *Crewe*, Chapter 7.

clear outright evidence of a capitalist railway company resorting to severe repression of its workforce. With this incident, and the denunciation of the railway company, its managers and their coercion and influencing of their workshop workforce, some of the more extreme forms of railway company repression of their employees appeared to come to an end. But while outright party political suppression was over, the growth of trade unionism and socialism at a national level merely meant that the railway companies took up a more subtle and indirect pressurizing of its workforce. By the latter 1890s, Britain's railway companies' policy of not officially recognizing their employees' trade unions was looking increasingly old-fashioned and injudicious.³⁸

In 1901 craft trade unionists in the LNWR workshops across the country were calling for union recognition.³⁹ At this point the odds were increasingly stacked against them, not just because of the resistance of their railway company employers, but due to escalating opposition from the British government. With strikes and trade union action ever increasing, the growth of socialism and syndicalism, the British government was in no mood for concession. Indeed the Taff Vale Decision of 1901 demonstrated this, with the British House of Lords deciding that the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants was liable for the losses made by the Taff Vale Railway Company in South Wales due to a strike that the ASRS trade union had called.

Workers and trade unionists in certain railway company workshops attempted to use the railway company's own system of appeal to do this. Once again an worker trade union organization was set up between the men of the different LNWR workshops, the manager of the Earlestown Works complaining that men from Wolverton had 'got up a petition' in order to do this for the men of all the company's workshops. This attempt to do this in all the LNWR works failed, but in Crewe in 1911 the 'Joint Committee of all workshop unions' was founded. This recognized all the trade unions, both craft and general, then in Crewe Works. It should be noted that this was not solely the outcome of the power of the Works' unions, they actually had very little, but because the LNWR's plan to dismiss five hundred workers from Crewe Works had caused a huge outcry in the town and more widely. Soon after this other railway company shops set up their own 'Joint Committees' in an attempt to gain trade union recognition.

There was another spur for the men of the railway company workshops to seek this wider recognition and establish collective bargaining. In 1907 the Railway Conciliation Scheme, instigated and monitored by the government, gave the ASRS the right to negotiate for its members in disputes. This scheme served all railway workers in the ASRS except for those in the Railway Workshops. They were left out of this agreement. Together these factors prompted the men of the railway works to seek trade union recognition. As seen at the end of section 2 of this paper, they were not to get it until 1922.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Drummond, *Crewe*.

³⁹ NA RAIL410/264 Crewe and Locomotive Committee minutes of the LNWR, Appendix A.

⁴⁰ NA RAIL1025/98 *Decision of the Industrial Court NO 728* (July 1922), p.63.

7 Conclusion

While the many workshops of Britain's railway companies ostensibly appeared to be very peaceful places, free of worker and trade union action and both employer and government repression during this long period from 1840-1914, this was far from being the case. Worker action took the form of subtle craft union strategies concerning their control of the knowledge and planning of the production process, and of the labour market for skilled workers. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth century while craft worker power in the railway workshops were gradually replaced by the mass action of more general railway unions such as the ASRS and after 19**, the NUR, these more subtle forms of worker resistance were replaced by more concerted and public supported actions. Railway companies and government maintained their own form of repression, especially as seen in the companies' desire to have the power to manage in their own workshops. Over this long period the strategies of the railway companies changed, developing from actions within the workplace to opposition and action outside. The railway companies were very successful in this, particularly in undermining craft worker power through the introduction of new machinery, piecework systems together with the division of the production process and use of semi and unskilled labour. These railway companies also resisted recognizing worker trade unions until 1922. In contrast it can be seen that the British government had a long term trend of increased trade union recognition and the adoption of collective bargaining. To be sure common law/court decisions such as Taff Vale in 1901 appear to have reversed this trend, but it was well established. The contrast between the form and level of repression exerted by railway companies and the British government was especially notable during the later nineteenth century and the commencement of the industrial strife of the Edwardian period.