

## **“A new labour era?”: Canadian National Railways and the Railway Worker, 1919-1929**

Allen Seager

Volume 3, Number 1, 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031048ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031048ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Seager, A. (1992). “A new labour era?”: Canadian National Railways and the Railway Worker, 1919-1929. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 3(1), 171–195.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/031048ar>

### Article abstract

It is conventional to assume that the idea of a 'new era of collaboration among organized labour, capital, and the state in wartime Canada died still-born with the events at Winnipeg in 1919 and the Big Business assault on trade unionism during the 1920s. This paper suggests that the conventional picture has been overdrawn. Railway workers, and those in the public sector in particular, remained highly unionized, while their organizations became deeply enmeshed in structures of conciliation, arbitration, and 'co-operation' during the period 1919-1929. Under the leadership of President Henrx Thornton, the state-owned Canadian National Railways, the largest employer in Canada at that time, developed a unique strategy of labour-management collaboration seen in some quarters as the harbinger of a 'new labour era' for North American industry as a whole.

# **“A new labour era?”: Canadian National Railways and the railway worker, 1919-1929**

**ALLEN SEAGER**

## **Résumé**

*It is conventional to assume that the idea of a ‘new era’ of collaboration among organized labour, capital, and the state in wartime Canada died still-born with the events at Winnipeg in 1919 and the Big Business assault on trade unionism during the 1920s. This paper suggests that the conventional picture has been overdrawn. Railway workers, and those in the public sector in particular, remained highly unionized, while their organizations became deeply enmeshed in structures of conciliation, arbitration, and ‘co-operation’ during the period 1919-1929. Under the leadership of President Henry Thornton, the state-owned Canadian National Railways, the largest employer in Canada at that time, developed a unique strategy of labour-management collaboration seen in some quarters as the harbinger of a ‘new labour era’ for North American industry as a whole.*

\* \* \* \*

*La littérature conventionnelle présume que la “nouvelle époque” de collaboration entre les syndicats ouvriers, le capital et l’État ouverte par la guerre mourut dans l’oeuf avec les événements de 1919 à Winnipeg et, plus généralement, à la suite des assauts contre le syndicalisme lancés par les grands employeurs dans les années 1920. Cet article suggère qu’il s’agit là d’une surestimation. Au cours des années 1919-1929 en effet, les travailleurs des chemins de fer, et parmi eux ceux du secteur public tout particulièrement, conservèrent un fort taux de syndicalisation et leurs associations s’impliquèrent profondément dans des structures nouvelles de conciliation, d’arbitrage et de “co-opération”. Sous la direction du Président Henry Thornton, les Chemins de fer nationaux du Canada (le Canadien National), une compagnie para-gouvernementale, et l’employeur le plus important du pays, mit au point une stratégie exceptionnelle de collaboration entre patrons et employés qui fut considérée par plusieurs comme le modèle avant-coureur de la “nouvelle époque” pour l’ensemble de l’industrie nord-américaine.*

The years from the Winnipeg General Strike to the Wall Street Crash would be a decade of disappointment for Canada’s industrial reformers. The welfare capitalism of the twen-

---

The author would like to thank Mark Rosenfeld and Kenneth Cruickshank for their readings of earlier drafts of the paper. The Canadian National Railways, as well as the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Transport and General Employees, provided valuable research assistance, which is also gratefully acknowledged.

ties, historians agree, aimed at best to substitute corporate benevolence for collective bargaining and, not incidentally, roll back unwelcome frontiers of interventionist government.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, historiographical consensus has erred in its assumption that an alternative, quasi-corporatist post-war vision of "co-operation between the State and Capital and Labor" disappeared from the agenda of Canadian class relations between 1919 and 1929.<sup>2</sup> The Canadian railways, this paper will hope to show, provide a significant case in point.

Though neglected by future historians, railway industrial relations in the 1920s were the subject of lively contemporary discussion and debate. In the approving judgement of the *Manitoba Free Press* railway labour and capital "had abolished the old spontaneous spirit of fight, and substituted a policy of reason and co-operation."<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of Tim Buck, labour had been railroaded into "cunningly engineered anti-working class schemes by which top trade union leaders sought to transform the unions into part of the 'efficiency' machinery of the capitalist class."<sup>4</sup> The truth of the matter is historically more problematic. 'A policy of reason and co-operation' measured labour strength as well as weakness, and the idea of a 'new labour era' embodied anything but a straightforward affirmation of the dominant values of North American capitalism in the twenties.

As was manifestly not the case in other major industrial settings at that time, class conflict on the Canadian railways was effectively suppressed in the context of a remarkably comprehensive structure of collective bargaining. Its emergence during World War I represented the consolidation of historic gains by and for Canadian railway workers, who had fought literally hundreds of battles for the right to organize in the late

- 
1. Margaret McCallum, "Corporate Welfarism in Canada, 1919-1939," *Canadian Historical Review* 17 (1990): 46-79; Bruce Scott, "'A Place in the Sun': the Industrial Council at Massey-Harris, 1919-1929," *Labour/Le Travail* 1 (1976): 158-192; Robert Storey, "Unionization versus Corporate Welfare: The Dofasco Way," *ibid.* 12 (1983): 7-42; Andrew Yarmie, "The Right to Manage: Vancouver Employers' Associations, 1900-1923," *BC Studies* 90 (1991): 40-74; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto, 1983), 177-198; John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto, 1985), 138-144.
  2. Quotation from Trades and Labour Congress, *Convention Booklet* (1918), cited in Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, "The Rise and Fall of a Workers' Revolt, 1917-1925" (unpublished manuscript, 1990); see also James Naylor, *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario 1914-1925* (Toronto, 1991), ch 1.
  3. "Division Four Railway Workers Convention," *Manitoba Free Press*, 3 June 1990; see also numerous references to the Canadian railways in Louis Aubrey Wood's contemporary study of *Union-Management Co-operation on the Railroads* (New Haven, 1931). The one existing historical monograph on the subject of Canadian railway industrial relations was similarly written by an economist, commissioned by the Task Force on Labour Relations in the 1960s: Stephen G. Peitchinis, *Labour-Management Relations in the Railway Industry* (Ottawa, 1971). Significantly, it neglects the 'co-operative' theme of the 1920s.
  4. Tim Buck, *Thirty Years: The Story of the Communist Movement in Canada 1922-1952* (Toronto, 1952), 38. Buck is not referring explicitly to the railway unions in this passage but implicitly so. The Communist Party's oppositional role in the railway labour movement of the 1920s will be discussed in detail further on.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> According to the best contemporary estimate, three quarters of the railway work-force belonged to recognized trade unions during the period between the wars; and 90 per cent were said to have been in receipt of rates of pay provided for by collective agreements. The rules of the game of 'industrial legality' were increasingly well understood and commonly applied, leading McGill University sociologist and social reformer Leonard Marsh to hazard the following generalization in 1935: "Both the companies and the men seem to take a more rational view of the position of the other, and the relations between the two seem more cordial than is usual between employer and employee."<sup>6</sup>

The industrial relations system on the Canadian railways had not arisen spontaneously. National economic interests benefitted from the maintenance of industrial peace on the railways, albeit not at any price, and successive federal governments had paid considerable attention to railway labour relations. More importantly, with the formation of the Canadian National Railways, the federal government itself became the largest employer in the industry. Any successful address of the railway labour question thus involved a measure of *de facto* co-operation among capital, labour, and the state. What is noteworthy, however, is the extent to which a reformist programme was consciously articulated at Canadian National, complementing the apparent success of what one middle manager described in 1925 as "the greatest experiment in public ownership the world has ever seen!"<sup>7</sup> The symbolic apogee came in 1929, when CNR President Henry Thornton stepped to the podium of the American Federation of Labor's international convention in Toronto to proclaim "The New Labor Era."<sup>8</sup> This moment, then, was less the harbinger of a future 'social contract' than it was the product of very particular conjunctures of context, character, and circumstance.

## II

If railway industrial relations were indeed exceptional in Canada, the exception was not small or insignificant. Even at the rosy dawn of North America's motor age, Canadian railways still clung to the commanding heights of the dominion's transportation industry. The railways were making do with somewhat fewer hands, thanks to the introduction of more powerful locomotives, all-steel boxcars, and the beginnings of mechanized track maintenance after World War I. Nonetheless, the great diversity of publicly-mandated railway services, the extreme geography of Canadian railway operations, and most im-

- 
5. Cruikshank and Kealey list nearly 650 strikes and lockouts in the transportation sector, a majority of which were almost certainly strikes on the railways, between 1890 and 1920: Douglas Cruikshank and Gregory S. Kealey, "Canadian Strike Statistics, 1891-1950," *Labour/Le Travail*, 20 (1987): 123-145.
  6. G. Meredith Rountree and Leonard C. Marsh, *The Railway Worker: A Study of the Employment and Unemployment Problems of the Canadian Railways* (Toronto, 1936), 43, *passim*; Pieitchinis, *op. cit.*, 112-130 does include a useful summary of collective bargaining activity during the 1920s.
  7. C. G. Bowker (General Manager, Central Region), "Railway Tradition makers of Today," *Canadian National Railways Magazine* (July, 1925): 7.
  8. Henry Thornton, "The Partner—The New Labor Era," *American Federationist* (November, 1929): 1305-1310.

portantly, their continued reliance on steam technology militated against a serious rationalization of the work-force at that time.<sup>9</sup> The steam railways were still traditional industries of a 'labour-intensive' type. The ratio of operating pay roll to revenues on Canadian National lines between 1923 and 1926 averaged 52.36 per cent; between 1927 and 1930, 52.38 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

The railway work-force is impossible to measure accurately through sources like the census, company payrolls being the most commonly cited evidence of the railways' peculiar place within the labour market. CN's first comprehensive annual report (for 1923) calculated a monthly average of 107,000 railway, express, and telegraph employees. Some of these lived and worked in the United States but there is little doubt that CN was by far the largest employer in Canada, the crown corporation claiming as well to be the provider for another "500,000 persons closely concerned through family alliance or dependency." President Thornton made the characteristic boast that "one-eighteenth of the population of the Dominion of Canada was turning the wheels" of the CNR in 1929. Though railway statistics tended to inflate the size of the actual work-force, a substantially smaller number of heads counted as wage earners on steam railways for the special unemployment census of 1931 still accounted for no less than 3 per cent of all Canadians claiming a gainful occupation.<sup>11</sup>

Superlatives about the size and importance of the railway work-force were useful in promoting a managerial philosophy of team play. *Canadian National Railways Magazine*, an attractive 'new-look' employee and public relations monthly, published numerous articles on railway history and economics to emphasize the common bonds of the "railway tradition-makers of today." An August 1930 Labour Day editorial, "Workers All," summarized its editorial viewpoint on the labour question: "The parade will be good, only it will not be big enough, for every man and woman whether he, or she, works with hand, or brain, whether they trudge to their work, or go in a high-powered automobile, whoever is a producer of thoughts, or things, must be included in any roll of labor." That said, autonomous working-class organizations were not a marginal force within the railways' domain. Nor, in spite of their reputation for aristocratic conservatism, is it easy to make generalizations about either the politics or the sociological constituency of the railway unions.

Canadian Division Number 4 of the Railway Employees Department of the American Federation of Labour, a key affiliate of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada since its creation in 1918, was one of three large contingents in a seemingly more disparate army of railway labour: ten of the nineteen different unions representing workers on CN lines, for example, were members of the RED. Commonly known as the Federated Shop Crafts, the RED embraced approximately one-quarter of organized railway

9. See Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, Chapter II, "The Employment Structure."

10. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Transportation Branch, *Canadian National Railway 1923-1941* (Ottawa, 1942).

11. *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. VI, 24-25. (Number of wage earners reported: 128,199. Number at work on 1 June: 108,401.) "One-eighteenth of the population" from the *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 July, 1929, quoted in D'Arcy Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton* (Toronto, 1935), 50.

workers in Canada, its members being exclusively employed in the railways' mechanical departments. Division 4 *had* been one of the most militant labour bodies in North America during the era of the First World War, machinists, carmen, and other crafts being major actors in the drama of the 'Canadian labour revolt' in 1919.<sup>12</sup> Despite an obvious cleavage between western and eastern affiliates over the 'One Big Union' issue that year, socialist-sponsored resolutions on industrial policy only narrowly failed to carry the day at the division's founding convention in Winnipeg. In the wake of the General Strike, however, militancy in Division 4 and other AF of L unions on the railways reached a low ebb. The sedate divisional convention in 1930, complete with banquet toasts to invited politicians and company representatives, assumed all the more significance in light of its venue, once more, in the Manitoba capital.<sup>13</sup>

Western-based craftworker militancy could be regarded as an inevitably transitory episode in railway labour history. The largest single railway labour organization (only slightly smaller than the combined strength of the Federated Shop Crafts) was the Maritime and Montreal-based Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees, with a heterogeneous membership concentrated among freight handlers, clerks and other 'non-operating' employees outside the mechanical departments on the Canadian National system. Unhappily married to the AF of L-dominated Trades and Labour Congress between 1917 and 1921, the CBRE underwrote a rival federation, the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, between 1927 and 1940. Regretably for these would-be reformers of the house of labour, the industrial-relations settlement of the 1920s had the effect of freezing existing jurisdictions. CBRE-ACCL President A. R. Mosher turned increasingly to political enthusiasms, endorsing J. S. Woodsworth's Co-operative Commonwealth Federation when it was formed in 1932. Mosher's 1929 call for national unions "strong enough to take a share in the control as well as the profits of industry" exemplified a social democratic vision rooted in the aspirations of many railway workers during the years of prosperity. The CBRE's industrial-relations practice, though, differed little from other railway unions. CBRE leaders in the 1920s significantly prided themselves on their technical and administrative expertise, and demonstrable skills in the delicate art of public-sector negotiation.<sup>14</sup>

A little more than one-quarter of organized railway workers in Canada did belong to those epitomes of craft exclusiveness, the four international running trades brotherhoods: engineers, firemen, conductors, and trainmen, who were pointedly unaffiliated with any central labour body. Pioneers of the signed agreements and accompanying ironclads against unauthorized and/or sympathetic strike actions which were the cornerstones of 'industrial legality' on the railroads, the running-trades kept a more-or-less separate peace with the railway companies. First to be recognized by the major Canadian

- 
12. Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984): 31-2, passim; Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: History* (Toronto, 1984), 355-64.
  13. "Division Four Railway Workers Convention," *op. cit.*; Friesen, "R. B. Russell and the Craft Unions," paper read at the symposium, "Class, Community and the Labour Movement in Wales and Canada, 1850-1920," Gregynog, Wales, 1987.
  14. W. E. Greening and M. M. MacLean, *It Was Never Easy: A History of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transportation and General Workers 1908-1958* (Ottawa, 1961), chs. 4-5; see also Thompson and Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, 144-146.

companies during the early 1890s, they occasionally collaborated with the bosses against other railway workers in what the late Hugh Tuck called the “Darwinian” labour-relations environment of that era. After the turn of the century, however, the brotherhoods waged increasingly aggressive campaigns for standardized wage rates — the cause of the Grand Trunk trainmen’s strike of 1910 — the eight-hour day, and other issues from which all railway workers ultimately benefitted.<sup>15</sup>

What distinguished the politics of the brotherhoods was not conservative complacency but a well-honed strategy of lobbying and electoral action designed to advance their collective interests. By the grace of Mackenzie King, the post of dominion minister of labour became something of a sinecure for the Liberal MP from the railroad brotherhoods during the 1920s: James Murdoch, Canadian vice-president of the Order of Railway Trainmen, held the job between 1922 and 1925, Peter Heenan, of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, between 1926 and 1930. The twelve-point programme of the brotherhoods’ joint Canadian Legislative Board in 1928 gives a fair indication of the particulars of liberal craft politics. More than half of the items dealt with specific regulatory matters of vital interest to the running trades such as locomotive inspections or level crossings. But the brotherhoods also protested the anti-sedition clauses of the criminal code and immigration acts and not least, practical restrictions of the right to vote among railway employees, sailors and commercial travellers.<sup>16</sup> The appointment of the BLE’s Calvin Lawrence to the Canadian Board of Railway Commissioners in 1927 illustrates the kind of influence ‘railroader’ MPs brought to bear at the cabinet table. In the United States, similar strategies prevailed; the brotherhoods had been important constituents of Woodrow Wilson’s Democratic coalition in 1916. That their interests had not been neglected during wartime federal administration of the US railroads was a precedent of no small importance to Canadian railway labour, as we shall see. The same experience made the brotherhood’s American leaders sympathetic to the cause of public ownership of railroads, although congressional rejection of the so-called Plumb Plan — joint control by shippers, bondholders and the operating unions — dampened such enthusiasms after 1918. The passage of the US Railroad Labor Act of 1926, which enshrined many of the brotherhoods’ gains in legislation, showed their continuing if somewhat diminished influence in post-war Washington.<sup>17</sup>

Labour relations on the Canadian railways had been structured within a political economy that was both unique and representative. As every student knows, Canadian governments had been the original wellsprings of railway capital through generous loans, land grants, and cash subventions from 1849 onwards. The Canadian Pacific Railway, floated and completed in the 1880s, went on to become one of the strongest railway

15. Hugh Tuck, “Canadian Railways and the Unions in the Running Trades, 1865-1914,” *Industrial Relations/Relations industrielles*, 36 (1981): 106-131; “W. C. Van Horne and the ‘Foreign Emmissaries’: The CPR Trainmen’s and Conductor’s Strike of 1892,” *Labour/Le Travail* 6 (1980): 73-88.

16. “Legislative Proposals of the Railway Brotherhoods in Canada,” *Labour Gazette* (February, 1928): 168-169.

17. David Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor: The workplace, the state, and American labor activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge and New York, 1987), 365-369, 401-403.

companies in North America and indeed the world. The years 1888-1903 saw the emergence of federal railway regulation, touted as a 'cheap' alternative to public ownership. The foundations of this happy compromise would be fatally undermined between 1900 and 1917, however, as national railway mileage more than doubled in a frenzy of heavily subsidized construction. If the subsequent financial collapse of the overextended Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk lines ultimately led to the formation of the Canadian National Railways, a wide-ranging critique of railway capital was also significant factor. E. B. Biggar probably spoke for a majority of Canadians when he asked in 1917: "Does the railway exist to serve the people or the people to serve the railway?"<sup>18</sup>

Between 1917 and 1923 the dominion minister of finance would become the sole shareholder of "the largest and most intricate railway system on the North American Continent," cobbled together out of the CPR's two defeated competitors and a pair of existing state-owned railways: the National Transcontinental, which connected Moncton, Quebec City, and Winnipeg through the Clay Belt between 1902 and 1915, and the Intercolonial, which had enjoyed a special dispensation for its Maritime services since Confederation. Canadian National, officially christened by parliament in 1919, continued to grow in response to perceived national requirements over the next decade, the Hudson Bay branch driving its last spike in 1929. By that date CN operated 24,000 miles to Canadian Pacific's 17,000 miles of track in Canada and the USA, and among numberless other obligations carried ten employees to every seven on the CPR.<sup>19</sup>

During the years of prosperity and depression between 1923 and 1939 CN confounded the critics of public ownership by showing regular and sometimes substantial operating surpluses but of profits one dared and could not speak. All 'credits' were owing to a mountain of bonded debt that was the legacy of Laurier's *belle époque*. It could be said that the public-sector workers were still being 'fleeced' by railway capital, but crucial to note, the railway question had *not* been answered to the mutual satisfaction of other stakeholders. During the 1920s, the financial community favoured the panacea of amalgamation under the aegis of the CPR — which forecast major line abandonments and certain redundancy for tens of thousands of railway employees. First proposed by Lord Shaughnessy in 1918, the 'Big Business' amalgamation plan still hung like Damoscles' Sword over the collective head of Canadian railway workers in 1938. They had, perforce, to defend the territorial and financial integrity of the CNR.<sup>20</sup> On a more positive note, supporters of public ownership on both sides of the international border

- 
18. E. B. Biggar, *The Canadian Railway Problem* (Toronto, 1917), 1-6, *passim*; for an excellent survey of railway regulation and related matters see Kenneth Cruickshank, *Close Ties: Railways, Government and the Board of Railway Commissioners, 1851-1933* (Montreal, 1991)
  19. "largest railway" from Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton*, 32; see also Leslie T. Fournier, *Railway Nationalization in Canada: The Problem of the Canadian National Railways* (Toronto, 1935).
  20. John Eagle, "Monopoly or Competition?: The Nationalization of the Grand Trunk Railway," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXVII: 1 (1981): 3-30; Fabius (pseud.) *52 Questions on the Nationalization of the Canadian Railways* (Toronto, 1918); Canada, National Archives (NA), Communist Party of Canada Papers, vol. 52, f. 2 "The Five Year Plan' Big Business Style," and other documents on railway amalgamation, ca. 1938.



continued to nurse the hope that "Canada's own railroad," as the *Locomotive Engineers' Journal* described the CN lines in 1927, might prove to be a working model of progressivist alternatives.<sup>21</sup>

The CNR's political masters naturally exploited pro-public ownership sentiment among the railway workers for their own purposes. Prime Minister Robert Borden personally appealed to Canadian delegates of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in December 1919. Upon the outcome of the CNR plan, he argued, "depends the success of state ownership, not only in Canada, but upon the whole North American continent." Gaining office in 1922 Prime Minister King promptly appointed unionist Tom Moore, president of the TLC, to the CNR's board of directors to underline the point. Organized labour was expected to do its duty by the National Railways; in return, the national government would, in Borden's words, "give earnest attention to some means by which the employees shall have just representation in the executive administration of this great system." If there is no evidence that railway workers were in any sense satisfied with such meagre emoluments the fact that CN's railway unions continued to lobby for direct representation on the board of directors testifies to their continuing faith in the possibilities for co-management on the government railways.<sup>22</sup>

In practice, the mixed economy fostered a general climate of what CNR President Thornton called "industrial compromise and concession." This, in turn, benefitted both private and public companies. With some exceptions, the main elements of a highly centralized collective-bargaining regime joined horizontal labour groups (e.g., the CN and CP system federations of Division 4) in negotiation with representatives of the Railway Association of Canada, successor to the Railway War Board of 1917. All of this machinery reflected wartime assumptions, including the terms of the Union Government's extraordinary (and little-known) PC 1743, which had ringingly embraced the principle of collective bargaining in 1918.<sup>23</sup> It is quite conceivable that the structure could have collapsed under various pressures in the 1920s, but the generally moderate and forbearing policy of the railway unions ensured its continuity.

The critical episodes may be briefly summarized. In 1917-18, the Government of Canada had taken the fateful step of 'dictating terms' to the companies' Railway War Board on the basis of policies set by Woodrow Wilson's wartime railroad administrator, William McAdoo — villain of the piece in many a boardroom railway history. McAdoo pegged wage rates to the cost of living, outlawed much of the piece-work system, accepted the eight-hours principle of pay, and introduced formal sanctions against dis-

- 
21. NA, Canadian National Railway Papers, vol. 3112, f "Pamphlets," copy, "Canadian National Earnings Prove Public Ownership Success." *Locomotive Engineers Journal* (April 1927): 271.
  22. *Labour Gazette* (January 1920): 49-50, (October, 1922): 1040; NA, CPC Papers, vol 52, f. 8, CNR System Federation Convention, 1928, "Officer's Reports;" also Harold Logan, *The History of Trade Union Organization in Canada* (Chicago, 1928), 247-248.
  23. For PC 1743 see Jeremy Webber, "The Malaise of Compulsory Conciliation: Strike Prevention in Canada during World War II," in Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto, 1986): 141; Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1920, "Department of Labour: Report of the Deputy Minister," 10-11.

crimination on the basis of membership in unions. (The net effect was to accelerate the unionization of the work-force: even the most established of the international brotherhoods — engineers and firemen — grew by 30-40 per cent between 1913 and 1920.) Soon there were demands that railway workers climb down from the economic perch they occupied during the intense deflationary pressure of the post-war period. In mid-1921 the Railway Association of Canada insisted on implementation of the US Railroad Labor Board's orders of 5-18 per cent pay cuts for all classes of railway workers. These reductions went unresisted by either the national or international railway unions, who collectively "decided that it would be wiser not to fight."<sup>24</sup>

Demands for a second round of concession followed in mid-1922. More divisive than the first, these excepted the running trades as well as the telegraphers, who could have crippled railway operations with a strike. AF of L shopcrafts in the US did strike over a variety of issues in 1922 — with disastrous consequences to themselves — at which point the hitherto parallel histories of North American railway labour diverged. In Canada, the affected unions were successful in modifying the employers' demands by negotiations and the principle of continental linkage would be formally repudiated in 1924. Wage determination on the railways was stupefyingly complex but an industry-wide index of national wage rates declined from 100 in 1920 to 88 in 1921 and 83 in 1922. Not until 1926 and 1927 were the major wage dossiers re-opened, the same index rising to 89 in 1928 and 92 in 1929. But collective bargaining was not a one-way street for either party. Although Stephen Peitchinis rightly notes that abstract economic forces were not "the chief determinants of wage rates" on the railways, what is nonetheless striking was their collective ability to respond to changing market conditions without sacrificing the advantages of industrial agreements in the 1920s.<sup>25</sup>

The peaceful resolution of the post-war wage disputes was read in some quarters as a vindication of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, federal legislation which had attempted to govern labour relations in so-called public utilities since 1907. In the words of its chief author, expressed in a letter to Edward Beatty, president of the CPR, the situation on the railroads had been "fraught with possibilities of the gravest character." That the dominion had been spared any disruption was, in the opinion of Mackenzie King, "owing to the legislation enacted by Parliament for the prevention and settlement of industrial disputes and to the loyal and public spirited manner in which both employing companies and their employees have on the whole respected its provisions."<sup>26</sup> The IDIA Act had not hitherto guaranteed labour peace, but major railway

24. Greening and MacLean *It Was Never Easy*, *op.cit.*, 81-82; *Labour Gazette* (June, 1921): 790; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, vol 7 (New York, 1987), 338-9.

25. *Labour Gazette* (July 1922): 675-772, *passim*; (February, 1927): 216; (August 1927): 881, and other numbers; Peitchinis, *Labour-Management Relations*, p 123. For the index of wage rates see Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Workers*, 196.

26. W. L. Mackenzie King to E. W. Beatty, Esq., 12 August, 1922, and other correspondence published in the *Labour Gazette*, (August 1922): 851-7; for overviews of the history of the IDIA see Paul Craven, 'An Impartial Umpire': *Industrial Relations and the Canadian State 1900-1911* (Toronto, 1980), 150-152, *passim*, and especially Greg Patmore, "Labour Relations in the NSW Railways before 1914: Some Canadian Comparisons," in Gregory S.

unions were clearly determined to exhaust the possibilities of the existing legislation during the post-war crisis, both the CBRE and Division 4 approaching the conciliation process with patience and sophistication.

Other arrangements arising out of the wartime matrix offer good if not better examples of the institutional dynamics of railway industrial relations in the 1920s. Established on the 'request' of the Union Government in 1918, a body known as Canadian Railway Board of Adjustment No 1 comprised equal representation from the Railway Association and a motley of allied unions: telegraphers, the running trades, and maintenance-of-way men, the last-named a newly-recognized (and imperfectly organized) AF of L affiliate including large numbers of less-skilled workers.<sup>27</sup> The board was responsible for the interpretation and enforcement of existing collective agreements, 'adjustment' being a euphemism for binding arbitration. Locomotive firemen, among others, had opposed "the perpetuation of Railway Board of Adjustment No 1 [in peacetime], on the ground that it would introduce the principle of compulsory arbitration against which the Organization had frequently declared itself."<sup>28</sup> Regardless, the brotherhoods continued to participate, and other unions followed their example. In 1925, Board of Adjustment No 2 was similarly constituted by representatives of the Canadian National Railways and the various bargaining units of the CBRE.

While a systematic analysis of the boards would require a separate study, their decisions appear to have been relatively even-handed. Without recourse to external arbitration they successfully disposed of scores of tricky issues involving seniority rights, disciplinary measures, and other such matters every year. Should a pair of CNR switchmen, tried but acquitted under the common law for pilfering a boxcar, be given lost wages during their period of suspension? The answer was yes. Should a CNR brakeman, begging off work with a sprained ankle but subsequently observed playing pool and even participating in a dance, be dismissed for malingering? The answer was no. Industrial arbitration almost certainly provided cheaper and speedier justice for the working class than the proceedings of the capitalistic courts.<sup>29</sup>

The bottom line of labour's participation in the boards of adjustment (like the boards of conciliation) was management's acceptance of the unions' right to represent the worker, an issue that binding arbitration helped resolve in a protracted dispute between the AF of L's Brotherhood of Railway Clerks and the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. The CPR (which had decisively defeated the rival CBRE in a 1912 strike) historically denied the right of collective bargaining to clerical employees on the anachronistic argument that they belonged to management. Referred to the Solomons of Board No 1 in 1919-1920 their unmistakably modern judgement read: "The right of employees to organize is unquestioned. On proper showing by the Organization of its

---

Kealey and G. Patmore, eds., *Canadian and Australian Labour History: Towards a Comparative Perspective* (St. John's, 1990): 101-118.

27. Harold Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada* (Toronto, 1948), 85-86, 137.

28. *Labour Gazette* (January 1920): 49-50; (May, 1921): 668-671.

29. *Ibid.* (November 1920): 1446-1469; (November 1922): 1171-1180.

right to represent the classes of Employees spoken for, arrangements should at once be completed between the Company and the Committee representing the Employees to negotiate a schedule."<sup>30</sup> *Quid pro quo*, trade unionists did not shirk their duties on the boards. David B. Hanna, Thornton's predecessor at the head of the National Railways (1917-1922), wrote of the work of Board No 1: "The labour representatives were as judiciously minded as their [management] colleagues. Nothing finer in desire for and capacity to get at the truth could have been displayed than the men's representatives invariably showed."<sup>31</sup> The achievements of Board No 2 were described by observers as "noteworthy," although, on occasion, CBRE officers would have to appeal directly to President Thornton to enforce its decisions on CN's line-managers.<sup>32</sup>

Under Thornton's presidency (1922-1932), the crown corporation ventured independently into the less well charted terrain of industrial democracy. One contemporary judgement, no doubt immoderate in its enthusiasm, was offered by journalist D'Arcy Marsh: "the men of the Canadian National, under Sir Henry's guidance, began to control their own destinies. Over the years of his association with the C.N.R., Sir Henry built up the co-operative method of union management, a system in which the men of the railway vote on policies affecting themselves, make suggestions for their own welfare and that of the road and generally play a conscious part in the management of the company which employs them."<sup>33</sup> The origins and impact of these policies will be examined in more detail further on. Suffice it to say that CN successfully balanced the need to divide-and-conquer a heterogeneous work-force with the different imperatives of building an *esprit de corps* as well as public support for what Thornton liked to call "the people's railway." President Beatty, contemptuous of all of Thornton's "mob appeals," stoically declined to participate in any such experiments. To suggestions that Thornton's system be extended to the private transcontinental, he would answer that the men of Canadian Pacific were already a highly co-operative body!<sup>34</sup> Yet to some extent at least that was evidently true. Steam railways, by their nature, were special kinds of social organisms. Indeed, the keystone to the interpretive arch of the 'new labour era' is possibly to found in the conclusion of an American sociologist, F. W. Cottrell. "The kind of class consciousness that Marxians expect to develop with industrial maturity," he averred in 1940, "shows little evidence of coming on the railroads."<sup>35</sup>

30. *Ibid.* (November 1920): 1465.

31. D. B. Hanna, *Trains of Recollection* (Toronto, 1924), 313.

32. Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, 51; Greening and MacLean, *It Was Never Easy*, 116-122.

33. Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton*, 80-1.

34. "the people's railway" from, among other contemporary sources, NA, CNR Papers, vol. 3103, f. "Toronto Opening of Station CFCA, 16 May 1924," text of Thornton radio address; "mob appeals" from David Cruise and Alison Griffiths, *Lords of the Line: The Men Who Built the CPR* (Markham, Ont., 1988), 327; for the CPR and co-operation, Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, 259.

35. William Frederick Cottrell, *The Railroader* (Stanford, Calif., 1940), 115; see also Robert D. Turner (ed.) *Railroaders: Recollections of the Steam Era in British Columbia* (Victoria, 1981.)

## III

Unlike miners, loggers, dockers or similar groups of workers, railway workers did not share anything like a common occupational identity or experience. The 1935 McGill University *Study of Employment and Unemployment Problems of the Canadian Railways* emphasized: "the railway group comprises in a definite sense a cross section of the workers in many industries. . . . Construction, manufacturing, maintenance, personal service, and clerical work are all found in this industry. In addition to the men in the running trades and the sectionmen who are peculiar to the railways, there are machinists, blacksmiths, electricians, carpenters, upholsterers, masons, plasterers, and painters. These are only a few of a long list. What is more, in this group are found all degrees of skill. [The skilled], semi-skilled, unskilled and casual are all represented."<sup>36</sup> The railways were, on the other hand, more than a mere microcosm of industries. A series of discrete identities flourished within the complex of work cultures on the railways, somewhat problematically described as "the culture of the 'railroader'."<sup>37</sup>

[R]ailroaders inhabited a closed world of their own making. They shared traditions, practices, peculiarities and even a language that separated them from others. . . . Decades of experience had forged the pattern of railroaders' lives and honed their relationships into a pecking order that also served as an apprenticeship system . . . protected by union agreements which, in the quip of one writer exceeded the French Civil Code in size. Firemen served as apprentice engineers and brakemen as apprentice conductors, making them together the Big Four of railway labor. Below them in rank were the dispatchers, who manipulated trains and equipment like chess pieces on a vast, complex board. The shopmen occupied the next rungs and below them the maintenance-of-way crewmen.<sup>38</sup>

This pecking order faithfully measured workers' unequal bargaining power, inevitably reflected in differentials in pay scales and earnings. If railway workers in the aggregate were relatively well-paid — average earnings of \$1,500 in 1930 exceeded the Department of Labour's estimate of \$1,200 for a 'minimum' family wage in 1929 — a locomotive engineer had three or four times the earning power of a track labourer, assuming the latter to be regularly employed. The long-term tendency of collective bargaining was to reduce disparities, but railroaders were not levellers by inclination and their common bonds were not always self-evident. Mark Rosenfeld's study of railway workers in Allandale, Ontario illustrates the complexity of the picture. Even a sectional strike could unexpectedly galvanize a railroad community against the employer, but a whole generation of local railroaders between 1920 and 1950 would have no experience of strikes.<sup>39</sup> Railway managers always resisted egalitarian arguments,

36. Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, 13, *passim*.

37. See Justice Rene P. Voisey, *Report of the commission of Inquiry, Hinton Train Collision* (Ottawa, 1986), 5.

38. Maury Klein, "Replacement Technology: The diesel as a Case Study." *Railroad History* 162 (Spring 1990): 115.

39. Mark Rosenfeld, "A Respectable Neighbourhood: Community and Culture in the Railway Ward of Barrie, Ontario, 1900-1950," unpublished paper read at the conference of the CN History Group, Montreal, 1990; "'It was a hard life': Class and Gender in the Work and Family Rhythms of a Railway Town, 1920-1950," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1988): 237-279.

CNR representatives at the board of conciliation in dispute with CBRE clerks and freight-handlers in 1922 typically insisting that engineers or telegraphers had duties which "cannot be compared to the employees whose earnings are now in question. They have responsibilities of the highest nature and their calling is one that of necessity requires men of special character and ability."<sup>40</sup>

Ethno-cultural factors were less likely to divide the railway work-force, but probably encouraged its sectional tendencies. Of 84,000 railway workers whose backgrounds can be identified in the census of occupations for 1931, 60 per cent were native-born Canadians and one-fifth were immigrants from the British Isles or its possessions. Five per cent had been born in the United States. The proportion of workers of French origin — at least 5 per cent of whom were immigrants from metropolitan France — was just over 17 per cent, native francophones being substantially under-represented.<sup>41</sup> Ninety per cent of 7,920 locomotive engineers in 1931 were native or British-born Canadians, while 44 per cent of 23,587 track labourers or section hands (including foremen) were continental Europeans. This class also accounted for 175 of a grand total of 238 Asian immigrants counted as railway workers in the census. Newer immigrant groups like Montreal's Italians carved out ethnic niches in the larger railway shops, which had in times of prosperity plenty of room for sojourners and labourers without recognized skills.<sup>42</sup> Cottrell argued that the presence of "marginal nationalities" reinforced the railroaders' limited identities: "French Canadians in New England, Poles in New Jersey, and Negroes in the South occupy the positions taken by Japanese and Mexicans in the West. But in all cases they 'justify' the superior attitude taken by the operating brotherhoods and by the more skilled among the mechanical division."<sup>43</sup>

That black workers occupied a special niche on the Canadian railways is indirectly shown by census data for a single occupation. Among 1,654 railway porters in 1931 45 per cent were born in the United States or 'British possessions.' A majority of railway porters were almost certainly African Canadians, including foreign and native-born. Racist labour practices being considerably worse elsewhere, CN and CP were guaranteed a steady supply of highly capable black men for the porter's work.<sup>44</sup> However, the Order of Sleeping Car Porters, led by civil-rights crusader A. Philip Randolph in the United States during the 1920s, was not a partner in the 'new labour era' north of the border. Canadian Pacific took an early stand against the OSP, apparently firing its supporters in Winnipeg during the General Strike, and the CPR Sleeping Car Conductors' Mutual Benefit Society, a classic example of company unionism, continued to function until the broader legislative changes of the 1940s.<sup>45</sup>

40. *Labour Gazette* (December 1922): 1265.

41. *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, 316-7, 398-99, 438-9.

42. *Ibid.*; Bruno Ramirez, "Brief Encounters: Italian Immigrant Workers and the CPR," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (1986): 9-27.

43. Cottrell, *The Railroader*, 10-11.

44. Agnes Calliste, "Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19: 1 (1987): 1-20.

45. Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, 30, 41.

Canadian National was a comparatively liberal employer. Its minimum wage for porters in 1920 was \$75 a month, compared to \$62 for Canadian Pacific — one of the few instances where a significant wage differential between the two companies can be identified. CN porters logged an average of 6,560 miles per month in the same year, compared to an astonishing 11,000 miles on the Pullman system in the United States. This was not due to the company's own largesse, but the fact that Canadian National was the first major railroad on the continent to bargain collectively with porters, through the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees. Despite disagreements and tensions with its 'coloured' membership, the national union defended their interests within the context of the segmented workplace. For example, the union's agreement in an inter-racial dispute over manning on former Grand Trunk lines in 1926-7 specified: "dining cars on trains 7 & 8 (Chicago and Port Huron) shall be manned by coloured crews. . . . Coloured dining car employees who are assigned duties as buffet or parlor car porters will exercise their seniority. . . ." <sup>46</sup>

Fears that unionization or slightly improved conditions across the colour line would somehow destroy black workers' 'morale' were proven to be utterly groundless. Porters had "learned to be diplomats" under the tipping system and they rarely failed to serve the public with courtesy and discretion. <sup>47</sup> A private testimonial from President Thornton, casually shown his passengers following a friendly conversation, increased at least one porter's earning power in the 1920s and 30s. <sup>48</sup> The racial division of labour had long since become part of a class-based, experiential landscape of railway travel, "beginning with the good-bye waving through the open window, the solicitude of amiable receivers of tips, the ceremonial of mealtimes, the constant feeling of receiving favours that take nothing from anyone else." <sup>49</sup>

The railway community's ideas about the sexual division of labour were at once conventional and extreme. The railway-transportation category of the census enumerated only sixteen women in 1931, all employed as ticket or (less likely) station-agents. The unemployment-census of 1931 reveals a truer picture of the woman's sphere: about 3 per cent in the railway service, compared with a national labour-force figure of 17 per cent. The same source has no information regarding the work that 4,000 or so Canadian railwaywomen were doing in the twenties, but a large majority were probably stenotypists, the archetypical "working girl" of that era. While the popular feminism of the 1920s dovetailed nicely with office needs, traditional views towards the employment of women on the railways did not reflect a strictly rational calculation. Undoubtedly commercial opportunities were lost by failing systematically to exploit female labour in clerical and sales-related work. <sup>50</sup> Among railway trades there was barely one excep-

46. See *Labour Gazette* (January, 1927): 18; Calliste, "Blacks on Canadian Railways," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 20: 2 (1988): 36-52.

47. *Ibid.*, 38.

48. See Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton*, 67.

49. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (English language edition, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott: London, 1974), 119.

50. See Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1983), 214-5.

tion to the rule, noteworthy for being rooted in developments that were not peculiar to the railways.

With their advanced mechanics but primitive communications, the steam railways still relied on a combination of scheduling, clockwork, and telegraphy to avoid confusion or calamity. There was no good reason why the “fence of human beings,” as railway telegraphers were called, should have been only manned. Women appeared in commercial telegraph offices in some numbers during the 1870s; one of the main demands of the famous 1883 commercial telegraphers’ strike, led by the Knights of Labor, had been equal pay for men and women;<sup>51</sup> and the Order of Railroad Telegraphers (1888) would be the only craft union in the railway industry to admit women on an equal footing, “the broad conditions of membership being good moral character and three years experience at some time as a telegrapher.”<sup>52</sup> However, less formal means of discrimination meant that few female railroad operators were in fact employed. The ORT claimed a Canadian membership of 4,000 in 1934; the 1931 census found 749 female telegraphers (all classes.) The most numerous group of female telegraphers were nonetheless part of the CN ‘family,’ as employees of Canadian National Telegraphs — formerly the Canadian subsidiary of the Western Union. Female competence in telegraphy remained “a source of some perplexity and tension” for co-workers and employers, notes Shirley Tillotson, and was commonly explained as evidence of exceptional ability to do “a man’s work.”<sup>53</sup>

Gender, as such, wore at least a Janus-face in the “culture of the ‘railroader’.” The notion of men’s work carried a baggage of entitlement — to job security and the family wage. Commonplace equations among manhood, dignity, and self-respect sustained the labour movement, here, as elsewhere. At the same time, ‘respectable’ notions of masculinity centred around the breadwinner role made a railwayman’s self-worth “disproportionately tied to a marketplace economy,” notes Eugene Debs’ biographer.<sup>54</sup> Of 84,000 railway employees whose conjugal condition can be identified from the Canadian census of 1931, 72 per cent were heads of conventional nuclear families; among locomotive engineers, the proportion rises to 84 per cent. Paradoxically, the practical difficulties of reconciling family life with the routines of railroad work were notorious.<sup>55</sup> A banner from the trainmen’s order (which hangs today in the Manitoba Museum of Man and Civilization) makes an interesting allegory in a series of striking images. The railwayman, breadwinner for a contented wife and child, leaves his cheery home for a stretch on the road; alas, his freight plunges into the river and the trainman drowns. The

---

51. Gilson Willets, *Workers of the Nation: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 1903) vol. II, 523; Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto, 1986), 138-140.

52. Willets, *Workers of the Nation*, vol. II, 556.

53. Shirley Tillotson, “We may all soon be ‘first-class men’: Gender and Skill in Canada’s Early Twentieth Century Urban Telegraph Industry,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (1991): 124, *passim*.

54. Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana and Chicago, 1982), 24-5.

55. *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 5, 738-740; See also Rosenfeld, “‘It was a hard life’”; Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labour Conflict in Nineteenth Century America* (Urbana and Chicago, 1987).



message of the banner, however, is *not* working-class martyrdom or the need for revolution, but the wisdom of regular support for the brotherhoods' impressive insurance funds — what the IWW called the coffin societies.<sup>56</sup>

A supposedly 'natural' association between men's work and mechanical danger certainly suited the railways' needs. Horrors like the hand-brake and the coupling-pin produced an early "slaughter" of railwaymen, and Canadian statistics show a steady increase of annual fatalities up to the First World War. Thanks to better technology, stricter laws, and the companies' 'safety-first' campaigns, the situation had changed for the better in the 1920s and this may have been a factor in improved labour relations.<sup>57</sup> On average, nevertheless, over one hundred Canadian railway workers were killed and over 1,800 injured seriously enough to be counted as casualties every year between 1923 and 1929.

The 'hard life' of the railroader was accepted with the necessary dose of fatalism, in a basic trade-off for work and wages. Feelings of comradeship among the most-exposed work groups were fostered, and valorous deeds out on the line became the rod-and-staff of railroader lore. A mournfully militant poem published in 1922 reminds us that conditions in the roundhouse were the stuff of everyday heroism:

Monsters of the rail stand here sublime,  
 But underneath a mass of slime,  
 Filling our lungs with gas and smoke,  
 While in the grease and dirt we poke  
 Iron and Steel we bend and cut today  
 Flesh and bone tomorrow we will pay  
 Broken and beaten, battered and worn,  
 Fast fades our youth of yesterday's morn;  
 Years have come, years have gone,  
 In a cage's wheel we move along,  
 Faster and faster, mile on mile,  
 Weary and tired we rest awhile,  
 Then around and around, growing dizzy, ever hopin,'  
 With less sense than the mice, for the door is open.<sup>58</sup>

For the historian, the bleakness of the poem's picture of working class injury and acquiescence lifts a little. While the individual railroader may have been but a cog in

---

56. I am indebted to Sharon Reilly, Curator of History and Technology, Manitoba Museum, for a copy of the Trainmen's banner and her insights into its interpretation.

57. 'slaughter' from "The Coupling Pin Must Go," *Vancouver Weekly World*, 31 October, 1889; for a discussion of the 'safety-first' campaign, which incorporated "elements of worker-management cooperation that were to reappear in the Shopcraft Plan of the next decade" on the Grand Trunk/CN Lines; see Mark Rosenfeld, "'She Was a Hard Life': Work, Family, Community, and Politics in the Railway Ward of Barrie, Ontario, 1900-1960" (PhD thesis, York University (1990), 52-53.

58. William O'Donnell, "The Roundhouse Worker," originally published in the *OBU Bulletin*, August 1922, re-published in Michael Gee (ed.), *An Anthology of Steam Railroad Poetry*, Volume 2, Canadian Edition (Prince George, B.C., 1987), 24.

the industrial machine, the machinery itself required constant switching and oiling, achieved, in part, through individual job mobility. The engine of ambition inevitably drove individual railroaders into new and hopefully better endeavours, albeit in highly and deliberately structured ways. Boardroom railway histories are full of Horatio Alger stories and it would be mistaken to dismiss them as simply corporate fairy tales. "All the great rises in railway history have not begun on headquarters staff," D. B. Hanna insisted in his autobiography: "the most important vice president of the Canadian National, S. J. Hungerford, came from the lathe." D'Arcy Marsh took a more singular view of the ex-machinist, who stood "in contrast to many by virtue of his vigorous background."<sup>59</sup>

Railway companies were or became skilled at raiding the ranks of organized labour for managerial talent, a strategy which probably tended to honeycomb both sides with potential collaborators. Fred Harrison, much-respected founding secretary-treasurer of the CNR system federation, Division 4, accepted a modest but apparently promising position as assistant foreman in the blacksmith shop at Point St. Charles in the mid-twenties. "[W]e are all glad to know that the position you decided to accept means advancement to you, and our only wish will be that success will crown your efforts and that you may continue to climb the ladder of the Official Staff," said his fellow unionists, noting one "consoling feature; that we feel sure that you will remain sympathetic to our great cause, and lend assistance wherever it is possible for you to do."<sup>60</sup>

More prosaic advancements on the unions' own seniority-driven schedules consumed the greater part of an average working life. The fireman's progress to locomotive engineer, praised by one CN executive as "the longest on-the-job training scheme in the world," took five, ten, or even twenty years.<sup>61</sup> Particular characteristics of railway work and work culture thus account for the almost pathological premium that railways placed upon the longevity of 'service.' Traditional rituals like the presentation of the gold watch upon retirement were very much a part of the 'new labour era.' Engineer Fred Johnston and Conductor Joseph Lambert were publicly honoured in Quebec's Eastern Townships in 1925. "On the platform of the Richmond Town Hall," the *CNR Magazine* reported, "sat nine other former employees of the Grand Trunk and Canadian National Railways, none of them with less than forty years service with the road. If their individual records are added together it will total 420 years and if those of Johnston and Lambert are added to the total, the grand total will be almost 525 years."<sup>62</sup>

---

59. Hanna, *Trains of Recollection*, 296; Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton*, 26-7. S. J. Hungerford did climb to the very top of the greasy pole, serving as president of the National Railways during a difficult decade, 1932-1941.

60. NA, CPC Papers, vol. 52, f8, CNR System Federation convention, 16 April 1928, "Officers' Reports."

61. John Gratwick, ex-CNR, quoted in Jim Lotz, "Loyalty, Luck Ships, and Free Spirits," *Transpo II*, vol. II, 1-4, reference courtesy of Donald MacKay. These estimates are Dr. Rosenfeld's; the rate of promotion naturally varied with the overall state of the railway labour market.

62. "Two Veteran Railroaders are Honoured," *CNR Magazine* (April, 1925), 35.

Railways developed pioneering incentive schemes designed to sustain the loyalty and productivity of their employees, the non-portable pension being an outstanding example of their mixed legacy. The Grand Trunk Railway of Canada had been a North American leader in this regard, establishing its Provident Insurance Fund (which covered salaried officers, clerks, passenger and freight agents, telegraph operators, roadmasters and shop foremen) in 1873; by 1907 the GTR aimed to make "provision for [all] faithful servants who have spent their lives with the company."<sup>63</sup> The CPR created a pension fund in 1902, the Intercolonial Railway following in 1904. Paul Craven reminds us that little of the 'welfare capitalism' associated with railways was in any sense "new"; rather, it represented "rediscoveries, reinvigorations or generalizations of lapsed usages" rooted in strictly paternalist labour relations. James Stafford states bluntly that railway pension schemes "were designed to hold the employee hostage until retirement."<sup>64</sup> On two noteworthy occasions, the Grand Trunk trainmen's strike of 1910, and the western general strikes in 1919, employers did not hesitate to threaten revocation of pension and seniority rights as a weapon against militant workers. Claims about the coercive power of the pension trustees, however, must be nuanced in the case of the federal railways. Continuing employees who had been victimized in 1910 or in 1919 had their rights reinstated as a result of direct political pressure from the labour movement and the Liberal government in 1923. In 1927 the CNR board belatedly agreed to extend the relatively generous GTR pension plan system-wide.<sup>65</sup>

Less contentious examples of welfare-capitalism were the activities of the Canadian National Railways Recreational Association. In railway communities across the dominion the company provided equipment, labour and facilities for skating rinks, ball fields, and bowling greens. Men and women's teams competed for divisional and presidential "challenge cups," while seniors simply enjoyed themselves. Company officials stressed the importance of "good clean sport, in creating a better spirit and in giving better service." The CNRA was also rooted in the legacy of past practice, in this case, the 'railway' branch of the Young Men's Christian Association. Supported by the GTR before the war, the institution of the Railway 'Y' had been formally secularized and significantly updated, with renewed emphasis on family and community.<sup>66</sup>

Radicalism persisted even if it did not flourish within the railway community of the 1920s. The ghost of the One Big Union, for example, haunted the shopcraft federation. David Bercuson's unflattering description of the OBU as "a gloss of syndicalism over a structure of craft exclusiveness" applies with some force to its supporters

---

63. Archibald William Currie, *The Grand Trunk Railway of Canada* (Toronto, 1957), 345, 424, *passim*.

64. Craven, review of Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers, Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (1989): 35; James Stafford, "The Class Struggle and the Rise of Public Pensions, 1900-1950," *ibid.*, 20 (1987): 156-7. See also Paul Craven and Tom Traves, "Dimensions of Paternalism: Discipline and Culture in Canadian Railway Operations in the 1850s," in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job* (Montreal, 1986), 47-74.

65. McCallum, "Corporate Welfarism," 53; NA, CPC Papers, vol. 52, f 3, Division Four Convention, 1928. "President's Report."

66. Rosenfeld, "A Respectable Neighbourhood," *op.cit.*

in Division 4.<sup>67</sup> The Federated Shopcrafts represented an earlier compromise between principles of craft and industry-wide organization within the AF of L, but to militants like R. B. Russell of the OBU, it was a shotgun or morganitic marriage.<sup>68</sup> If the OBU as such was led to the scaffold in 1919, it remained a burr under several saddles in 1929. Russell's *OBU Bulletin* continued to publish a weekly sheet in Winnipeg and from this platform the ex-railroader regularly inveighed against the labour establishment's strategy of begging for political favours amidst "the sumptuous splendour and parasitical environment at Ottawa."<sup>69</sup>

Left-wing opposition may or may not have been weakened by the appearance of a rival claimant to the mantle of leadership after 1920: the Communist Party of Canada and its labour front, the Trade Union Educational League. Adopting the tactic of boring from within, the TUEL established regional railway workers' organizing committees in eastern and western Canada, led by a small though capable cadre of 'red' railroaders such as Montrealer Hugh Corrigan and Edmontonian Jan Lakeman. The role that railway workers had played in revolutionary Russia was already legendary.<sup>70</sup> If Canadian conditions were rather different, a minority of railway unionists were at least prepared to listen to the TUEL's programme of trade-union amalgamation and a 'fighting' policy for labour. "[W]ith railroaders in particular we were able to fight on a common ground of struggle for real needs," the Party's industrial director Tim Buck reported in 1923; "our success may be measured by the fact that we have active members or groups of members in no less than seventy local or central bodies of railway workers, including three of the so called big Four."<sup>71</sup>

Communists typically agitated against illusions sown by railway nationalization, which had merely demonstrated the "strength and Nationalism" of Canadian capital.<sup>72</sup> Such perspectives promised to steel the Party for leadership in the class struggle, but the latter regrettably failed to materialize. "We find the railroad Shopmen Clerks maintenance of way workers and others, well organized, but absolutely anxious to avoid a struggle at this time," Buck explained in 1924.<sup>73</sup> If they still had jobs, militant railroaders were structured into inactivity or diverted into mundane trade-union work by the economic and political dynamics of the 'new labour era.' "Railroaders seem to be taking a rest," a Scots comrade in Winnipeg wryly remarked in 1929: "The amalgamation campaign in the Trades Councils, upon which so much depended, has produced the most

---

67. David J. Bercuson, "Western Labour Radicalism and the One Big Union: Myths and Realities," in S. M. Trofimenkoff, ed., *The Twenties in Western Canada* (Ottawa, 1972), 38.

68. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*; Kealey, "1919."

69. Quoted in Jordan, *Survival*, 207.

70. For essential background on the Soviet legend, see Henry Reichman, *Railwaymen and Revolution: Russia 1905* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1987), reference courtesy of Professor John Hutchinson.

71. NA, CPC Papers, vol. II, f 7, Workers' Party Convention Minutes, 1923, Report of the Industrial Organizer, Sheet #2.

72. *Ibid.*, vol. 52, f 7, "Railway Shopmen Face Big Issues" [1924?] Sheet #3.

73. *Ibid.*, vol. II, f 13, Workers' Party Industrial Report Third Annual Convention, 1923, Sheet #2.

meagre results imaginable."<sup>74</sup> Significantly, the left-wing in the 1920s had two *bete noires*: first, the stubborn refusal of craft unionism to wither away before the impersonal forces of industrial change, and second, the "laudatory effusion of 'union co-operation in industry' expounded by Sir H[enry] Thornton."<sup>75</sup>

#### IV

As a master of the inter-related arts of public and employee relations Henry Worth Thornton K.B.E. (1871-1933) certainly had few peers. For example, President Thornton created the CNR's own radio network, a hugely successful effort to establish "a friendly and human contact between the administration of the Canadian National Railways and a great, invisible audience of shareholders and employees" which aired from Moncton to Vancouver between 1923 and 1931. Employees could buy receiving sets on the company instalment plan, at \$4.00 a month, the better to hear Sir Henry's sermons, and taste the fruits of classless consumption.<sup>76</sup> In various media as well as legendary personal inspections the semi-charismatic Thornton spread a consistent message designed to build new loyalties and blunt old antagonisms: "Every man here, I think, is proud to own that he is connected with the Canadian National Railways . . . one of the few great state owned railways that is improving day by day. We are the servants of the people. We are the custodians of the property which they have committed to our charge."<sup>77</sup>

If, in the salons of Big Business, there came to be loud mutterings against Thornton's 'radicalism' they scarcely damned him among the railway workers.<sup>78</sup> Thornton, of course, had the enormous advantage of presiding over rising fortunes in the boardroom and in the workshop. Between 1925 and 1928, CN's freight revenues rose from \$180 to \$228 million; even passenger earnings showed a marginal increase, from \$58 to \$60 million. While wage rates advanced, albeit slightly, CN's average monthly payroll rose steadily from a decade low of 98,000 in 1925 to a decade high of 109,000 in 1929.<sup>79</sup> Thus could a number of potentially conflicting agendas be successfully coupled together, at least for a time. Leslie Roberts' 1929 collection of business and political biographies, *These Be Your Gods*, ranked Thornton as the first citizen of the Dominion in so many words: "Never has one of our *ipse dixit* captains of industry effected a commercial

74. *Ibid.*, vol. 51, f 73, T. McGregor memo to Communist Party, 28 February, 1930; see also, vol. II, f 23, Proceedings, Workers Party Convention, 1927, 73: "[the] illusory promise of 'steady work,' coupled with meagre wage increases, has definitely reduced the general activity of the shop-craft unions, and has caused a temporary lull in the demand for action upon union officialdom . . ."

75. *Ibid.*; vol. 52, f 9, National Committee of Progressive Railway Workers, "To the Shopmen of Division #4," n.d., 1929.

76. NA, CNR Papers, vol. 3103, f "January, 1924 Radio Speech"; Jordan, *Survival*, 200; for CNR Radio see Bill McNeil and Morris Wolfe, *Signing On: The Birth of Radio in Canada* (Toronto, 1982), 176-193.

77. "All Working for the National System: Sir Henry Thornton Pays Tribute to the Loyalty, Co-operation and Service of Employees in Address to General System Conference," *CNR Magazine* (May, 1925): 7-8, 53.

78. Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton*, 73, *passim*.

79. DBS, *Canadian National Railway 1923-1941*, *op.cit.*

combination to equal his accomplishment. Never has any of our exclusive but verbose squad of prime ministers done half so much to redden our national corpuscles."<sup>80</sup>

Predictably, this Adam Beck of railways was not himself a Canadian. Thornton had joined the CNR, *deus ex machina*, after service to the Allied military railways in France and the civilian British railways under wartime National Control. Here Thornton learned the straightforward maxim that underlay his labour-relations policy: "No general, however great his skill, ever won victories with a mutinous army."<sup>81</sup> Thornton had demonstrably won the confidence of British railway unionists, being recommended to Mackenzie King by J. H. (Jimmy) Thomas of the National Union of Railwaymen in 1922, and thereafter preached the importance of good relations with leaders of the *bona fide* labour movement: "The power of labour is recognized. Disciplined, organized, and well-led, it constitutes an irresistible force."<sup>82</sup> J. Bromley, of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen in the United Kingdom, passionately testified on Thornton's behalf during his later time of troubles: "if and when Britain nationalized her railways, here was the man ready to take them over."<sup>83</sup>

Thornton's sensitivity towards problems of class relations was not, on other hand, of definitely 'Old Country' origin. Though a naturalized British subject, Thornton was an American by birth and training. And the crux of his 'New Labor Era' would be part and parcel of a distinctly North American enterprise: the Baltimore & Ohio Plan, a brave attempt to synthesize progressivist theories of industrial relations with the principles of scientific management first instituted in the B&O Railroad shops in 1922-3.

The B & O Plan actually arose out of a moment of wartime collaboration among top-level American union leaders, federal railway administrators, and labour-relations experts, notably Captain Otto S. Beyer, a graduate engineer and railroad man then serving in the Ordnance Department of the US Army. As a national initiative for promoting productivity as well as harmony, it died still-born with the reprivatization of the American railway industry: only two other American lines adopted 'B & O' policies in the 1920s. Significantly, "Canada's own railroad," including its US subsidiaries, was or became the continental flagship for the B & O planners. That Beyer allowed that the appearance of the Canadian National Railways Co-operative Shop Craft Plan in 1924 had been "almost coincidental" tells us a little about the network of personal and professional relations involved in the B & O story. Other key figures — all of them well-known to Thornton — included President Daniel Willard of the B & O Railroad, and Bert Jewel, international president of the Federated Shop Crafts.<sup>84</sup>

80. Leslie Roberts, *These Be Your Gods* (Toronto: Musson Books, 1929), 173-4.

81. NA, CNR Papers, vol. 3109, f "9 December 1930," text of Cyrus Fogg Lecture in Applied Technology, "Men and Industry," 9.

82. Thornton, "The New Labor Era," *op. cit.*; for Thornton, Thomas and King see G. R. Stevens, *History of the Canadian National Railways* (Toronto/New York, 1973), 307-9.

83. Quoted in Marsh, *The Tragedy of Henry Thornton*, 256.

84. NA, CNR Papers, vol. 3112, f "Speeches by Others," Correspondence, Beyer to Thornton, 29 January, 1926, Jewel to Thornton, 2 February, 1926; "almost co-incidental" from Otto S. Beyer "The Machinery of Co-operation," *American Federationist* (November 1929), 1311-1319, copy in above collection, vol. 3108, "November 1929." On the American back-

The AF of L's own role in fostering 'labour-management co-operation' has usually been overlooked or misconstrued. As revisionist historian David Montgomery writes, "What is noteworthy, especially in view of the fierce denunciations of 'class collaboration' heaped on the B & O Plan by the Left after 1923, is that its earliest champions were not AFL traditionalists, but progressives."<sup>85</sup> The B & O Plan also took root as an alternative to other railways' open-shop campaigns, which, in Montgomery's estimate, "locked out" some 175,000 shopworkers from the American labour movement during and after the 1922 strike. The B & O Plan was certainly sold to AF of L members as more palatable than open-shop conditions, yet it also predated and transcended the issues of the post-war conflict. The B & O Plan promised labour 'stable' employment at union rates of pay and, not least, an active voice in production.

Revising the gospel of Frederick Winslow Taylor as many a twentieth century socialist did Marx, Beyer's theory held scientific management's central tenet, absolute managerial authority over the workplace and industrial expertise, to be outmoded. Rather, industrial managers could benefit by creatively exploiting "the brains and ingenuity of the men."<sup>86</sup> The machinery of co-operation involved the establishment of local works councils representing labour and management delegates but Beyer's system, unlike the typical 'employee-representation' scheme, was designed to complement, not supercede, collective bargaining procedures. Indeed it deliberately left to the trade unions the functions of wage negotiation, the handling of grievances, and so forth, while the councils were to focus on supposedly 'non-adversarial' issues like scheduling, mechanical innovation, and the like. Beyer's system was to some extent peculiarly applicable to the craft-oriented, non-mass production methods of the steam railways' repair and manufacturing facilities. CN extended co-operative principles to its maintenance-of-way department in 1930, but was the only company to do so. Train-service workers, whose existing measure of workplace control has been well described as effective "co-management," were never integrated into any formal co-operative plans.<sup>87</sup>

Thornton became the hottest gosseller of co-operation in part because his own brand of progressivism was a natural complement to Beyer's technocratic assumptions. In a speech to the Taylor Society in New York he drew the canvas of industrial reform with the broadest strokes: "The capitalistic system succeeded the antiquated feudal system and, as is the case with the introduction of all social systems, developed in its initial stages serious difficulties and problems. Like every system of so great a magnitude and so world wide an influence it had to reduce itself to a rational bearing, and that is what is happening to day." "Such large potentialities," he elaborated at the AF of L con-

---

ground see Wood, *Union-Management Co-operation on the Railroads*, 80-5, *passim*; on the broader project of synthesizing progressive theory with scientific management in the twenties see Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900-1945* (New York, 1986), 102-105.

85. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 424, *passim*.

86. In the words of Henry Thornton: Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, 238.

87. R. E. (Lefty) Morgan, "Informal Participation Patterns in the Railroad Running Trades," *Labour/Le Travail* 27 (1991): 231; for the details of Beyer's system see "The Machinery of Co-operation," *op.cit.*

vention in 1929, “involve much preaching, considerable conversion, and a period of trial. . . . The opportunity it seems to me is here for labour to grasp the torch and to be a light to lighten the world and to lead [all] classes, peoples, and nations to the haven of peace, prosperity and happiness: Truly a noble mission.”<sup>88</sup> The ‘period of trial’ on the CNR began with the first works council established at the former Intercolonial shops in Moncton. Thornton’s co-operative train had been admittedly carefully scheduled. It ran from the Maritimes, then reeling under the hammer blows of a deep regional depression, through Point St.-Charles in Montreal, down into Stratford and London, Ontario, and only *then* to the former citadels of the OBU in western Canada. Communist Party archives record its progress across the country, with an ever more gloomy outlook.<sup>89</sup>

AF of L leaders in Canada clearly saw the B & O Plan as a logical corollary to ‘industrial legality.’ “I feel that we cannot afford to under estimate the value of the Co-operative movement and its relationship to the present healthy condition of our Federated movement,” said W. R. Rogers, president of the CNR System Federation in 1928. According to R. J. Tallon, President of Division 4, “[I]t gives us an approach to management on a great number of questions which we would not have by any other means.” The abolition of an orthodox Taylorist bonus-incentive scheme on former Grand Trunk lines, the establishment of three regional hiring halls for ‘furloughed’ (laid-off) union members, and ongoing negotiations for paid vacations — apparently vetoed by the dominion cabinet in 1928 — were among the matters which the shopcraft leaders had in mind.<sup>90</sup>

The co-operative policy did succeed in meeting a few specific trade-union goals, with relevant statistics indicating a levelling of seasonal intensity in CN’s maintenance-of-equipment and maintenance-of-way departments, for example, with job losses attributable to other factors. Thornton and his trade union supporters claimed an avalanche of formal ‘suggestions’ received by the co-operative councils as proof of endorsement by the rank and file. Between 1924 and 1935 CN shop workers offered more than 16,000 suggestions and during the 1920s, these were indeed weighted towards ideas for ‘economy of materials,’ ‘new devices and methods,’ etc., in accordance with Beyer’s expectations. A good example of serious shopfloor initiatives was the continuous steaming device perfected by CN employees at Battle Creek, Michigan: it cut down coal consumption and improved the atmosphere in roundhouses dedicated to the light repair of ‘live’ locomotives. Data for the early 1930s indicate the tendency to broaden the labour-management dialogue to include occupational health and safety, among other things.

88. NA, CNR Papers, vol. 3106, f 5 February, 1926, “Address by Sir Henry Thornton, K.B.E., Before the Taylor Society of New York; Thornton, “The New Labor Era,” *op.cit.* The symmetry between Thornton’s world-view and that of Prime Minister King is of course striking; see, among other works, Reginald Whitaker, “The Liberal Corporatist Ideas of Mackenzie King,” *Labour/le travailleur* 2 (1977): 137-167.

89. NA, CPC Papers, vol. 10, f 7, Trade Union Educational League, Canadian Section, “Report of 16 December, 1924; also f 8, “Report” for the period September 1924 — January 1925.

90. *Labour Gazette* (June, 1928), 620; NAC, CPC Papers, vol. 52, f 8, CNR System Federation Convention 16 April, 1928, “Officers’ Reports;” Wood, *Union-Management Co-operation on the Railroads*, pp 248-50, *passim*.



Obviously not insensitive to the job costs of efficiency in a falling market, suggestions from both managers and employees in the mechanical departments falling into the category of 'working conditions and safety' soared from 17 per cent of the total between 1924 and 1929 to 52 per cent between 1930 and 1935. Eighty per cent of all suggestions were ostensibly 'accepted' and only a few were formally rejected. "Such classes as 'Purchase of new shop equipment' and 'Lunch rooms, lockers, etc.' probably meant a net outlay and some of them may have been adopted as a goodwill gesture." In the significant absence of any specific cost-accounting, the Marsh study sensibly concluded, it was "much easier to assess the contribution of this part of the Plan to better employer-employee relations than to dollars and cents efficiency."<sup>91</sup>

Inevitably there were some dissenters, notably a group of seven workers fired from the Transcona shops during the implementation of the B & O Plan in Winnipeg. Tallon dismissed their grievance in the language of apology for arbitrary management: "As very often happens in such a case, some of the least desirable men were laid off, men who had been making themselves obnoxious to the company officials and to those working with them, and were a detriment to the well being of the shop." The "obnoxious" railroaders were apparently unrecanted One Big Union men and R. B. Russell sought a *cause celebre* by taking the case to court. As a local railway shopman, John Glendenning, explained at trial, "Having received their training on class lines, they could not conceive the idea of sitting along with management and discussing [increased production] across the table." CN's own opinions on the matter, which carefully skirted the AF of L's closed-shop arguments against the OBU, would be confirmed by the Empire's highest court in the Privy Council decision in *Young vs CNR* (1927).<sup>92</sup>

## V

Brother Tallon's morality tale of non-co-operators as bad tradesmen reminds us of the underlying paradoxes of the 'new labour era.' Like 1920s-style welfare capitalism more generally, its vision of the future was all too-firmly rooted in the past — in this case, a peculiar compound of employer paternalism and craft autonomy.<sup>93</sup> The Canadian National Railways' unique experience reflected both its exceptional status as a crown corporation and the influence of a single historical actor. To Otto Beyer belongs the last word on President Thornton's contribution: "I am telling you right now that in conversation this summer [1929] with Canadian National men in their homes, car men in their shacks, roundhouse men under and alongside of engines, conductors on trains, section men on the tracks . . . with one accord they assured me Sir Henry had their fullest

91. Rountree and Marsh, *The Railway Worker*, 250-1; ch. XI, "Union-Management Co-operation," *passim*.

92. Tallon quoted in NA, CPC Papers, vol. 52, f 3, Seventh Convention, Division 4, Railway Employees Department, AF of L, "President's Report;" Glendenning quoted in Jordan, *Survival*, 203. For a summary of the case and the OBU response to the B&O Plan, see Jordan, 198-210.

93. See McCallum, "Corporate Welfarism," esp. 47-48.

confidence and support, that they literally felt inspired because they were able and permitted to work with him.”<sup>94</sup> Was this a roundabout way of admitting that institutional models of industrial reform were necessary but not sufficient on the railways?

Thornton’s days were regrettably numbered as the ‘roaring twenties’ drew to a close. Made a convenient scapegoat for Prime Minister R. B. Bennett’s difficulties during the Depression years, he would fall from political grace in a spectacular 1932 purge and died shortly thereafter. More to the point, Canadian National would be significantly downgraded as an instrument of national transportation policy.<sup>95</sup> The steam railways, as such, never did recover from the crisis of the 1930s. The legend of “Sir Henry,” the democratic railroad king, only lived on within the railway community. Thornton’s personal monuments were appropriate: modest memorial plaques, erected ‘by the employees of Canadian National Railways,’ in stark contrast to the major corporate statuary for the men who made the CPR. Both can still be seen in empty cathedrals of the railway age, scattered across the country.

From a present-minded point of view, Canada’s railway unions may have built better than they knew in the 1920s. Their moderation and willingness to ‘play the game’ doubtless laid a cornerstone for future structures of accommodation among organized labour, capital and the state. As envisioned by Thornton and his working-class supporters, however, the ‘new labour era’ was about much more than the bureaucratic management of industrial relations. A study of Canadian National Railways and the railway worker in the twenties serves to refine if not revise well-worn themes in the broader social history of the period: the unchallenged hegemony of ‘Big Business,’ the speedy collapse of wartime idealism, and the onward march of capitalist industrial technique, 1919-1929.

---

94. Beyer, “The Machinery of Co-operation,” *op. cit.*: “Here, in reality, labour enjoys a new dispensation!”

95. Stevens, *History of the Canadian National Railways*, pp 345-60, contains a lively narrative of the anti-Thornton purge, under the evocative chapter heading: “The Lordly Buck and the Butcher’s Dogs.” Cruise and Griffiths, *Lords of the Line*, 331-6, has a detailed account of Big Business plotting against Thornton and its implications for future railway policy. These authors argue that the public railroader’s “red thread of extravagance” was the purest nonsense: “After the 1929 stock market crash Thornton was one of the first businessmen in Canada to institute a vigorous cost-cutting program, slashing salaries 10 per cent without raising the unions’ ire, and abandoning a series of unprofitable branch lines.” In retrospect, then, one can see his own response as the beginning of the end of the ‘New Labor Era.’ No ukase against ‘co-operative’ principles was ever issued, though, and the continued existence of the B & O councils up to the 1950s contributed, no doubt, to what one of Thornton’s successor’s called a “tradition of moderation and restraint” in industrial relations. President Donald Gordon (1949-1966) quoted in Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-1966* (Ottawa, 1968), 334. More research is evidently needed.