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# Thomas Beaumont, *Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2019)

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instead of dismissing 20th-century communist parties as irrelevant and rotten with Stalinism, they should be viewed as difficult but unavoidable predecessors in anti-capitalist struggle that need working through to realize a superior total form of modern civilization.

Harker's book is a clever interplay between culture and politics and relevant to those who study the communist movement in the developed West, as well as those who are pondering questions related to the future of the left in the 21st century.

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**Thomas Beaumont, *Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2019)**

IN THE 1920S AND 1930S, French railway workers (*cheminots*) gravitated in significant numbers towards a communist-affiliated trade union, the Fédération Nationale des Cheminots Unitaire (FNCU), and constituted a key bastion of support for the French Communist Party (PCF). Yet these *cheminots* have been largely overlooked by historians, in part because of the reluctance of railway workers to engage in strikes and work stoppages during this period. Thomas Beaumont's meticulous new book rectifies this oversight; it not only stands as the first monograph-length study of communist railway trade unionism, but also offers a complex and nuanced portrait of interwar French communism more broadly.

The initial three chapters of *Fellow Travellers* link the experience of railway workers in World War I to their subsequent radicalization in 1919 and 1920, a

failed general strike in May 1920, and the ultimate schism between communist and "reformist" unions in 1921. The war years placed enormous pressure on France's railway workers, who laboured long hours for increasingly stagnant wages. Beaumont argues that the shared sacrifices and relative impoverishment of the *cheminots* during the war years helped fuse them together as one national body; he also suggests that the war raised expectations that the end of the conflict would produce a transformed workplace, including the nationalization of the private railway companies (50). When post-war reforms were slow to materialize, many *cheminots* grew frustrated with the railway workers' union and its parent body, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), and increasingly gravitated to more confrontational voices. The failure of the May 1920 strike exacerbated these fractures; the majority of unionized French rail workers eventually joined the new FNCU, which was created in 1921 as a part of a more radical general union, the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU), and which soon became tied to the fledgling French Communist Party.

In these early years, the FNCU was particularly strong in areas where *cheminots* were concentrated (e.g. the workshops and depots near Paris) or in areas with a strong communist political presence. The fourth and fifth chapters of *Fellow Travellers* examine the realities and limits of *cheminot* militancy in the years before 1928, in the face of employer pressures and heightened police surveillance. Beaumont argues that the lack of railway strike activity does not indicate that the *cheminots* had internalized the railway companies' claims to have created an "apolitical professional community" (127). To the contrary, the FNCU championed an alternative view of railway labour that was laced with class division

and characterized by ongoing critiques of management practices. Beaumont deftly analyzes the local news sections in the FNCU's newspaper, *La Tribune des cheminots*, which featured such a volume of anonymous denunciations of railway managers that the newspaper's editor had to plead with his readers for patience to allow him to publish all of their contributions (131). For Beaumont, these letters (like *rakbory*, or Soviet proletarian correspondence) were a significant space for voicing grassroots sentiment and connected the FNCU to the grievances of the rank-and-file. Even so, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, the FNCU (and the PCF) often struggled to mobilize *cheminots* in support of the international communist workers' movement; they failed to prevent French railway workers from helping break the Ruhr railway strike in 1923 and could not spur them to strike against the Rif War in Morocco in 1925.

Chapter 6 traces the dramatic shift in communist railway militancy between 1928 and 1934, while Chapter 7 chronicles the role of the *cheminots* during the Popular Front era between 1935 and 1938. Even as the Comintern urged communists to enter a new phase of revolutionary activity in 1928 (the so-called "class against class" period), the FNCU paradoxically became more engaged with the structures of railway capitalism. FNCU militants contested elections among railway workers (which they had previously boycotted) and won seats on the railway management advisory committees. While these bodies had no direct decision-making authority, the communist delegates – acting as what Beaumont calls "hostile participants" – voiced the grievances of workers over cost-cutting measures and defended workers accused of safety violations (161). In an era when the communist movement was hemorrhaging support in France, the FNCU's engagement with the advisory

committees broadened its base of support, and gave the union valuable experience when the political climate shifted in May 1936 thanks to the victory of the labour-friendly Popular Front coalition. While the *cheminots* (now re-united with their non-communist brethren in the Fédération des Cheminots, or FdC) did not participate in the great "social explosion" of labour militancy in May and June 1936, Beaumont argues that they were still "at the heart of the Popular Front experiment in industrial social democracy" (207). In tangible terms the Popular Front brought a longstanding *cheminot* goal to fruition by nationalizing the railways; moreover, Beaumont suggests that the *cheminots'* previous experience in negotiating with management offered a model for democratic industrial relations that undergirded Popular Front reforms legitimizing unions and collective bargaining.

Besides possessing a top-notch title, *Fellow Travellers* is a richly researched history of the railway unions and the communist labour movement in interwar France. Drawn off national and regional archives, as well as the specialized holdings of trade unions and the Communist party, it provides an invaluable account of the FNCU's activities. Beaumont's work challenges previous assumptions about the quiescence of railway workers during the interwar period; instead, *Fellow Travellers* argues that workers (as represented by the FNCU) contested the dominance of their employers and the French state not merely in pursuit of material gains, but in a quest for symbolic recognition of their autonomy in the workplace. Moreover, the book also nuances our understanding of French communism in this era by depicting it as far more pragmatic and flexible than previously assumed; far from alienating workers through a dogmatic insistence on revolution, the FNCU adapted to their demands and gave voice to their grievances

(sometimes in the face of criticism from other communist actors in the process).

The shortcomings of *Fellow Travellers* mostly stem from the limitations of its evidence in places. The book understandably functions better as a history of the FNCU's activities than it does as an account of the day-to-day experience of communist militancy on the railways, despite Beaumont's creative use of the sources at hand. Source limitations also weaken Beaumont's claim that the *cheminot* strikes at the end of the Popular Front in 1938 were not (as historians have contended) solely in defense of material gains, but stood as a symbolic statement in support of democratic industrial relations. While this may have been the case, the argument is based off statements made by union leaders, who presumably had a vested interest in positioning their demands in this fashion. As a final point, the book asserts that the interwar *cheminot* experience shaped the often-fractious relationship between unions and the nationalized railway administration after the World War II, a claim that merits more attention than it receives here. Still, these minor issues do not detract from a nuanced, detailed, and engaging examination of communist trade union militancy that deserves to be read widely by historians of France, labour, and the left alike.

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**Marielle Benchehboune, *Balayons les abus : expérience d'organisation syndicale dans le nettoyage*, (Paris : Editions Syllepse 2020)**

*BALAYONS LES ABUS : expérience d'organisation syndicale dans le nettoyage* est un petit livre plein de force qui fait la part belle au travail de l'ombre

et à son potentiel subversif. Dans les toutes dernières lignes de sa postface à l'ouvrage, Karel Yon, sociologue français spécialiste du syndicalisme, souligne à juste titre combien, loin des récits sur le travail traditionnellement conjugués au masculin, le livre de Marielle Benchehboune met en scène la puissante rencontre entre « deux formes de travail invisible, celui des petites mains de la propreté et celui des petites mains du militantisme » (138). Sans détour, frontalement, par l'usage du récit, d'extraits d'entretiens avec les travailleuses en lutte, mais aussi d'encadrés, d'un lexique ou de notes de bas de page lorsque c'est nécessaire, Marielle Benchehboune nous invite, au cours de cette centaine de pages, à suivre et à saisir son travail d'organisatrice. Elle dévoile, ce faisant, une partie du travail invisible des travailleuses du secteur du nettoyage dont elle cherche à construire le pouvoir collectif. C'est tout autant dans la présentation de la rencontre entre ces deux types de travailleuses et de ses effets, que dans la pleine mise en visibilité de leur travail respectif que réside l'intérêt à la fois politique et théorique de cet ouvrage.

D'un côté donc, les travailleuses de ce secteur du nettoyage de l'agglomération lyonnaise dans lequel deux organisations militantes, le ReAct et la CNT-SO, ont décidé d'expérimenter, entre septembre 2016 et octobre 2017, des méthodes nouvelles de syndicalisation issues de *l'union organizing* anglo-saxon, quasiment jamais mobilisées en France. De l'autre, l'organisatrice de cette campagne, Marielle Benchehboune, qui en détaille les étapes, les difficultés mais aussi les victoires, alliant précision et émotion, écrivant à la première personne sans cesser de donner la parole aux travailleuses qu'elle rencontre. Et enfin, ce travail de nettoyage dans des hôtels, des centres commerciaux ou des