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The 1919 Railway Strike: The Government's Response



Figure 1: A Ministry of Food Lorry loaded with beef at Smithfield Market, London, during the 1919 Rail Strike, 10/1919, http://avax.news/touching/Vintage_Transport_9_2.html (Accessed March 2016)

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List of Abbreviations

NUR: National Union of Railwaymen

ASLEF: Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen

TNA: The National Archives

GWR: Great Western Railway

GCR: Great Central Railway

SE & CR: South Eastern and Chatham Railway

NER: North Eastern Railway

LRD: Labour Research Department

Abstract

This study aims to rethink the 1919 national British rail strike from the perspective of Lloyd George's Coalition Government. This dissertation argues that the government were willing to use all in their power to defeat the strike. Prior historians have touched upon how the government combatted the strike, but this study will give a more thorough examination of the emergency measures which were implemented. It draws from government and railway company reports on the strike which became available after 1970. There has been sparingly little research on the 1919 rail dispute since Philp Bagwell's study in 1963. Bagwell's classical approach to the strike will be rethought in the light of the newly accessible government and Railway Company records. A new regional approach is included, assessing the local and regional newspapers in the northern Home Counties and the north east of England.

In dedication to my Granddad, a railway driver for 50 years, and Nan. A true railway family,
who were the inspiration for this work.

(1) Introduction

The 1919 railway strike pitted one of the strongest trade unions in Britain following the First World War, the National Union of Railwaymen, against an employer of overwhelming authority, the British Government. The national rail strike began on 26 September 1919 after negotiations broke down in a dispute over railwaymen's wages. It would be expected that such a dramatic event in British trade union history, a nine day strike just following the First World War of all the nation's railwaymen, would have generated high interest from British labour historians; however, this has been far from the case. There has so far only been one extensive study completed on the dispute, that is, Philip Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: A History of the National Union of Railwaymen*.¹ Bagwell was a prominent labour historian who focused on railway union history and in particular the history of the National Union of Railwaymen.

The first aim of this study will be to rethink Bagwell's study on the strike in the light of new research identified in the National Archives. This research includes Cabinet documents, railway company records, Home Office reports and reports from the many government departments which combatted the strike such as the Ministry of Food and the Ministry of War. These documents were not available to the public until 1970 which has meant that Bagwell did not have access to them when he wrote his study on the dispute. Bagwell's study will also be rethought with new regional and county press reports. These reports will be taken from newspapers from the north east of England and the northern Home Counties, including, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, and Essex.

¹ P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: The History of the National Union of Railwaymen* (London, 1963)

The second aim of this study will be to emphasize just how seriously and aggressively Lloyd George's coalition government dealt with the 1919 railway strike. The government used everything at its disposal to defeat the railwaymen. What measures to combat the strike the government implemented will be analysed in this study. How the government viewed and addressed the strike will be evaluated with the new research from TNA.

The first chapter of this study will focus on updating Bagwell's narrative of the strike. It will also explain the context surrounding why the strike occurred; including how and why the negotiations between the unions and government broke down. The first aspect of the narrative of the strike which will be updated is whether there was a complete paralysis of railway traffic following the call to strike and whether there were improvements in the railway's service as the dispute continued. The second aspect is how many railwaymen, according to the official records, ceased work when the call to strike was made and how many returned to work as the strike progressed. The final aspect which will be assessed is how and why so many railwaymen came out on strike. The aim of this chapter will be to highlight how great a crisis the strike was for the government in terms of exactly how many railwaymen stopped work and how their cessation of work affected Britain's railways. A regional assessment will also be included in this chapter.

The second chapter will analyse the emergency measures which the government implemented to combat the strike. The first emergency measure which will be assessed is the government's decision to call on public volunteers to help run the railway. The next will be the government's use of road transport, and the last will be the role the Armed Forces played during the strike. This chapter will aim to emphasize how complex and sophisticated the government network to combat the strike was. The government dealt with the strike in

a decisive and aggressive manner and this chapter will provide evidence to support this argument.

The third chapter will focus on the government's use of the national and regional press. The government's harnessing of the press from the outset of the strike to the end can be regarded as an extension of the government's wider emergency measures to combat the dispute. This chapter will aim to emphasize the government's willingness to use all in its power to break the strike. The government's use of the press as a strike breaking tool was met with stern opposition by the railway unions. The railway union's counterattack in the press will be evaluated in this chapter. A regional comparison between the local and county papers in the north east of England and the northern Home Counties will also be included.

This study will start by addressing the historiography of the dispute. This will begin with an assessment of Bagwell's research on the strike. Some reasons why the 1919 railway strike and railway trade unionism, in general, has been overlooked in the historiography will follow. With Labour History in Britain not focusing on the railway strike or the railway unions an assessment of what the focuses were and how they have changed over the decades will come next. Where Labour History in Britain is now and how this study fits into the current focus will conclude this chapter.

The 1919 Railway Strike and Philip Bagwell

Bagwell's contribution to railway union history is vast, and the labour and transport historian can be regarded as the authority on both the railway strike of 1919 and the history of the National Union of Railwaymen. Bagwell wrote two major works on the National Union of Railwaymen. The first in 1963 covered the early activities of railway trade unionists in the mid-19th century up to the Transport Act of 1953 and included the 1919 railway strike. The

second major work on the NUR came in 1983 and covered the history of the union from after the Second World War up until 1980.² Bagwell produced a wide array of works on transport and industrial relations history while also being a prominent member of the British Labour History Society serving as the society's general secretary for five years.³ He has been cited in the majority of major studies on British trade union history which cover railway union history. Bagwell has been described by Neville Kirk in the *Labour History Review* in 2010 as being one of the prominent labour historians who was fundamental to the early development of the Labour History Society; amongst others, Kirk includes Eric Hobsbawm and Asa Briggs.⁴ It is also worth considering when assessing Bagwell's work on the 1919 railway strike that the labour historian regarded himself as a Marxist Christian.⁵ Bagwell's strong socialist beliefs contributed to why the historian focused on working class and trade union history.

A particular focus of Bagwell's study on the railway strike is the negotiations which took place between the Government and the Railway Unions that eventually led to the outbreak of the dispute. Bagwell provided a detailed analysis of the discussions between the government and the railway union executives from when the issue of the standardisation of the railwaymen's pay arose during March 1919 to the eventual climax of the strike itself on 5 October. One of the major arguments Bagwell presented is that the railway union

² P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: The History of the National Union of Railwaymen* (London, 1963), & P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen: The History of the National Union of Railwaymen: Volume 2: The Beeching Era and After* (London, 1982)

³ P. Bagwell, 'The Triple Alliance', in Asa Briggs & J. Saville, *Essays in Labour History, 1886-1923*, (London, 1971); P. Bagwell, *The Transport Revolution from 1770* (London, 1974 & second extended ed, London 1988); & P. Bagwell, & P. Lyth, *Transport in Britain 1750-2000: From Canal Lock to Gridlock* (London, 2002)

⁴ N. Kirk, 'Challenge, Crisis, and Renewal? Themes in the Labour History of Britain, 1960-2010', *The Labour History Review*, Vol. 75 No. 2 (Liverpool, 2010), p. 169

⁵ D. Rubinstein, 'Philip Bagwell: Obituary', *The Guardian*, (14/3/2006)

executive did not want a strike and that they did everything they could to avoid one.⁶

Bagwell asserted instead that the breakdown in negotiations was caused by the government purposely and that at least some members of the cabinet wanted the strike. It is worth noting that Bagwell emphasized how the cabinet contained highly conservative members, such as Winston Churchill, the Geddes brothers and Bonar Law, who were all aiming for “the restoration of Britain's competitive position by reduction in wages.”⁷

To a lesser extent, Bagwell has addressed the narrative of the strike in his study on the dispute. Bagwell stressed the early success of the strike for the railway unions and provided evidence for a complete stoppage of Britain’s railwaymen on the opening weekend of the dispute. Bagwell cited in his analysis of the dispute reports from Glasgow, Cambridge, and Carlisle where apparently all the men had ceased work following the call.⁸ These reports that Bagwell cited on the numbers of men who ceased work are taken from the national daily press, particularly *The Times*. Bagwell argued that following the total walkout of the nation’s railwaymen there was a near complete cessation of railway traffic at the beginning of the dispute. Bagwell used the examples of Derby, where only three trains were running on the first day of the strike in comparison to the usual 130, and the South Eastern line where railway traffic had been completely suspended on the first day of the strike.⁹ With the new government and railway company documentation on the strike it is now possible to update how many railwaymen came out on strike at the heralded successful beginning of the dispute and how many, if any, returned to work as the strike developed. It is also possible with this new research to analyse how many trains were being run by the railway

⁶ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 386

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 384

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 388-9

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 387-8

companies as the strike progressed. Whether the number of railwaymen who returned to work as the strike progressed had any correlation with increasing numbers of trains being run on the government's emergency service will be assessed in this study.

Bagwell has also briefly examined the government's emergency measures in his history of the dispute. These emergency measures include the government's call for volunteers, the government's harnessing of road transport and the government's use of the army. In regards to the call for volunteers, Bagwell asserted that it was well received with all echelons of society offering their services. Bagwell briefly touched on some of the roles of the volunteers arguing that the "favourite occupation with many of the volunteers was exercising the railway horses and cleaning out their stables."¹⁰ There is, however, no discussion on the practical use of the volunteers as an emergency strike breaking measure and no analysis as to whether their intervention had any effect on the strike. What jobs the volunteers did and whether they were effective will be updated in chapter two via the new government and railway company records. In respect to the government's use of road transport, Bagwell argued that the emergency measure worked effectively.¹¹ Bagwell only briefly touches on the road transport which was implemented during the strike, however.

The government's use of the army is an emergency measure which Bagwell has observed in a little more detail. Bagwell in his analysis introduces the army's main role during the dispute, which was to guard essential and vulnerable points, and emphasises how the striking railwaymen and soldiers were amicable during the dispute. By examining

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 389

¹¹ Ibid., p. 390

the new government and railway company research, it is possible to advance and expand on Bagwell's prior research on both road transport and the use of the Armed Forces.

Another element of the 1919 railway strike which Bagwell examined is the utilization of the mass media by both the government and the railway unions during the strike. Bagwell provides evidence that the government launched an attack on the railwaymen via the national newspapers and the cinema while the railway unions counterattacked with propaganda of their own.¹² Bagwell argued, in regards to the national press, that they were "almost unanimous in (their) opposition to the railwaymen at the beginning of the strike" however, by the end of the strike they sided with, and were much more sympathetic to, the railwaymen's cause.¹³

Through the 1960s, 70s and into the 80s British labour history has been described as being in a 'Golden Age' with labour history focused on the issue of social class and 'history from below'.¹⁴ The 60s and 70s witnessed student and worker protests as well as other forms of social revolution and this impacted on the history being produced at the time. With the focus on social class, there were many studies aimed towards the trade union movement in Britain from the 1830s onwards. Bagwell was one of only two labour historians during the 'Golden Age' of labour history that chose to focus on the history of British railway trade unionism. The other was Brian Murphy who wrote a study on the ASLEF from 1880 to 1980 published in 1980 by the ASLEF.¹⁵ Murphy's study is typical of the classical period of labour history with its focus being on the early struggles of the union and how it developed through the twentieth century. This work is not as detailed as Bagwell's,

¹² Ibid., pp. 392-5

¹³ Ibid., p. 395

¹⁴ N. Kirk, 'Challenge, Crisis, and Renewal?', pp. 162-80

¹⁵ B. Murphy, *ALSEF 1880-1980: A Hundred Years of the Locoman's Trade Union* (London, 1980)

but it does give an overview of the major flashpoints in the union's history. The 1919 rail strike does feature, but no real emphasis is put on its importance. Instead, the 1911 national rail strike and the 1926 general strike take more focus.

The reason so few labour historians took an interest in railway union history was partly because there was an emphasis in British labour history on the history of the coal miners and the coal mining unions.¹⁶ This was due to the mining unions' economic and political importance to the country during the 1960s and 1970s. It may have also been because of the miners' distinctive culture in Britain; there were mining villages and whole communities built around the mining industry. This can be especially noted in the north east of England and South Wales where the mining communities were particularly shaped by the industry. The railwaymen also had their own cultural distinctiveness. Certain areas of Britain, such as Swindon and Crewe, became so reliant on the railway that they were known as railway towns. Another potential reason there has been a greater exploration into the lives and experiences of the coal miners, in comparison to the railwaymen, is because of the dangerous and dirty nature of the work. It is for this reason that on 4 September 1919, General Secretary of the NUR, James Henry Thomas, claimed he was not going to ballot his membership on a potential strike. Thomas argued that "you cannot blackleg the miners," but the government can and will call on volunteers to run a skeleton service on the railway.¹⁷

¹⁶ R. P. Arnot, *South Wales miners* (1967); R. P. Arnot, *The Miners; One Union, One Industry: a History of the National Union of Mineworkers, 1939-46*. (1979); K. Brown, 'The lodges of the Durham Miners' Association, 1869-1926', NH (1987); H. Francis & D. Smith, *The Fed: a history of the South Wales miners in the twentieth century* (1980); M. Daunton 'Miners' houses: South Wales and the great Northern coalfield, 1880-1914', IRSH (1980)

¹⁷ C. Wrigley, *Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour: The Post-War Coalition, 1918-1922* (London, 1990), p. 217

A further reason why the 1919 railway strike has been overlooked is because of the focus in labour history on the 1926 general strike. The 1926 general strike has been examined extensively in both national and regional studies. A compilation of the many works can be found in a select bibliography compiled by John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, Keith Laybourn and Quentin Outram in 2006.¹⁸ During the classical period of labour history studies on the strike have focused predominantly on the effect the dispute had on the trade union movement. The strike has often been regarded as the end of the trade union militancy which followed the First World War. As Martin Jacques argues when discussing the 'Consequences of the General Strike' in 1976, "1926 proved to be a turning-point in the development of the working-class movement: it marked the end of the last great period of working-class militancy."¹⁹ James Cronin in 1984 highlights and focuses on the 1926 general strike as the pivotal event which witnessed the restoration of the "dominance of capitalism" following the First World War.²⁰ Cronin is typical of the classical period of labour history as he presents the working classes after the general strike as being "deeply resentful of their employers and of the obviously anti-labour character of the Conservative rule."²¹

One study from the classical era of labour history which did examine the period just following the First World War is Kenneth Morgan's, *Consensus and Disunity*.²² This analysis provides crucial context to the politics surrounding the Lloyd George Coalition government following the war. Morgan argues, when discussing the ability of the government to deal with the challenges of labour in the years following the war, that "the ministers and civil

¹⁸ 'The General Strike and Mining Lockout of 1926: A Select Bibliography', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Issue 21, 2006

¹⁹ M. Jacques, 'Consequences of the General Strike', in J. Skelly, (ed.) *The 1926 General Strike* (London, 1976), p. 275

²⁰ J. E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain 1918-1979* (London, 1984), p. 46

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146

²² K. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-1922* (Oxford, 1979)

servants responsible for handling them were often peculiarly ill-equipped for treating such a sensitive and vital area of policy.”²³ The best example of a minister that was not properly equipped to deal with the issues of labour was Sir Auckland Geddes. Morgan argues that not only was Geddes “out his depth” when dealing with the unions but that his poor judgement led to the hastening of the 1919 rail strike itself.²⁴

From the mid-1980s, studies on the 1926 general strike had turned away from trade union history and began to focus more on the cultural and social aspects of the dispute. The reason for the change is because of the resurgence of neo-liberalism under Thatcher. The 1980s and onwards saw, as Kirk argues, a retreat of British labour history caused by the “decline of socialism, the weakened position of the trade unions and wider labour movement.”²⁵ Rachele Saltzman in 1994 examined the upper and middle class volunteers and how they turned what they believed to be a potentially revolutionary working-class movement into a nine-day May festival.²⁶ This cultural study moves away from assessing the strike from a trade union perspective and focuses on the activities of the middle class volunteers during the dispute and the reasons behind these behaviours. Gender and community have also become a topic which has come under greater scrutiny with studies focusing on the role of women during the general strike. In 1998 Jaclyn Gier-Viskovatoff and Abigail Porter examined the roles of women during the 1926 general strike and the 1984 miners’ strike.²⁷ The study compares the two major disputes and argues that there are

²³ Ibid., p. 50

²⁴ Ibid., p. 51

²⁵ N. Kirk, ‘Challenge Crisis’, p.175

²⁶ R. H. Saltzman, ‘Folklore as Politics in Great Britain: Working-Class Critiques of Upper-Class Strike Breakers in the 1926 General Strike’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 3, (July, 1994), pp. 105-121

²⁷ J. J. Gier-Viskovatoff & A. Porter, ‘Women of the British Coalfields on Strike in 1926 and 1984: Documenting Lives Using Oral History and Photography’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (1998), pp. 199-230

similarities between the roles of women in both. Sue Bruley in 2007 examined the general strike from the perspective of gender in South Wales.²⁸ The study focuses on communal eating which was a fundamental aspect, according to Bruley, of community survival in the South Wales region during the dispute. Other cultural studies have examined how the strike affected industrial communities and how the strike has been remembered in those communities.²⁹

Railway Trade Union History

Another contributing factor to this oversight of railway union history has been the focus in the historiography of the British railway on the engineering and economic aspects of the industry's development. This argument is articulated in the Forward to Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*. S. F. Green points out in this Forward that there had been 'countless' books written on the railway companies and development of the railway locomotive in Britain in the period leading up to 1950 however "the number of books about the lives and working conditions of railwaymen could be counted almost on the finger of a man's hand."³⁰

The three main railway union historians who came before Bagwell include John Raynes, who wrote a history for the ASLEF in 1921, George Alcock, who wrote a history for the NUR in 1922 and Norman McKillop, who wrote for the ASLEF in 1950.³¹ Each of these railway union works, similar to the classical approach to labour history, aimed to provide a

²⁸ S. Bruley, 'The Politics of Food: Gender, Family, Community and Collective Feeding in South Wales in the General Strike and Miners' Lockout of 1926', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, (2007), pp. 54-77

²⁹ K. Morgan, 'Memory and Community in 1926', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 75, Issue 1, (2013); & H. Barron, 'The 1926 Miners' Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield', *Oxford Historical Monographs*, (2010), pp. xv-314

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ J. R. Raynes, *Engines and Men: The History of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen* (Leeds, 1921); G. W. Alcock, *Fifty Years of Railway Trade Unionism* (London, 1922); N. McKillop, *The Lighted Flame: A History of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen* (London, 1950)

broad history of the two national railway unions, focusing on the 1880s in Britain and then chronologically through the major events of each railway union's history up to the year before each respective work was published.

Raynes, the earliest of the trade union historians, does address the 1919 Railway Strike in his work but not in detail. The area of the history of the strike Raynes focused on primarily was the negotiations between the railway union executive and the Government. Raynes argued that the "Cabinet had for weeks been quietly preparing its plans" for a strike.³² While Raynes alludes to the Government preparing for a strike "weeks before" there is not much explanation as to how. Raynes also claimed that the Government's attempt to run a train service during the strike was a "complete and ghastly failure."³³ While the service may not have come close to getting back to normal via the Government's initiatives, it was by no means a "ghastly failure," as Raynes contends. Raynes used very emotive language in his summary of the 1919 Railway Strike and does not back up with evidence the claims that he makes. The fact Raynes experienced the strike first hand may explain the emotive language he chose to write his piece on the dispute.

Alcock, similar to Raynes, does not go into much detail in regards to the 1919 Railway Strike. It is probably less surprising that Raynes does not as he wrote his history for the ASLEF; however, considering Alcock writes for the NUR it is curious why he has not paid more attention to the dispute. The areas of the strike in which Alcock focused on include the negotiations between the NUR and the government before and during the dispute. This analysis of the negotiations mirrors Raynes work on the dispute. Alcock did argue that the "Government used all the resources of the state, but they were altogether insufficient for

³² Raynes, *Engines and Men*, p. 554

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 555

public need.”³⁴ This is the only comment Alcock makes on the strike away from the negotiations between the Government and the NUR's executive, and there is no evidence cited to back the claim that the Government did not meet the needs of the public. Alcock's use of primary sources is very limited, and the NUR historian has used the same sources as Raynes.

McKillop, while he had nearly 30 more years to ponder the dispute in comparison to Raynes or Alcock, chose not to discuss the 1919 Railway Strike in his history of the ASLEF. McKillop instead highlighted the fact that the NUR did not support the ASLEF in an industrial dispute which was to take place only a few years after the 1919 dispute. McKillop contended that the history of the strike should not be told by himself or “any other member of the ASLEF.”³⁵ This may be the same reason why Murphy in 1980 barely comments on the 1919 national strike. McKillop did emphasize however that the ASLEF joined the 1919 Railway Strike with no interest in the outcome of the dispute other than to help fellow workers on the railway.

The Rail Strike Post-Bagwell

The 1980s may have seen a shift in focus of British labour history to more cultural and gender issues, however, there are labour historians who have remained in the classical tradition. Hugh Clegg, Hamish Fraser, and David Howell are prominent examples of labour historians who have continued their focus on the history of trade unionism in Britain.³⁶

³⁴ Alcock, *Fifty Years*, p.554

³⁵ McKillop, *The Lighted Flame*, p. 132

³⁶ H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Volume II 1911-1933* (Oxford, 1985); W. H. Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1998* (London, 1999); & D. Howell, *Respectable Radicals: Studies in the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism* (Aldershot, 1999)

These historians have written studies on the trade union movement which have addressed the 1919 rail strike in varying depth.

A very valuable work that needs to be included here is Jane Morgan's, *Conflict and Order*.³⁷ Morgan's study examines how the government dealt with labour disputes in England and Wales from 1900 to 1939. Morgan dedicates a chapter to 'Police Organization and the Anti-Strike Machinery, 1919-1922'.³⁸ This section gives real insight into how the government combatted the rising power of trade unions following the First World War. The work analyzes the government's response to the 1919 railway strike, with a focus on the government's use of the Armed Forces and the police.³⁹ This is the only research which analyses in such depth the government's response to the strike.

Clegg's extensive study on the history of British trade unionism from 1911 to 1933 does not put any emphasis on the 1919 rail strike. Clegg focuses on the breakdown in negotiations between the government and the railway union executive and does not deviate from the established history on the strike. Clegg, however, does give an assessment in regards to the settlement which was accepted by the NUR which ended the dispute. Clegg argues that the terms agreed "were not very different from those they had rejected on 26 September."⁴⁰

Fraser covers a broader period in comparison to Clegg, from 1700-1998. This more extensive span of time has meant that Fraser has not been as detailed in his analysis as the former labour historian on the interwar year period. While Fraser does not go into much

³⁷ J. Morgan, *Conflict and Order: The Police and Labour Disputes in England and Wales, 1900-1939* (Oxford, 1987)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 75-110

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-95

⁴⁰ Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, p. 291

detail on any topic during the interwar years he does focus more on certain elements; the miners and the mining union, the trade union movement in Clydeside and the 1926 general strike. Choosing these three elements as the most important is typical of the classical approach to labour history when examining the First World War and interwar years.

Howell's study examines how the railway unions developed from the 1900s to the years following the Second World War and how their development impacted and coalesced with the rise of the Labour Party. Howell argues that the railway workers were regarded as a "thoroughly decent section of the working class" and that this "respectability" was at the heart of railway union politics.⁴¹ Work on the railways was highly regimented, and discipline was fundamental to the running of an efficient and safe service.⁴² This "occupational culture" of discipline was central to the railway unions system of industrial relations.⁴³ Following the First World War Howell argues that "the respectable culture of railway trade unionism could be expressed through a stable system of collective bargaining."⁴⁴ Howell does not examine the 1919 rail strike in much depth but does emphasize how the railway union leaders were certainly not the revolutionaries the government had made them out to be at the start of the strike.⁴⁵ The union leadership supported the bargaining culture which they had profited from during the First World War and felt that if strikes were necessary, they had to be short and disciplined.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Howell, *Respectable Radicals*, p. 9

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 394

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 310-11

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311

Laura Beers in 2010 published two works which covered the 1919 rail strike.⁴⁷ Beers analysis focuses on how the railway unions combatted the government's early attacks towards the railway strike in the media. Beers work fits into the cultural focus of labour history and is the only purely cultural study available on the strike. Beers work aimed to provide a comparative analysis between the 1919 railway strike and the 1926 general strike. Beers argued that if labour launched a publicity campaign during the 1926 strike, similar to that of 1919, the public would have better understood the labour movement's grievances and the outcome of the 1926 general strike may have been different.⁴⁸ There is also a compelling argument to suggest that if General Secretary Thomas and the other executives of the two railway unions were willing to call on the Triple Alliance, the outcome of the 1919 railway strike would have undoubtedly been a very different story. Beers has followed a similar argument to Bagwell in her work which is that the media shifted its attitudes as the strike progressed from anti-railwaymen at the start to more pro-railwaymen at the end.

New Directions

The focus of labour history in Britain has recently turned towards the 'Great Labour Unrest' of 1911 to 1914. This resurgence of interest in the period has stemmed from it being the era's 100 year anniversary. In the Labour History Review's special edition on the 'Great Labour Unrest' Yann Beliard argues that the period "has not been celebrated in the way the 1926 general was for its eightieth anniversary or the miners' strike of 1984 - 1985 was for its twenty-fifth." There are a variety of reasons Beliard offers to explain why. Beliard argues

⁴⁷ L. Beers, along with the journal article, "Is This Man an Anarchist?" *Industrial Action and the Battle for Public Opinion in Interwar Britain*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 30-6, also wrote, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (London, 2010), this substantial work documents the Labour Party's use of the media from the beginning of the party in 1900 to the General Election victory following the end of The Second World War and only briefly assesses the 1919 railway strike.

⁴⁸ Beers, "Is This Man an Anarchist?", p. 60

that the 1911 to 1914 period only held the epithet of ‘the greatest labour rebellion in British history’ for ten years with the post war agitations of 1919 to 1923 dwarfing it vastly in scale. Beliard also highlights how the First World War cast the prewar industrial unrest events into a shadow.⁴⁹ The *Journal of Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* in 2012 has also focused on the 1911 to 1914 period with particular emphasis on the 1911 national rail strike.⁵⁰

These new studies on the 1911 rail strike are moving back towards the classical approach to labour history. The studies analyze the effect of the strike on the overall trade union movement and how the working classes were uniting together to fight against a ruling elite whose aim was to keep workers’ wages and rights down. Sam Davies and Ron Noon’s study examines who exactly was involved in the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike by assessing press reports, court records, and census returns as well as other sources.⁵¹ The main argument Davies and Noon presents is that the state overreacted enormously, by the employment of troops and police, to legitimate industrial and civil protest. While the government was unjustified in their actions, Davies and Noon celebrate the “remarkable solidarity of many thousands of workers engaged in a struggle for an improvement in their miserable wages and working and living conditions.”⁵² Alex Gordon in his study on the first national rail strike focuses on the effects the dispute had on the overall trade union movement. Gordon argues that the massive response of railwaymen to the strike, the equally massive response of the government in support of the railway companies set “in train a course of events that, in less than eighteen months, led to the founding of a new

⁴⁹ Y. Beliard, ‘Introduction: Revisiting the Great Labour Unrest, 1911-1914’, *Labour History Review*, Vol 79, (2014), p. 1

⁵⁰ *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Issue 33, (2012)

⁵¹ S. Davies, & R. Noon, ‘The Rank and File in the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike’, *The Labour History Review*, Vol 79, (2014)

⁵² Davies & Noon, ‘The Rank and File’, p. 80

industrial and political force, the National Union of Railwaymen.”⁵³ David Howell, in his study, points out that the dispute was “largely confined to industrial centers of the north, the Midlands, and south Wales.”⁵⁴ Howell goes on to state that the strike even in the most solid areas was not complete.⁵⁵

⁵³ A. Gordon, ‘1911: The First National Railway Strike and the Rail Union Amalgamation Movement’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Issue 33, (2012), p. 127

⁵⁴ D. Howell, ‘The Contribution of Direct Action to Gradualism: The Railway Strike of 1911’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, Issue 33, (2012), p. 71

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72

(2) The Context of the Strike

This chapter will examine the narrative of the dispute in Britain with a new regional perspective being added from the northern Home Counties and the north east of England. The first section of this chapter will address what caused the strike and why. The second section will examine just how serious a crisis the rail strike was by focusing on how many trains were being run by the railway companies from the start to the finish of the dispute according to official government and railway company reports. The third section will assess how many railwaymen came out on strike. Whether any railwaymen remained loyal during the strike is a very important question and potentially helps answer why certain railway companies were able to run better train services through the strike than others. The final aspect of the strike's narrative which will be addressed is why and how so many railwaymen came out on strike. This updated narrative of the strike will draw from new research gathered from TNA.

Labour Unrest of 1919

The national railway strike was not the only industrial conflict Lloyd George's Coalition Government had to contend with following the First World War. There were strikes in a host of different industries which were focused on maintaining wage increases and condition improvements achieved by workers during the war. One of the most concerning episodes of labour unrest for the government was the Clydeside Strike of Engineers and Shipbuilders in January 1919. The striker's demands were for a 40 hour work week with the aim that discharged soldiers coming back into the workforce could find

employment.⁵⁶ The dispute culminated in a reported 30'000 protestors violently clashing with police on 31 January. Troops and tanks were moved into Glasgow to quell the disorder which was described by Secretary for Scotland Robert Munro as being 'a Bolshevik Uprising.'⁵⁷ According to labour historian Kenneth

Morgan, every "major labour dispute brought approaches from the government to the army and naval chiefs of staff to ensure that the maximum fighting power could be brought to bear to suppress the revolutionary working class."⁵⁸

One industry which was to prove particularly problematic for Lloyd George's Government in 1919 was the coal mines. The government during the war had taken the mines under state control. This government ownership led to vast improvements in working conditions and wages for the miners.⁵⁹ The main aim of the miners' union after the war was to maintain and build upon the successes they achieved during the war. In February 1919 the miners' union set out what they wanted to achieve from their negotiations with the government; which was for a 6 hour day, an advance of 30 percent on basic wage rates and nationalisation of the mines.⁶⁰ The government under threat of a national strike quickly set up a Royal Commission which was neutrally chaired by Mr. Justice Sankey. The Commission agreed to a wage increase in March.⁶¹ The Commission raised the issue of nationalisation in July, but this was rejected officially by Lloyd George on 19 August.⁶² The miners were forced

⁵⁶ Morgan, *Conflict and Order*, p. 76

⁵⁷ Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, p. 48

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5

to accept the government's decision with the Sankey wage enough to temporarily calm some of the tension.

The railways similar to the coal mines came under government ownership during the war. This ownership was extremely beneficial to the railwaymen with wages and conditions both being improved. The railway unions gained some concessions from the government early in 1919, including the 8 hour day.⁶³ The issue of wages was not to be so simply resolved. In regards to wages on the British railway, it was not a case of simply lowering or raising the railwaymen's pay. This was because there was no standard base rate of pay for railwaymen in the country. For example, a railwayman in one area, doing the same labour, in the same conditions, was receiving differing pay to another railwayman working in a different area.⁶⁴ The Government, with agreement from the railway unions, believed it in the benefit of all to lower the amount of grades on the railway and then standardise their rates of pay.⁶⁵ It is the debate on the standardisation of wages that led to the break down in relations between the NUR and the government. This is because the government decided to offer the locomotivemen standardisation upwards in August 1919.⁶⁶ This meant that no locomotiveman would have suffered a decrease in wages. The government did not offer this wage agreement to the rest of the railwaymen which naturally created real tension between the NUR and the government.

Although the issue of the standardisation of pay was eventually going to lead to the strike, this did not have to be the case. Both the General Secretary, Thomas, and the President, Charlie Cramp, of the NUR, were moderate trade unionists who were opposed to

⁶³ Howell, *Respectable Radicals*, p. 309

⁶⁴ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 380

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.380

⁶⁶ Howell, *Respectable Radicals*, p. 309

striking unless absolutely necessary.⁶⁷ Thomas used his diplomatic abilities earlier in the year to negotiate a prolongation of the wartime bonuses which were to be continued until December 1919.⁶⁸ It was this intervention which helped avert a strike in March. There was a combination of pressure from the more radical members of the NUR Executive to strike and the poor handling of negotiations from government ministers, notably Auckland Geddes, which eventually led to Thomas having no choice but to begin the dispute.⁶⁹ Auckland Geddes was the President of the Board of Trade and took a chief role in the negotiations with the railway union executive. Geddes, Morgan argues, “was hopelessly adrift, slow-witted, rigid and personally unsympathetic,” when it came to questions of labour.⁷⁰ Geddes alienated Thomas throughout the negotiation period and his comment that the government’s offer to the railwaymen was ‘definitive’ gave the railway union executive little option but to call the strike which they did.⁷¹

Just how moderate Thomas was is emphasized by how he did not consult the other Triple Alliance members, the Miners and the Transport Workers, before calling the strike.⁷² This was because Thomas did not want the strike to have wider political implications. It would have also delayed the beginning of the strike and allowed the government to prepare for the dispute. On the morning of September 30, 1919, however, Thomas declared, at a mass meeting of railwaymen at Clapham Common, “I have refused the offer of other trade unions to call their men out... but I am not going to continue to do so now that I am driven

⁶⁷ P. Williamson, ‘Thomas, James Henry (1874–1949)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), online edn.; & D. Howell, ‘Cramp, Concemore Thomas Thwaites (1876–1933)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), online edn.

⁶⁸ Williamson, ‘Thomas, James Henry (1874–1949)’

⁶⁹ Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, p. 51

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51

⁷² Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, pp. 399-401

to fight, and my back is to the wall.”⁷³ This seeming change in stance from General Secretary Thomas was followed by a meeting the subsequent day where the Railway Union Executive explained to around 70 delegates from organisations such as, the Labour Party, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Railway Clerks, the issues of the strike, however it must be noted that the railway union leaders emphasized at the meeting it was a dispute over wages only.⁷⁴ It was decided during this meeting that a deputation of 11 men, including Arthur Henderson, Ernest Bevin, and Harry Gosling, would go and discuss with Lloyd George a reasonable settlement which would end the strike fairly.⁷⁵ This initial meeting on 2 October was unsuccessful, and later on that day the deputation returned to Downing Street accompanied with the Railway Union Executive. At this meeting, Lloyd George proposed to the Railway Executive that a seven day truce should be declared and that the stabilisation of wages and alleged unfairness can be settled and discussed then. This was declined, and on 4 October, the members of the Downing Street deputation sent a letter to Lloyd George warning him that if he is not more reasonable with the Railway Executive’s demands “it would be impossible to avert a widespread extension of the strike with all its consequences.”⁷⁶ It was this declaration with the threat of wide spread strikes, which was a key reason why the government saw fit to come to a reasonable settlement with the railwaymen.

A Complete Paralysis?

When the railway strike began at midnight on 26 September 1919, Britain’s railway was brought to almost a complete standstill. The first two days of the strike were the most

⁷³ ‘Mr Thomas’ “Back To Wall”, *The Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 15, 3/10/1919, p. 421

⁷⁴ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 397

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 397

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 397-9

disrupted with both passenger and freight train services being significantly affected. It should be noted though that the Metropolitan was, as reported by the *Railway Gazette* on 3 October, “the only railway in England whose regular service was never entirely interrupted.”⁷⁷ The Metropolitan Line was the only public railway which was able to maintain a good service during the strike however privately owned railway lines like those in the north east of England were also unaffected by the dispute and were able to keep certain north eastern collieries open throughout the strike.⁷⁸

After the initial two days where the strike was at its most effective a real improvement in the number of trains ran in Britain can be noted. Sir Eric Geddes, who was the Minister of Transport during the strike, compiled a ‘General Railway Situation’ report each day of the strike, which detailed exactly how many trains were running on each line. Geddes reports that as early as 29 September that there had been “considerable improvement in the running of trains” and then on 30 September Geddes confirms that “Yesterday’s anticipations were realised or exceeded on all principal lines.”⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the reports by Geddes are incomplete, and they end on 1 October. Geddes does however again emphasize the continuing improvement in the railway’s service stating that there had been a “very large increase (in numbers of passenger and freight trains) from yesterday.”⁸⁰

The reports and official documents created by the Great Western Railway also support the idea that the railway’s service improved after the opening weekend of the dispute. According to the GWR’s figures on the first day of the dispute, 27 September, there

⁷⁷ *The Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 14, 3/10/1919, p. 47

⁷⁸ *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 30/9/1919

⁷⁹ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Sir Eric Geddes Daily Reports on the 1919 Railway Strike, 29/09/1919 & 30/09/1919

⁸⁰ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Sir Eric Geddes Daily Reports on the 1919 Railway Strike, 1/10/1919

were 10 passenger trains ran with no freights.⁸¹ By Sunday 28 the number of passenger trains had increased to 28 and one freight.⁸² The number of passenger and freight trains increased on every day of the dispute according to the figures in the GWR reports.⁸³ By 1 October 325 passenger and 26 freight trains were recorded, and this was to increase to 568 passenger and 48 freight trains on the penultimate day of the strike.⁸⁴

The north east of England follows a very similar pattern to that of the rest of the nation in regards to the paralysis of the railway at the beginning and the gradual improvement of the railway's service as the dispute progressed. In the north east, the strike was reported to have left stations completely empty on the opening weekend of the dispute. The *Northern Echo*, for example, ran the headline, "Deserted Northern Stations," on 29 September.⁸⁵ The *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant* also reported on the strike, in the same way, stressing the "desolate" looking railway stations in Sunderland and South Shields.⁸⁶ The *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* emphasized "the complete paralysis of railway traffic" which was felt on the first day of the strike in the Tyneside, Northumberland, and Durham areas.⁸⁷ However, the north eastern service began to improve and on 29 September, the North Eastern Railway Company managed to run 40 trains on their system, which increased to 62 by 30 September and to 80 on 1 October.⁸⁸

The railways in Essex on the opening weekend of the strike, like the rest of the nation, were described by the county and local press as being left abandoned. For example,

⁸¹ (TNA), RAIL 253/732, Table of trains ran on the GWR during the rail strike found in a report by the GWR Executive on the Rail Strike, (1919)

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ *The Northern Echo*, 29/9/1919

⁸⁶ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 29/9/1919

⁸⁷ *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 29/9/1919

⁸⁸ *The Northern Echo*, 2/10/1919

Witham Railway Junction, a usually busy station was described as presenting a “forlorn and deserted appearance.”⁸⁹ It was a similar story in the Brentwood District on the second day of the strike, 28 September, with only one train leaving the town.⁹⁰ However, the Essex County, like the rest of Britain began to improve after the opening weekend, with several passenger trains running through Chelmsford, going from Liverpool Street to Ipswich, on 29 September, with similar improvements occurring elsewhere.⁹¹ The situation in Cambridge also mimics the rest of Britain, with an initial near complete stoppage at the start and a gradual improvement as the strike continued. The *Cambridge Daily News*, on 1 October, reported that in Cambridge there was a “further improvement in the train service” and that a “few” more trains would be running on 1 October.⁹² By 3 October Cambridge had again improved and, despite the strike, was set to run 15 passenger trains on 4 October serving the surrounding area.⁹³

It is clear that the British railway service improved from the first day of the strike up until the last. What must be stressed is that the railway, without the vast majority of railwaymen, was never able to run anywhere near the number of trains that would have been running on a regular service at any stage during the dispute. This fact was emphasized by the Newcastle railwaymen, during the strike, who claimed, “A full service could only be secured by their return.”⁹⁴ General Secretary of the ASLEF, John Bromley (1876-1945), also argued, when questioned by the press on the improving system, that “I will give them 500 of our best drivers on the top of their present service, and then beat them.”⁹⁵ It was not just a

⁸⁹ *Essex County Chronicle*, 3/10/1919

⁹⁰ *Ibid*

⁹¹ *The Essex Newsman*, 4/10/1919

⁹² *The Cambridge Daily News*, 1/10/1919

⁹³ *The Cambridge Daily News*, 3/10/1919

⁹⁴ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 4/10/1919

⁹⁵ Raynes, *Engines and Men*, pp. 268-9

lack of drivers which hurt the Government's attempts at running an emergency train service; it was also the lack of signalmen. The signalmen were a vital part of the running of the railway, and without them, serious accidents could have occurred with trains not knowing when to stop and proceed. To combat the lack of signalmen the 'time interval system' was used.⁹⁶ The system meant that trains would set off only after a certain amount of time had elapsed after the last train had gone. This was an understandably dangerous method because if a train had broken down on the tracks, a serious collision could have occurred. While no accidents did happen during the dispute, it does show how desperate the government was in getting a train service up and running, safe or not.

The improving service ran by the government and the railway companies during the dispute may not have been up to normal standards however the maintaining of the service which did run certainly went in the government's favour and drastically damaged the railwaymen's overall chances of a successful resolution to the strike. As 'G. A. Sekon', in the *Railway and Travel Monthly*, argued in the aftermath of the strike, for a railway strike to be successful it must do so on the opening days, or it is "doomed to fail."⁹⁷

Beyond All Expectation

The 1919 rail strike had effectively brought the nation's railway to a standstill on 27 and 28 September. The main reason the strike was so effective at stopping the railway's services at the beginning of the dispute was because of the solid response from the railwaymen to stop work. On the first day of the strike, the union leaders, Thomas and Bromley, declared in their statements to the national press, that the numbers of railwaymen

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ 'G. A. Sekon', 'The Failure of the Lightning Strike', *The Railway and Travel Monthly*, Vol. XIX, No. 115, 11/11/1919, p. 347

that stopped work had “gone beyond all expectation.”⁹⁸ This disciplined and solid national response contrasts with the 1911 national rail strike which began unofficially and only really took effect in the industrial centres of the nation including the north, Midlands, and South Wales.⁹⁹

One reason why the 1919 railway strike was more solid than the 1911 dispute was because of the developments in railway trade unionism. The foundation of the NUR in 1913 with the merging of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, the General Railway Workers' Union and the Signalmen's Society, meant that the railwaymen had a union which could represent their large workforce. Union membership grew substantially from 159,261 at the union's formation in March 1913 to 267,611 by the end of the year.¹⁰⁰ With this growth came greater opportunity to push in a unified manner for wages and conditions improvements. During the First World War, both the NUR and the ASLEF gained recognition from the companies.¹⁰¹ This was a significant step forward for the unions and meant that the unions could negotiate directly with the companies. The strategy of conciliation particularly suited Thomas who was firmly against striking unless entirely necessary.¹⁰² The growth of union membership and union recognition by the companies contributed significantly to why the 1919 strike was so solid.

It must be emphasized the importance of the decision made by Bromley, the General Secretary of the ALSEF, and the ASLEF's executive to come out on strike in sympathy of the NUR. Without the ASLEF's support, the strike would not have been as successful as the

⁹⁸ *The Times*, 30/9/1919

⁹⁹ Howell, 'The Contribution of Direct Action', p. 71

¹⁰⁰ *The Railway Review*, 'Silver Jubilee Supplement', (1938)

¹⁰¹ Williamson, 'Thomas, James Henry (1874–1949)'

¹⁰² *Ibid*

locomotivemen who were members of the union would have remained at work. This is not to say that all the locomotivemen would have stayed at work if the ASLEF did not call a sympathetic strike because the NUR was the dominant union of the locomotivemen. The ASLEF became the dominant union of locomotivemen in the mid-1920s.¹⁰³

RAILWAY STAFF 1920. NUMBER OF MEN ON STRIKE.

Railway.	Total No. of Men on Strike.	Percentage to Total Staff.	No. of Men in Operating Dept. on Strike.	Percentage to Total Operating Staff.	No. of Men on Strike in each Department.							
					Loco.	Engin.	Goods.	Wagon.	Signal.	Telegr.	Other	Other
Caledonian.	10,760	76.21	10,000	87.0	4,770	5,004	2,300	2,207	1,000	81	107	209
C.L.C.	3,024	81.0	2,470	87.0	-	1,400	1,010	500	500	7	20	107
C. & N.W.R.	6,927	77.65	5,000	83.0	2,100	2,000	1,400	1,000	1,000	10	50	50
G.D.R.	24,140	64.8	10,000	46.1	5,710	5,000	3,700	2,071	2,100	200	177	1,107
G.N.R.	25,770	70.0	10,000	40.0	5,007	6,000	4,000	2,000	4,000	170	170	207
G.N.R.	20,040	77.1	10,000	50.0	5,100	10,000	-	4,000	2,000	50	100	200
G.N.R.	20,000	69.0	10,000	50.0	14,071	17,100	2,000	7,000	2,000	217	1,000	200
L. & N.W.R.	29,371	70.2	10,000	34.1	6,000	5,100	2,000	2,000	2,000	100	107	100
L. & N.W.R.	27,040	66.0	10,000	37.0	14,000	14,000	10,000	2,000	10,000	200	-	1,000
L. & N.W.R.	20,000	70.0	10,000	50.0	2,100	2,000	2,100	2,000	2,000	100	100	1,000
L. & N.W.R.	10,000	80.0	8,000	80.0	1,700	2,000	1,100	2,000	2,000	100	100	200
Metropolitan.	5,000	80.0	4,000	80.0	100	1,000	20	200	200	200	100	100
Nat. Dist. Comm.	7,000	80.0	6,000	85.7	-	1,000	-	1,000	-	1,000	-	-
Midland.	27,000	80.0	10,000	37.0	11,710	10,000	11,000	2,000	2,000	100	100	-
N.W.R.	10,000	80.0	10,000	100.0	5,000	5,100	1,700	4,000	2,000	100	100	-
N.W.R.	20,000	80.0	10,000	50.0	2,000	4,100	10,000	2,000	10,000	50	100	200
N. Staffs.	4,170	70.1	2,000	47.9	700	1,000	500	200	200	50	50	200
N.W.R. S.E.	10,000	80.0	10,000	100.0	4,770	5,100	2,000	2,000	2,000	100	100	200
Staffs. Vale.	4,000	80.0	3,000	75.0	1,000	1,000	100	200	1,100	-	-	100

* Included in Traffic.

Figure 2: (TNA), MT 49/51, Table showing the 19 Systems which had 3000 or more working staff, 8/1/1920 – give the title of the paper as shown in the image?

On 8 January, 1920, the Railway Executive Committee, which comprised of leading general managers on Britain’s railways, such as Sir Alexander Kaye Butterworth of the North

¹⁰³ Howell, *Respectable Radicals*, p. 7

Eastern Railway and John Audley Frederick Aspinall of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway, sent secret detailed tables of all of the railwaymen who came out on strike during the dispute to the Supply and Transport Sub-Committee.¹⁰⁴ These tables included the total number of men on strike on each railway, the percentage of that number of men on strike in each railway, the percentage of that number to the total operating staff, and the number of men on strike in each Department. There are 63 systems which are listed in total, the 19 which are most significant, due to the fact 3,000 or more came out on strike on them, were put in a separate table by the Railway Executive Committee which can be seen above (fig 1).¹⁰⁵ It can be noted that the total percentage of railwaymen on strike to the total staff ranged from 64.6 percent (24,140 railwaymen), on the Great Central Railway, to 92.25 percent (19,849 railwaymen), on the North British Railway.¹⁰⁶ The overall railwaymen's response to strike on the Great Central Railway goes against Bagwell's argument that there was a total walkout on all systems. The Great Central Railway was not the only major system which experienced a comparatively low total walkout, the London and North Western Railway was also low, only 66 percent of their total staff ceased work, which totalled 67,346 railwaymen, the highest amount on any system.¹⁰⁷ The average of the total number of railwaymen which struck on the 19 most significant systems was 80.65 percent, according to the data provided by the Railway Executive Committee.¹⁰⁸ This means that approximately 90,893 out of 454,469 railwaymen were still available to do their job on these systems which

¹⁰⁴ (TNA), MT 49/51, Railway Executive Committee Figures for Railwaymen who came out on Strike during the 1919 rail dispute, 8/1/1920

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

would have contributed to the improvements in the number of trains being run as the strike progressed.

While the total number of railwaymen who came out on strike is lower than what has been alluded to in the historiography, the numbers of the essential grades which came out on strike are higher. According to the Railway Executive Committee figures, the numbers of railwaymen who worked in the operating departments that came out on strike on the 19 most significant systems varied from 71.2 percent (4591 railwaymen) on the Metropolitan District and Tubes, to 99 percent (2825 railwaymen) at Taff Vale.¹⁰⁹ The average percentage of railwaymen employed in the operating departments out on strike was 91 percent on the 19 systems.¹¹⁰ The operating grades support the historiography that the strike was a total walkout however it still must be said that the 9 percent that remained loyal would have contributed in a small way to the increase of trains run through the dispute. The importance of the operating grades to the strike is symbolised by the fact that the only railway to maintain a service throughout the strike was the Metropolitan Line, the system with the highest number of loyal operating staff.

In a detailed report on the strike, created by the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company's Managing Committee, the figures of all of the railwaymen who had ceased work under the company's management, their grade and how many men returned to work as the strike continued had been compiled.¹¹¹ The only grade of railwaymen which came out 100 percent on strike were the Glandpackers as can be noted via the table below (fig 2).¹¹² 88.71

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ (TNA), RAIL 633/445, South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company's Managing Committee Records on numbers of railwaymen who came out on strike, their grade and how many railwaymen returned to work, (1919)

¹¹² Ibid

percent of the company's drivers and 96.62 percent of the firemen came out on strike at the beginning, which, while still high, was not the total walkout that Bagwell alludes to.¹¹³

Overall, according to the SE & CR Managing Committee's report at the beginning of the strike, 19992 railwaymen came out, which totalled 79.32 percent of all the railwaymen.¹¹⁴ In regards to the railwaymen which returned to work the company reported on each day of the strike, with the grades and the amounts of men being noted. On 4 October the amount was 723 altogether who had resumed, which equalled 3.63 percent of the total railwaymen in the company.¹¹⁵

Similar to the SE & CR, the GWR recorded the percentage of each grade of railwaymen out on strike each day of the dispute. One grade of railwaymen worth mentioning in the GWR are the drivers. This is because the drivers dropped from 85 percent out on strike on the first two days of the dispute to 74 percent for the rest of the dispute.¹¹⁶ The reason that approximately 11 percent of the drivers decided to go back to work is not explained in the report, but their return would have certainly contributed to the increase in trains run on the system as the strike progressed.

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ (TNA), RAIL 253/732, Table created by the Great Western Railway Company's Managing Committee Records on numbers of railwaymen on strike during the dispute, (1919)

NATIONAL RAILWAY STRIKE - 1919
No. in each grade who went out on Strike with percentage.

GRADE	TOTAL No. who went out	% of Grade
	77	82.70
Boilermakers	469	91.06
Carsmen	327	92.56
Checkers	18	.77
Clerks	1001	96.34
Cleaners (Loco.)	317	92.12
Cleaners (Carr.)	256	94.46
Coalmen	267	72.29
Collectors & Examiners	1100	88.71
Drivers (Loco.)	1317	96.32
Firemen (Loco.)	79	88.76
Firelighters	122	46.96
Foremen	21	77.78
Handpackers	107	100.00
Pressers & Oilers	866	94.59
Guards	99	77.92
Forcekeepers	71	21.41
Inspectors	71	91.02
Numberlayers	256	96.32
Permanent Waymen	2984	93.12
Porters (all classes)	656	96.61
Shunters & Couplers	4445	92.21
Shoemen	962	91.56
Signalmen	146	77.22
Signal Lads, Telephone Lads & Messengers.	193	98.97
Vanguards	40	92.61
Wharfmen	1108	-
Miscellaneous Grades		
No. who went out on Strike	19992	79.32
Loyal	4692	19.41
Absent from other causes	320	1.27
TOTAL	25204	
No. who went out on Strike	19974	87.95
Loyal	2439	10.74
Absent from other causes	296	1.31
TOTAL	22711	

Includes Station Masters, Goods Agents & Clerks (Except Chief Offices).
Exclusive of Goods Agents, Stationmasters and Clerks.

Figure 3: (TNA), RAIL 633/445, Numbers of railwaymen (including percentages) who struck on the South Eastern and Chatham Railway, (1919)

The Solidarity of the Railwaymen

The decision to call the strike fell to the General Secretary of the NUR, Thomas, and his Executive. When the ASLEF decided to strike in sympathy the decision was made by General Secretary Bromley and his Executive. The railwaymen themselves were not given a ballot on the decision to come out on strike. It is therefore hard to determine how many railwaymen wanted the strike at the beginning of the dispute. According to Bagwell, the executive of the NUR believed that if they had not pressed the government and called a

national strike then it would have caused “a series of local and sectional strikes.”¹¹⁷ The chaotic and violent events of the 1911 national rail strike, which began with unofficial localised strikes, would have certainly impacted on the minds of the union executives.¹¹⁸ Even if the railwaymen were offered a ballot on whether to strike, it would have taken far too long to organise. Time, after all, was the greatest weapon the railwaymen had during the strike; the fact the strike could be unleashed as a ‘surprise’ meant that the government and railway companies would have had little time to implement emergency measures to cope with the cessation of the railway.

In the north east of England, the railwaymen appeared to be fully supportive of the strike. From the start to the finish of the dispute there were meetings of railwaymen across the region where proclamations were made in support of the strike. For example, on the first day of the dispute, 27 September, it was unanimously agreed at a meeting of the Newcastle branch of the NUR that they would act in accordance with union instruction.¹¹⁹ There was another meeting of railwaymen on 29 September in Newcastle where it was agreed that the railwaymen had “withdrawn their labour willingly at the behest of their leaders.”¹²⁰ In Middlesbrough, on 30 September there was a large meeting of railwaymen held at the Zion Methodist Chapel where “expressions of determination to continue the course, and to fight with all the resolution and resources at command.”¹²¹ In Sunderland on 4 October, it was reported that while a few men were returning to work, there was a willingness and desire to carry on.¹²² There is no clear evidence to suggest that the

¹¹⁷ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 382

¹¹⁸ S. Davies, ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’, pp. 97-115

¹¹⁹ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 27/9/1919

¹²⁰ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 29/9/1919

¹²¹ *Northern Echo*, 30/9/1919

¹²² *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 4/10/1919

railwaymen were against the strike in the north east, at least in the local and regional press reports.

There are a few reasons which may have contributed to the railwaymen of the north east's support of the strike. One reason was that the railwaymen in the region were amongst some of the highest paid railway workers in the country.¹²³ This meant that the government and railway company's proposed standardisation policy, which had caused the strike, would have potentially decreased the regions railwaymen's wages significantly. Another factor which would have added to the railwaymen's support of the strike was the industrialisation of the north of east of England. At the time of the strike, the north east was an industrial super power, with prospering heavy industries. This industrialisation created an unionised population in the region; including miners, ship builders, and Dockers unions. This meant that the idea of worker solidarity was something which permeated through the community. This overall worker solidarity in the region, which was to play a significant role in the rise of the Labour Party in Britain, contributed to the support of the strike by the region's railwaymen.

There is also evidence to suggest that the railwaymen in the northern Home Counties were behind the strike. This is because there were, like in the north east of England, many railwaymen's meetings which took place where the railwaymen expressed their support for the dispute. For example, on the evening of 26 September, the local Cambridge railwaymen held a mass meeting in the Midland Tavern and passed the resolution that they would be supporting the resolution and refusing the government's offer.¹²⁴ The railwaymen in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, also held mass meetings in support

¹²³ *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 25/9/1919

¹²⁴ *Cambridge Daily News*, 27/9/1919

of the dispute throughout the strike; the argument regularly presented was that they were not attacking the community but instead were just vying for “common justice.”¹²⁵ The railwaymen came out fully in Aylesbury, and the pickets which arrived on 27 September left after four hours as there was no need for them due to no one returning to work.¹²⁶

These meetings were also used as a tool to persuade the public and other workers in the local area to support and understand the strike. For instance, there was a large meeting held on 1 October in Chelmsford, Essex, by the railwaymen where they explained to the public that the strike was not against the community but was against the employers, who were the government.¹²⁷ At the same meeting, the railwaymen requested the support of the other trade unionists in the area, as, according to the railwaymen, if the government force their wages down the rest of the workers of Britain would be next.¹²⁸

The holding of local and county meetings was not the only tool the unions used to maintain the unity and spirits of the railwaymen. There were also hundreds of charity football matches that were organised across Britain and other events such as the strikers’ procession in Cambridge, where a large body of local strikers marched through Cambridge headed by a band.¹²⁹ These events would have certainly roused the railwaymen’s spirits. There would have also been a family element to these events, where the families of the men on strike would have met, serving as another unifying element to the men on the strike. The element of family and community would have meant that returning to work

¹²⁵ *The Bucks Herald*, 4/10/1919

¹²⁶ *Ibid*

¹²⁷ *Essex Newman*, 4/10/1919

¹²⁸ *Ibid*

¹²⁹ *The Cambridge Daily News*, 29/9/1919

would have jeopardised not only the striker's relationships with their colleagues but their family's relationships with other railwaymen's families in the community.

The importance of family and community was even more significant in small communities which were reliant on the railway. An example Howell brings to light is the isolated railway community of Riccarton in Scotland. At Riccarton Junction, a fireman, Cairns, returned to work during the 1919 strike and had stones thrown through his windows for doing for so.¹³⁰ His wife was also verbally assaulted by the strikers.¹³¹ The tensions between the fireman and his wife and the rest of the community did not finish with the ending of the strike. Cairns emphasized how the women were the "worst enemies" and that because his wife was from London, she was regarded as an outsider.¹³² The importance of family and the sense of community goes some way in explaining why the railwaymen came out on strike in such high numbers across Britain. If they remained at work, particularly in the smaller communities more reliant on the railway, the fallout could have been social ostracism for both the railwayman and his family. Cairns makes the point that the company management did not afford the level of protection they promised during the strike.¹³³ It is safe to say that would have also been the case after the strike as well; even with the settlement stating that all railwaymen would have to go back to work in harmony.

The example at Riccarton Junction was not the only instance of intimidation by strikers towards loyal men which were recorded during the strike. One report written by the Major General Staff of the General Head Quarters took note of any reported "Sabotage" or

¹³⁰ Howell, *Respectable Radicals*, pp. 311-12

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 312

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 312

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 312

“Intimidation” on each day of the strike.¹³⁴ In this report, there were numerous accounts of violence against loyal men. On 3 October a loyal signalman reported that he had had the windows of his house broken during the night.¹³⁵ On the same day, there were two reported instances of intimidation by the strikers in Leeds; an inspector was threatened with bodily violence, and a fireman’s house was surrounded by 150 strikers because he had returned to work.¹³⁶ On the North Eastern Railway on 4 October the house of a loyal employee was entered, and the striking railwaymen urged him to leave work.¹³⁷ The fact strikers went to the homes of loyal men represents how closely knit these railway communities were. It also represents the risk loyal railway workers took in returning to work. The threat of physical violence, coupled with the potential for social ostracism, undoubtedly had an impact on why so many railwaymen came out and remained out on strike.

The North British Railway Company certainly believed that the fear of violence and intimidation was having an impact on why there were not more railwaymen returning to work. On 27 September, the NBR Company reported that “picketing is being carried on extensively, but if adequate protection is afforded a number of men might return to work.”¹³⁸ The same sentiments were echoed in Leeds by the towns Chief Constable who believed that potentially “75 per cent of the strikers would return to duty if they were assured of protection.”¹³⁹ It is unlikely that many more men would have gone back to work

¹³⁴ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Daily Reports by the Major General Staff on Sabotage, Disruption and Intimidation during the 1919 Railway Strike, (1919)

¹³⁵ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Intimidation found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 3/10/1919

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Intimidation found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 4/10/1919

¹³⁸ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report by NBR on how picketing was stopping men from returning to work in the Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 27/9/1919

¹³⁹ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report by Chief Constable of Leeds on how intimidation was stopping striking railwaymen returning to work found in the Daily Reports by the Major General Staff, 2/10/1919

even if the government and companies could have provided better protection. This is because it was not the direct fear of violence that stopped the railwaymen going back to work it was the fear of losing their place in the community.

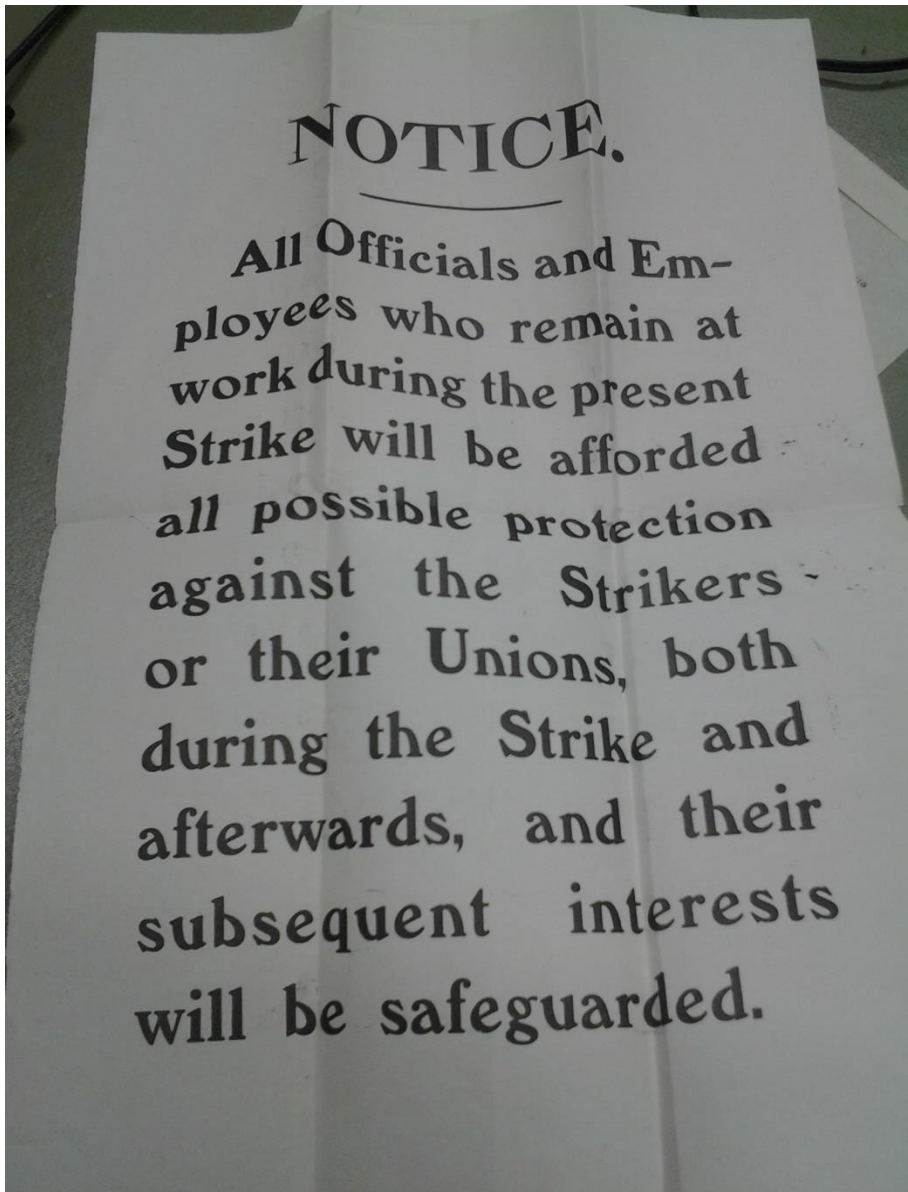


Figure 4: (TNA), MT 6/2547/7, A government poster which was aimed at getting striking railwaymen back to work and loyal railwaymen to remain at work. (1919)

The mass meetings and events of strikers organised by the railway unions in the north east and the northern Home Counties represented the increased organisational abilities of the two railway unions. It also represented the idea of community and solidarity

amongst the railwaymen. The railwaymen often formed closely knit social groups which permeated not just through relationships at work but also at home and in the community. These meetings then occurred both because of the increased organisational abilities of the unions and the desire for local railwaymen to meet and discuss the strikes events. The meetings would have encouraged and unified the strikers and certainly would have played a role in deterring railwaymen that may have been considering going back to work.

What is most striking about the solidarity and sense of community shown by the railwaymen is that it was not confined to certain geographical locations. The railwaymen in the north east of England came out in extremely high numbers and showed their support of the strike via meetings and events. The railwaymen in the northern Home Counties also came out in similar numbers and showed their support for the strike, just like in the north east, through attending meetings and events. The enormous difference in the socioeconomic structure of the north east, with its heavily unionised population and industrial economy, compared with the northern Home Counties, an area reliant on agriculture and very little unionisation, shows that the sense of solidarity of the railwaymen did not depend on location but on the industry itself.

Conclusion

The strike can be considered a complete stoppage on the opening days of the dispute. After this, however, the emergency train service ran by the government and railway companies began to improve day by day. This improvement can be noted in the government and railway company figures and reports. The initial stoppage was due to the unprecedented number of railwaymen who came out on strike following the railway union's call on 26 September. The solidarity exhibited by the railwaymen in 1919 represented at the

time how far the railway union movement had come in the organisation and control of their membership since the chaos of the 1911 national rail strike. One reason why the 1919 rail strike had such high numbers of railwaymen ceasing work was because of the importance of community and social solidarity amongst the railwaymen. This is why the strike was solid everywhere and why local meetings were attended no matter the geographical location.

This chapter raises questions which will be addressed in the following chapter.

Firstly, how did the government maintain a rail service during a strike which was, in terms of numbers of railwaymen on strike, worse than 1911? Secondly, how did the government maintain order amongst the striking railwaymen so efficiently when the 1911 strike spiralled so wildly out of control?

(3) The Government's Emergency Measures

The nation's railways were by far the most essential mode of transport in Britain in 1919; heavy industry relied upon them, the vast majority of citizens relied on them for travel, newspaper circulations relied on them and communities relied on them to deliver food and other necessities.¹⁴⁰ With practically all of the nation's railwaymen ceasing work at midnight on 26 September, Lloyd George's Government had to make many quick and crucial decisions to combat the strike and maintain the essential services which the railways provided.

The main aim of this chapter will be to emphasize just how seriously and emphatically Lloyd George's Coalition Government dealt with the railway strike. It focuses on the emergency measures which the government implemented during the dispute. The first emergency measure which will be assessed is the government's decision to call on public volunteers to help run the railway and maintain essential services. The next will be the role the Ministry of Food played during the dispute with a focus on the implementation of an emergency road transport scheme. The last measure will be the role the Police and Armed Forces played during the strike.

These three emergency measures are amongst the most influential that the government implemented to combat the strike and all contributed to why the rail strike did not achieve a victory for the railwaymen on the opening days of the dispute. As these measures had such a profound impact on the outcome of the dispute and because they have been somewhat overlooked in the historiography of the strike, each measure will be assessed individually. Firstly, what the government hoped to achieve with each emergency

¹⁴⁰ Motor transport was at a relatively primitive stage during the strikes period and could not on its own replace the work of the railways

measure will be examined. After the emergency measures' main roles are identified the question of whether they were successfully implemented will follow.

These emergency measures would have never have been able to function without a complex and considered network of emergency Strike Committees, Strike Sub-Committees and government departments all working in harmony to combat the dispute.

A Sophisticated Network

When the rail strike began, Lloyd George immediately started planning how the government was going to deal with the dispute. This preparation to combat the strike began on 26 September when the Prime Minister met with the War Cabinet to “consider the measures necessary to cope with the situation.”¹⁴¹ At this Cabinet meeting, it was decided that a special strike committee to deal with the railway crisis should be appointed, this included the Minister of Transport, Sir Eric Geddes, as the Chair, the Secretary of State for War, Sir Winston Churchill and the Minister of Labour, Sir Robert Horne, amongst others. This committee was in charge of creating the government's emergency measures.

It should be noted that before the railway strike, according to a review of the strike months after the dispute written by a Special Sub-Committee under the Chairmanship of Sir Rhys Williams, who was parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Transport Sir Eric Geddes, there was no adequate organisation which existed that could deal with such a large industrial crisis.¹⁴² Instead, the machinery which was created to combat the strike was of an “organic growth,” developing and changing as the strike progressed.¹⁴³ The government

¹⁴¹ (TNA), CAB 23/12/11, Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet regarding the 1919 Railway Strike, 26/9/1919

¹⁴² (TNA), CAB 27/60, A General Review of the Work of the Strike Committee in Sir Rhys Williams Report on the 1919 Rail Strike, p. 31, (1919)

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 31

organisation which was in place before the railway strike and that assisted in the preparing of the emergency measures to combat the rail strike was the Industrial Unrest Committee created by the Cabinet in February 1919. This Committee examined questions such as coal distribution in the event of a miners' strike and the use of the army in guarding essential services. Owing to the magnitude of the rail strike Lloyd George and the War Cabinet, in a Cabinet Meeting on 14 October 1919 decided that it was necessary to replace the Industrial Unrest Committee with a National Emergency Committee which was entitled "The Supply and Transport Committee of the War Cabinet."¹⁴⁴ This was because it was felt by Lloyd George and the War Cabinet that some nucleus of the emergency strike organisation should remain after the rail dispute so that if a similar crisis to that of the rail strike occurred again, the government would be better prepared to deal with it.¹⁴⁵ The new Supply and Transport Committee comprised of the Minister of Transport, the Home Secretary, the President of the Board of Trade, the Food Controller and the Minister of Labour. The new committee was ordered to supervise in the preparation of the report on the strike which was to become the Williams report on the dispute.

The government's initial Strike Committee, as the strike progressed, evolved into a significant and sophisticated network of numerous Sub-Committees and government departments. In the Williams report on the strike there are a total of 17 different bodies recorded all working to combat the dispute; this included: the Communications Sub-Committee, the Ministry of Food, the Employment Sub-Committee, the Protection Sub-Committee, the Road Transport Sub-Committee and the Petrol Sub-Committee.¹⁴⁶ Each of

¹⁴⁴ (TNA), CAB 23/12/15, Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet Discussing the 1919 Railway Strike, 14/10/1919

¹⁴⁵ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Introduction to the Sir Rhys Williams Report on the 1919 Rail Strike, (1919)

¹⁴⁶ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Summaries of Reports Furnished by Sub-Committees of the Strike Committee and Government Departments, P. 111, (1919)

these bodies submitted summaries of their work during the strike to the Williams Sub-Committee and these summaries can be examined in the following pages of the Williams report. The complex and comprehensive nature of the government's response to the strike emphasizes just how important defeating the rail strike was for their anti-union agenda.

Lloyd George and the War Cabinet created this sophisticated network between the main Strike Committee, Strike Sub-Committees, government departments and the Railway Executive Committee so that the necessary and most effective policies and measures could be implemented as the events of the strike unfolded. For example, the Protection Sub-Committee, which was chaired by the Home Secretary Edward Shortt, was given the responsibility of making sure vulnerable points on the railways were guarded and that the necessary actions were taken, in regards to maintaining order amongst the railwaymen, during the strike by the appropriate departments. While the strike was uneventful in regards to disturbances, the Protection Sub-Committee helped coordinate and kept in daily contact with the Chief Constables and the Secretary of State for War. For example, a letter was sent on 30 September 1919 from the Home Office to all Chief Constables which directed the police to "at once... report any serious development, particularly any disorder or apprehended disorder, sabotage, etc."¹⁴⁷ The work of the Protection Sub-Committee and the collaboration between themselves and the other government emergency organisations certainly contributed to the lack of disturbances during the strike. This was because the Police forces and the Army, from the very start of the dispute, were highly organised and strategically positioned.¹⁴⁸ The example of the

¹⁴⁷ (TNA) HO 144/1679/390500, Letter Sent from Home Office to Chief Constables Across Britain, 30/9/1919

¹⁴⁸ The lack of disorder from the striking railwaymen is also due to the Railway Union Executive who demanded the strike be conducted peacefully.

Protection Sub-Committee highlights how effective and complex the government's Strike Machinery was.

The government's strike network also recorded exactly how many railwaymen went on strike in each district with percentages of each grade that went out during the dispute.¹⁴⁹ This report was produced from the start of the strike and continued until the end of the dispute. This report allowed the government to monitor how many railwaymen remained on strike throughout the dispute and whether men were beginning to return to work. This monitoring of the numbers of men on strike was important for the choosing of actions the government was to take in the negotiations with the railway union executives; if for example there was a sharp increase of men going back to work then the government could have used this opportunity to press the railway executive into finishing the strike. Detailed reports were also produced by the government's strike network on the numbers of trains being run on each railway, the amount of food in each region of the country and the numbers of volunteers in each railway company.¹⁵⁰ All of this information was used to ensure the most effective policies and measures were being carried out throughout the strike. For example, if there was a dire lack of food in one area of the country then an appropriate solution could have been arranged by the Ministry of Food, if there was an increase in the number of trains being run adequate to deliver essential mail, then emergency services provided by the Royal Air Force could be abandoned, which they were, and so on.

¹⁴⁹ (TNA), MT 49/51, Railway Executive Committee Figures for Railwaymen who came out on Strike during the 1919 Rail Dispute, 8/1/1920

¹⁵⁰ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Daily Reports by the Major General Staff on the Railway Strike, (1919); & (TNA), CAB 27/60, Daily Reports by Sir Eric Geddes on the Railway Strike, pp. 304-475, (1919)

Stocks of Refrigerated and Tinned Meat (26th September, 1919) 312

Area	Population	Stock		Daily Requirements of all meat Tons	Number of days supply if met by		
		Refrigerated meat Tons	Tinned meat Tons		Refrigerated meat alone days	Tinned (a) Meat alone days	Both days
Newcastle	2,130,000	330	460	180	13	3	43
Leeds	4,100,000	4,520	2,596	350	12	11	23
Preston	6,110,000	23,740	19,561	520	46	56	102
Birmingham	2,785,000	490	74	240	2	-	2
Birmingham	2,450,000	380	588	300	1	3	4
Cambridge	1,310,000	26	10	110	-	-	-
London	4,365,000	43,100	10,538	370	115	42	157
Home Counties							
(North)	2,640,000	14	39	250	-	-	(b)
(South)	2,610,000	288	83	270	1	-	1(b)
Reading	1,910,000	3,000	143	160	18	1	19
Bristol	2,360,000	1,900	3,609	300	9	28	37
IRELAND TOTAL	34,062,000	77,788	38,001	2,900	26	19	45
Ulster	490,000	-	-	40	-	-	-
Connaught	2,080,000	2,880	1,147	180	18	9	25
WALES TOTAL	2,540,000	2,880	1,147	270	13	7	20
Edinburgh	1,633,000	900	413	170	5	3	8
Glasgow	2,800,000	3,520	1,422	270	16	9	25
Inverness	357,000	-	-	30	-	-	-
SCOTLAND TOTAL	4,900,000	4,420	1,835	470	10	6	16
IRELAND	4,300,000	125	8	370	-	-	-

(a) Allowance has been made for tinned meat being the more highly concentrated form of food.
(b) These Divisions draw from London.

MINISTRY OF FOOD.

ON CONSULTATION with the Labour Minister that have had been agreed in consultation with him and the Home Secretary.

Figure 5: (TNA), CAB 27/60, This is an example of the government's record keeping on levels of food across the country. These are the figures for stocks of refrigerated and tinned meat; there were reports for all other major food types such as milk and bread. 20/9/1919

Volunteers Wanted!

The government, in a bold move, called upon volunteers to maintain the country's essential services. According to the government's initial call for volunteers in the national press, "every citizen" needed to do their part in order to avert "national starvation and the ruin of industry."¹⁵¹ The government appealed to the public on 29 September, urging anyone who possessed qualifications in the following areas; Engine Drivers and Firemen, Stokers, Signalmen, Foremen, Stablemen, (for tending to the horses) carters, checkers,

¹⁵¹ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Example of Press Release included in the Williams Report on the 1919 Railway Strike, (1919)

porters, cleaners, to come forward and make contact with the head offices or local superintendents of any of the railway companies.¹⁵² The railway companies also called upon their clerical staff to volunteer, and in the case of the Great Western Railway, the entire office staff volunteered their services.¹⁵³ The clerical staff began voluntary positions from the outset of the strike.¹⁵⁴ Voluntary jobs were not just available on the railway; there was also a call for volunteers who could drive a “Motor Car or Motor Lorry,” who could act as a Special Constable, and also anyone who was engaged in civil aviation.¹⁵⁵

During the 1911 national rail strike, the government called upon the Army to help maintain and keep the railway running.¹⁵⁶ However, during the 1919 rail strike, at a meeting of a Strike Sub-Committee which was formed to assess the viability and availability of the Armed Forces for maintaining the railway services, it was decided that it was “most undesirable to compel serving soldiers, sailors or airmen to assist in maintaining the Railway Services of the Country.”¹⁵⁷ This was because the government could not afford to be perceived to be using the Armed Forces as strikebreakers. It was instead advised by the Sub-Committee on the use of the Armed Forces during the strike that the government should ask for their ‘voluntary’ assistance.¹⁵⁸ The Armed Forces which did volunteer their services during the strike were instructed not to wear their uniforms while performing their

¹⁵² ‘Volunteers For Railway Work’, *The Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 14, 3/10/1919, pp. 410-1

¹⁵³ (TNA), RAIL 253/732, Report detailing who volunteered for the GWR during the 1919 Rail Strike by the GWR Executive, 10/10/1919

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Example of Press Release included in the Williams Report on the 1919 Railway Strike, p. 280, (1919)

¹⁵⁶ Davies, ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’, p. 101

¹⁵⁷ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Report by Sub-Committee on the Viability of the Armed Forces as Volunteers During the 1919 Rail Strike, p. 264, 27/9/1919

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

voluntary duties by the government.¹⁵⁹ This was because it was feared these army volunteers might be misconstrued as strikebreakers.

The main problem which the government and railway companies faced when calling upon volunteers to run the railway was that certain crucial railway jobs were too specialised for the majority of the volunteer workforce. It was not possible, for example, to teach a volunteer with no experience how to drive a train or operate an engine in a few days. The issue of signalling was also a significant problem during the strike for the railway companies. However, it was possible to train volunteers, in a relatively short space of time, to become signallers. Training centres for voluntary signallers were set up during the strike across the country, such as the temporary school established at Park Royal, which also trained, with “intensive methods,” linesmen and shunters.¹⁶⁰ In a report by the GWR’s Executive on the strike the ‘desertion’ of the signalmen meant that the trains ran by the Company had to be worked on a “time interval system.”¹⁶¹ The “time interval system” essentially meant that a train could only run at full speed after a certain amount of time had elapsed after the train in front had left. This was a dangerous and outdated method because if there was a breakdown between stations or the train behind caught up with the train in front, a serious collision could have taken place; this fortunately never occurred during the dispute. According to the report by the Executive of the GWR, on the last days of the strike large numbers of signal boxes were opened owing predominantly to the work of volunteers; 483 signal boxes were in commission by the end of the dispute, 159 manned by regular signalman and 373 by volunteers.¹⁶² Other voluntary jobs which were available such as

¹⁵⁹ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Protection Sub-Committee Minutes, 28/09/1919

¹⁶⁰ (TNA), RAIL 253/732, Report by the GWR Executive on Volunteers During the 1919 Railway Strike, 10/10/1919

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Ibid

looking after the horses, porters, ticket collectors and cleaners were much easier to assign to the volunteers as they were less specialised work.

Despite the initial challenges of organising the volunteers and training them the government's emergency volunteer army did an effective job. This was mainly because the call for volunteers was so well received. Across Britain thousands of the general public, ex-railwaymen and members of the Armed Forces registered their services. For example, on 30 September, 1,500 volunteers were working on the London Underground, with improvements in numbers of trains run on the District and Hampstead tube.¹⁶³ The London and North Western Railway and the GWR also had a high influx of volunteers, 2,500 and 4000 respectively and both saw an increase in their trains ran from the start to the finish of the dispute.¹⁶⁴ In a report by the General Manager of the GWR, James Milne, it is stated that 8,625 people volunteered to work for the company with 4113 being put to work.¹⁶⁵ Of these volunteers 1203 were members of the company's staff, 2511 were taken from the Navy, Military, and R.A.F., 106 were Pensioners, and retired railway workers and the rest were members of the public.¹⁶⁶

The government's call for volunteers to run the railway in Britain in response to the strike was met with high numbers of applicants in the north east. According to *The Railway Gazette*, the response to the call for volunteers in the region was positive with "several thousand (volunteers) ... offering their assistance" during the strike.¹⁶⁷ The response to the government's call was immediate and continual in the region as it was

¹⁶³ 'G. A. Sekon', 'Facts and Incidents During the Great Industrial Crisis', *The Railway and Travel Monthly*, Vol. XIX, No. 115, 11/1919, p. 345

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 340-4

¹⁶⁵ (TNA), RAIL 253/732, Extract from the Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors held at Paddington Station, 10/10/1919

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁷ *The Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 15, 10/10/1919, pp. 460-3

across the country, the *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, as early as 29 September, asserted that the NER Company had received “a large number of (volunteer) applications.”¹⁶⁸ In Sunderland, it was reported on 30 September that there “has been a good response to the appeal for volunteers,” with a number of ex-service and ex-railwaymen, included in the list.¹⁶⁹ On 1 October the *Northern Echo* reported when commenting on the NER that the “rail service has improved expectation because of excellent work done by volunteers.”¹⁷⁰ Correspondingly the *Newcastle Journal* on 2 October recorded that a combined total of 750 names had been taken at the Town Hall and Central Station in Newcastle for voluntary duties. The volunteers, the *Journal* declared, were “drawn from all classes of the community.”¹⁷¹ The response for volunteers in the region was high throughout the strike as it was throughout the nation. What is harder to determine, however, is why exactly this was? The *Newcastle Journal* claims the volunteers came from all sections of society in the region however it is likely that the public volunteer turnout was mainly taken from the middle and upper classes of the region.¹⁷² During the 1926 general strike, the members of the public which volunteered to help break the strike were overwhelmingly of middle and upper class stock.¹⁷³ The reason the middle and upper classes came out in support of the government during the general strike was because, as Rachelle Saltzman has argued, they believed it was their duty to crown and country to keep the

¹⁶⁸ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 2/10/1919

¹⁶⁹ *The Northern Echo*, 30/09/1919

¹⁷⁰ *The Northern Echo*, 1/10/ 1919

¹⁷¹ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 2/10/1919

¹⁷² According to Bagwell, never had so many lords, earls and dukes offered their services for manual work on the railways. P. Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, pp. 388-9

¹⁷³ Saltzman, ‘Folklore as Politics in Great Britain’, pp. 108-11

nation going.¹⁷⁴ It is likely that the middle and upper classes felt the same way in the rail strike of 1919.

The effectiveness of the volunteers led the Supply and Transport Committee at the end of the strike to question whether the government should have a permanent volunteer organisation set up to “meet future strikes by railway or transport workers – or both combined.”¹⁷⁵ The Supply and Transport Committee on 11 November 1919 submitted to the Cabinet a memorandum detailing their discussions on the potential volunteer organisation. It was noted that for the organisation to be workable a vast number of volunteers would be needed as a general strike would be so debilitating to the nation.¹⁷⁶ The committee did not give an estimate of how many volunteers would be required, but they did suggest that it would take approximately 3,000 volunteers as a nucleus alone just to keep London’s emergency passenger service running.¹⁷⁷ The Committee was split on whether a volunteer organisation should be implemented and it was “generally felt that the enrolment of volunteers would at once lead to trouble with Labour.”¹⁷⁸ It was feared that the Trade Unions would protest immediately and vehemently against any perceived “strike breaking” organisation and that a strike may even be called on that ground alone.¹⁷⁹ The Committee also believed the allocation of such a massive amount of public money on such an organisation “would be sure to raise a storm of protest from certain sections of Parliament and in the Press.”¹⁸⁰ A voluntary strike-breaking organisation eventually came to

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 110

¹⁷⁵ (TNA), CAB 24/92/98, Supply and Transport Committee of the Cabinet: Memorandum on the Potential of a Permanent Volunteer Organisation, 11/11/1919

¹⁷⁶ Ibid

¹⁷⁷ Ibid

¹⁷⁸ Ibid

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

be in the autumn of 1925 with the creation of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. Its main aim, like the proposed volunteer organisation of 1919, was to provide a group of trained volunteers which the government could call upon to maintain essential services during a wide scale industrial dispute.¹⁸¹

The Ministry of Food and “The Triumph of the Lorry”

To combat the dislocation caused by the rail strike the government implemented an emergency Road Transport organisation. The main role of this emergency Road Transport scheme was to ensure that there was no shortage of food anywhere in the country during the dispute. The scheme originated during the First World War with the formation, by the government, of the Road Transport Board. The Road Transport Board was created so that the delivery and supply of food could be met sufficiently during the war even in the event of a dislocation of transport.¹⁸² As a result of the industrial unrest which occurred following the war the government decided it was necessary to merge the Road Transport Board into the Ministry of Food. This uniting of departments occurred on 21 July 1919.¹⁸³ The aim of uniting the two departments was so that policies could be more effectively developed in the case of a major industrial dispute in the future. The three main policies which were set out by the Minister of Food, George R. Roberts, were, in the event of a strike, to give ‘considerable powers to Local Authorities’, to encourage ‘wholesalers and retailers to hold unusually large stocks of goods’ and to create a ‘complete system of road transport’.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ A. Mason, 'The Government and the General Strike, 1926', *International Review of Social History* 14 (1969), p. 18

¹⁸² (TNA), CAB 24/90/92, Ministry of Food: Report on how the Ministry of Food Dealt with the 1919 Rail Strike, 15/10/1919

¹⁸³ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*

The combining of the two departments, the Road Transport Board and the Ministry of Food could be viewed as the government knowingly preparing for the 1919 rail strike. This is certainly what Beatrice Webb believed as she wrote in her diary after the strike that the dispute had been “desired, if not engineered, by the Geddes brothers, and subconsciously desired by the Prime Minister.”¹⁸⁵ Webb here is reversing Lloyd George’s argument in the national press, which was that the strike was “engineered for some time by a small but active body of men who wrought tirelessly and insidiously to exploit the labour organisations of this country for subversive ends.”¹⁸⁶ If either side ‘engineered’ the strike then the government are the much more likely of the two to have done so, particularly considering the railway unions only had an inadequate £3000 immediately available at the start of the dispute to fight the strike.¹⁸⁷

When the strike began, the Ministry of Food implemented a variety of policies to combat the crisis. On 27 September, ‘The Divisional Food Commissions Order,’ 1919, was enforced.¹⁸⁸ This order meant that the Food Controller, Divisional Officers, and persons under their authorisation, had the power to take possession of ‘all horses and road vehicles in use, or capable of being used, for the transport of goods by road with certain exceptions.’¹⁸⁹ The Divisional Food Commissions Order also gave the Food Commissioners authorisation to fix maximum prices on food. This meant that food prices would not soar out of control owing to the railway crisis. The ‘Public Meals Order,’ 1919, was also introduced on 27 September, which ‘restricted the use and consumption of flour, milk,

¹⁸⁵ Excerpt taken from *Beatrice Webb’s Diaries 1918-24*, found in Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 386

¹⁸⁶ ‘Prime Ministers Denunciation, “Anarchist Plot of Few”’, *The Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 14, 3/10/1919, p. 416

¹⁸⁷ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 387

¹⁸⁸ (TNA), CAB 24/90/92, Ministry of Food: Report on how the Ministry of Food Dealt with the 1919 Rail Strike, 15/10/1919

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*

butchers' meat, sugar and bread in public eating-houses.' Similar to the 'Public Meals Order,' the 'Food Hoarding Order' was also introduced, this law stipulated that 'no person could acquire any article of food so that the quantity of such article at one time exceeded that required for ordinary use.'¹⁹⁰ It was also decided on 27 September by the Home Office that "it may be necessary to employ, during the present emergency, drivers who are not provided with the usual driver's licence or vehicles which are not registered."¹⁹¹ The application of these laws supports the argument that the government was doing all they could to defeat the strike.

The Emergency Road Transport which was spearheaded by the Ministry of Food worked effectively. This effectiveness is signified by the fact that there was no real shortage of food anywhere in Britain during the strike.¹⁹² As a report by the Ministry of Food claims on 15 October 1919 after the first two to three days of the strike, "a definite and closely knit system of transport was developed which ensured adequate and constant supplies of even the more perishable articles of food."¹⁹³ The success of Road Transport was signalled at the time by the national press, *The Times* on 1 October affirming the "Triumph of the Lorry."¹⁹⁴ *The Railway Gazette* also heralded Road Transport during the strike pointing out that not only has the lorry dealt with food supplies superbly but "motor traction has served from the beginning to help the problem in a host of ways," such as the taking to and from work of season ticket holders.¹⁹⁵ Bagwell highlights the success of Road Transport arguing that the

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Home Office letter to Chief Constables across Britain discussing Emergency Road Transport, 27/09/1919

¹⁹² *Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 15, 10/10/1919

¹⁹³ (TNA), CAB 24/90/92, Ministry of Food: Report on how the Ministry of Food Dealt with the 1919 Rail Strike, 15/10/1919

¹⁹⁴ *The Times*, 1/10/1919

¹⁹⁵ *The Railway Gazette and Railway News*, Vol. XXXI, No. 14, 3/10/1919

“Government’s Emergency Transport arrangements worked well.”¹⁹⁶ For the first time in British history, the motor car and lorry proved that they could at least do some of the work of the railways. If the government had not implemented these emergency transport measures, then similar events to the 1911 rail strike may have occurred with shortages of food being reported up and down the country.¹⁹⁷

Emergency road transport in the north east of England worked successfully during the dispute with no severe shortage of food being reported at any time during the dispute. Colonel Alexander Leith, the Northumberland and Durham food commissioner, told the press on 29 September, that “everything... had worked smoothly during the weekend.”¹⁹⁸ There was no sign of a panic in the north east in regards to food, in fact, as the food controller at Hartlepool argued on 30 September in the *Northern Echo*, “there is not the slightest need for alarm in regard to the food position.”¹⁹⁹ There was a shortage of milk however in Newcastle and Sunderland at the beginning of the strike.²⁰⁰ This shortage was rectified as the dispute progressed due to improvements in road transport and numbers of trains being run in the region. By 3 October it was reported that milk supplies were back to 100 percent.²⁰¹

The Police and the Armed Forces

Following the First World War, there was much opposition to using the Armed Forces to aid the state in industrial disputes. Most military chiefs, as Morgan argued, “hoped that troops would not be used on a massive scale in policing duties as they had been before

¹⁹⁶ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 390

¹⁹⁷ Davies, ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’, pp. 110-12

¹⁹⁸ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 29/09/1919

¹⁹⁹ *The Northern Echo*, 30/09/1919

²⁰⁰ *The Northern Echo*, 30/9/1919

²⁰¹ *The Northern Echo*, 3/10/1919

1914.”²⁰² Military officials believed that that the use of the military had become out of control during the pre-war labour unrest. There was also fear that soldiers would not want to support the government any more in industrial disputes. According to a secret circular issued by military authorities to their commanding officers in January 1919, troops would preserve order and peace but would be against strike breaking.²⁰³

Considering the opposition to the use of the Armed Forces and the potential of their use to exacerbate tensions with the strikers, it was naturally desirable only to use civilian police forces to maintain order. This was not deemed however during the national rail strike mainly because there were not enough police to cover all the necessary areas of Britain. One attempt the government made to keep the Armed Forces from having to be so heavily involved in the dispute was to enrol voluntary special constables. The call for special constables was not that successful, but this did not deter the government from deciding it was necessary to have a new permanent organization set up, which would perform the same duties as the special constables, called the ‘Citizen Guard.’²⁰⁴ The change of name was decided upon because it was argued that it might provide a “stimulus to recruiting.”²⁰⁵ The appeal for enrolment began on the penultimate day of the strike and received 70,000 names. However, with the end of the strike came the disbandment of the organization.

The British Armed Forces played a significant role in the 1919 rail strike. The Army, under the guidance of the Minister of War, Winston Churchill, was mobilised across Britain, guarding vulnerable and strategic positions, such as railways and power stations.²⁰⁶ Soldiers

²⁰² Morgan, *Conflict and Order*, p. 75

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-9

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-1

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91

²⁰⁶ (TNA), CAB 24/93/12, Report by Field Marshall Earl Haig on the Employment of Troops in Industrial Disturbances, 12/11/1919

directly mobilised around Britain at the start of the strike were 23,000.²⁰⁷ There were 13 battalions and 3 cavalry regiments in “positions of readiness” and 59 battalions held in reserve by Command.²⁰⁸ It was feared, following the bloody clashes between the railwaymen with the police and army in the 1911 national rail strike, that the 1919 railway strike could have followed a similar violent route. The violence which occurred in South Wales in the 1911 strike prompted one unidentified government minister, at a meeting of the Protection Sub-Committee on 30 September 1919 to question whether there should be additional military forces made available in the danger points of the South Wales area.²⁰⁹

The police and the military campaign was extremely aggressive in 1911 with police baton charges taking place and rumours of troops being instructed to shoot to kill.²¹⁰ In the 1919 strike, the government followed a completely different track. The Secretary of State on the first day of the dispute informed all the Chief Constables across the nation that they “should be careful that no demand for military assistance is made except in cases of real necessity.”²¹¹ The government wanted to avoid conflict with the strikers at all costs if possible because if the government was seen to be trying to break the strike by force sympathetic action amongst other workers could have occurred. During the 1911 strike, there was also scepticism over whether the government had used the Armed Forces illegally and no investigations were made into the shootings of railwaymen by troops during the dispute which the railwaymen had called for.²¹² The government in the 1919 strike could not

²⁰⁷ Ibid

²⁰⁸ Ibid

²⁰⁹ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Minutes of a Meeting of the Protection Sub-Committee, 30/9/1919

²¹⁰ Davies, ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’, p. 115

²¹¹ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Letter written by the Secretary of State to Chief Constables Regarding Military Assistance, 27/09/1919

²¹² Davies, ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’, p. 115-6

afford similar events particularly considering the revolutionary potential they believed the labour movement had in Britain after the war.

The government had made the correct decision in limiting army and police intervention with only minor instances of violence and intimidation occurring across the nation during the strike. Field-Marshal Earl Haig reported on 17 October 1919, that there were no “serious attempts at sabotage or violence” from the striking railwaymen and that many of the armed forces guarding vital and vulnerable points and railways during the strike were relieved by the police between 1 and 4 October because of this.²¹³ The lack of violence came as a surprise to the government as one report on ‘The Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom’ suggests. The report, circulated on 2 October, by the Home Secretary Edward Shortt, emphasized how there was a “marked absence” of violence and sabotage during the dispute and that there had “never been a labour crisis of this magnitude in which there was so little talk of revolution.”²¹⁴

There may have been no major disruption during the strike, but there were still various instances of localised disruption. One report written by the Major General Staff of the General Head Quarters took note of any reported “Sabotage” or “Intimidation” on each day of the strike.²¹⁵ These reports came from across the nation, and there were incidents of varying severity on most days of the strike. The throwing of stones and bricks at trains, stations and in some instances volunteers and loyal workers occurred numerous times during the dispute. On 1 October, the Chief Constable of Lanarkshire reported that stones

²¹³ (TNA), CAB 24/93/12, Report by Field Marshall Earl Haig on the Employment of Troops in Industrial Disturbances, 12/11/1919

²¹⁴ (TNA), CAB 24/89/55, Report by the Home Secretary on Revolutionary Movements in Britain, 2/10/1919

²¹⁵ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Daily Reports by the Major General Staff on Sabotage, Disruption and Intimidation during the 1919 Railway Strike, (1919)

were thrown in the afternoon at an Engine-driver at work and that an arrest was made.²¹⁶

The next day in Manchester strikers threw stones at the Engine Staff of a passenger train

and stones were also thrown by strikers at a train in York and Middlesbrough

respectively.²¹⁷ A couple of days later on 4 October stones were then thrown at a driver of a

train from Victoria to Herne Bay and Birchington.²¹⁸ It is also reported that on the same day

Platelayers were stoned near Forest Gate.²¹⁹ Along with the disruption caused by throwing

stones, the strikers also attempted to sabotage the railways running by placing obstructions

on the track and breaking railway equipment. In Nostell near Leeds on 1 October a signal

lamp was thrown to the ground, broken, and a hoisting chain was also broken.²²⁰ On the

same day in Glasgow, the Chief Constable of the city reported "an unsuccessful attempt to

derail a Mineral Locomotive, some damage to a Signal-box and Railway points."²²¹ Another

instance occurred on 1 October in London with strikers tampering with engines in the

absence of the volunteer engine driver on the North Western Railway.²²² On 3 October

there was more disruption caused on the tracks with six large stones being found between

Shotton Bridge and Haswell in Durham and an obstruction placed on the main line at

²¹⁶ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Stone Throwing found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 1/10/1919

²¹⁷ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Stone Throwing found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 2/10/1919

²¹⁸ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Stone Throwing found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 4/10/1919

²¹⁹ Ibid

²²⁰ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Sabotage found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 1/10/1919

²²¹ Ibid

²²² Ibid

Hayland, Swindon.²²³ The following day a driver on the Purley to Tadworth train in Surrey reported: “two heaps of stones and a broken bolt having been placed on the line.”²²⁴

The report by the Major General Staff also includes accounts of volunteers and loyal men being attacked by the strikers. On 29 September the Scottish Command reported that strikers stopped two trains and that a fireman was injured and engine driver was removed from the train; troops were sent to both areas.²²⁵ On 1 October in Glasgow, there was an assault upon an engine driver who was proceeding to work.²²⁶ A few days later a lorry from Bishopsgate was attacked by a gang of 20 to 30 men, and the Assistant Carman was “severely handled.”²²⁷ On 4 October in Hull, two volunteers were assaulted, and one man badly knocked about by the strikers.²²⁸ In one more extreme event in Crewe the same day a striker shot his revolver three times at a train with one bullet hitting the engine.²²⁹ Again on the same day on the London Underground strikers attacked and mauled volunteers at Golders Green and Lillie Bridge.²³⁰ One disturbing incident, which was reported on in the *Daily News* on 4 October, detailed the attack of two volunteers who had acid thrown in their faces at Clapham.²³¹

²²³ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Sabotage found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 3/10/1919

²²⁴ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Sabotage found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 4/10/1919

²²⁵ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Intimidation found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 29/9/1919

²²⁶ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Intimidation, found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 1/10/1919

²²⁷ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Intimidation, found in Daily Report by the Major General Staff, 3/10/1919

²²⁸ (TNA), HO 144/1679/390500, Report of Intimidation, 4/10/1919

²²⁹ Ibid

²³⁰ Ibid

²³¹ *The Daily News*, 4/10/1919

The R.A.F.

The army was not the only part of the Armed Forces which the government called upon to combat the strike, however. The RAF also played a fundamental role in the government's strike machinery and via new research from TNA, it is possible to update their role in the historiography of the dispute. The government, like with the emergency road transport scheme, already had plans for the use of the RAF prepared before the rail strike broke. According to the War Cabinet Strike Committee, the "scheme for the conveyance of urgent Government despatches by air mail was drawn up in advance by the Home Office and the Air Ministry to meet precisely the emergency which arose on September 27th - a sudden dislocation of the mail services severing communication with the Police."²³²

The RAF had three main roles during the strike; the first was to make sure essential government communications could be delivered across Britain during the dispute, the second that newspapers and other mail could continue to be delivered and finally that passengers who needed to travel urgently could use the service.²³³ The transportation of essential government communications began early in the dispute when it is detailed in a report by the War Cabinet's Communications Sub-Committee that on 28 September arrangements had "been made for an Aircraft Service for the conveyance of urgent official despatches to commence full operations tonight. The service will cover the whole of England and the greater part of Scotland."²³⁴ In a Summary of Report by the Air Ministry, dated 4 December 1919, it explained that the most important role of the RAF was to despatch "urgent official communications" particularly between the Home Office, the

²³² (TNA), AIR 5/44, Supply and Transport Committee: Memoranda: Work of R.A.F. in Railway Strike, (1919)

²³³ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Summary of Report by the Air Ministry Regarding the 1919 Railway Strike, 4/12/1919

²³⁴ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Communications Sub-Committee Report on the 1919 Railway Strike, 28/9/1919

Scottish Office and the Chief Constables across Britain.²³⁵ The report also stated that the RAF scheme was used to “distribute propaganda, to collect intelligence and to convey officials.”²³⁶ It is clear via these government reports that the RAF played a significant role during the rail strike and it is surprising therefore that no attention has been played to their activities in the historiography of the dispute.

The government did not just call upon the RAF but also after the suggestion was made by the Post Office Authorities, Civil Aviation. The role of Civil Aviation was similar to that of the RAF; in a memorandum written by the Air Ministry on the potential expansion of the RAF’s service during the strike it was agreed that in “the event of traffic becoming too heavy for the RAF it is proposed that civilian machines should assist in the distribution of mail matter.”²³⁷ The report also stated that if the strike had become general Civil Aviation would have had to have taken greater responsibilities as the RAF would have been “mainly occupied in delivering important despatches, guarding vital points, etc.”²³⁸ The government knew the importance that the RAF and Civil Aviation had during the dispute, and this is symbolised by a memorandum on the use of Civil Aircraft. It was argued that “in a crisis, such as the present, failure in the postal services and the non-delivery of newspapers will do more to unsettle the public and to give credit to fantastic rumours than almost any conceivable disaster, conversely ability to maintain these services will do much to hold public confidence and to strengthen the hand of the government.”²³⁹

²³⁵ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Summary of Report by the Air Ministry Regarding the 1919 Railway Strike, 4/12/1919

²³⁶ Ibid

²³⁷ (TNA), AVIA 2/1747, Memorandum on the Expansion of the RAF Home Office Despatch Carrying Scheme, (1919)

²³⁸ Ibid

²³⁹ (TNA), AVIA 2/1747 Memorandum on the use of Civil Aircraft During the 1919 Railway Strike, (1919)

As an emergency measure to deal with the strike the RAF and Civil Aviation worked effectively in their roles, and this is summarised in the Report by the Air Ministry, “it is considered that the scheme was well planned, suitable for good and bad weather and capable of expansion.”²⁴⁰ Without the RAF and Civil Aviation, the government would have been in a significantly weaker position, particularly at the beginning of the strike when train services and the Road Transport scheme were not yet able to provide any effective service. This is emphasized by how it was not until 4 October the day before the end of the strike that the Ariel Mail Service was stopped.²⁴¹

Conclusion

The government used all means at its disposal to defeat the rail strike. The harnessing of all available resources, including the Armed Forces which was an undesirable tactic, represents how important the government believed the strike to be. While the government did its best to prepare for widespread violence, positioning troops across the country in areas of strategic importance, the strike was almost completely peaceful. The railwaymen then, were able to peacefully stand up to the full force of the state’s anti-strike machinery and while they may not have won the fact they were not outrightly defeated was crucial in maintaining momentum and confidence in the overall trade union movement. The respectable manner in which the railwaymen conducted themselves during the strike aided their public image. Public opinion was to play a vital role in the strike, and that subject will form part of the next chapter.

²⁴⁰ (TNA), CAB 27/60, Summary of Report by the Air Ministry Regarding the 1919 Railway Strike, 4/12/1919

²⁴¹ *The Times*, 4/10/1919

(4) The Press and the Strike

The government and the railway unions both used the national and the regional press to their fullest extent. The press, like the call for volunteers, emergency road transport and the use of the Armed Forces, can be understood as being another feature of the government's emergency measures to combat the rail dispute.²⁴² Public opinion was decisive during the strike, and both the government and the railwaymen knew success or failure in the dispute could have potentially hinged on an effective publicity campaign. This chapter will focus on the newspaper campaigns run by both sides.²⁴³ The national and regional press had the ability to influence millions of people in Britain and was arguably the most effective mass propaganda tool at the time. There is little recent research done in the historiography on the national press during the railway strike, excluding Laura Beers in 2010, and so far, no regional analysis.²⁴⁴ One of the aims of this chapter will be to add to the neglected historiography of the national and regional press during the rail strike.

This chapter will be broken into the three most significant periods of the strike in terms of how the national press reported on the dispute. This will be the start of the strike, 26 September to 30 September, then 1 to 4 October and finally the end of the strike and the days preceding, 5 to 10 October. It reassesses one of the main arguments presented in the historiography of the media during the strike. That the press sided with the government at the beginning of the dispute but as the strike progressed began to become more

²⁴² The national and regional press were fundamental in the drive for volunteers.

²⁴³ Analysis of the other forms of media used during the dispute such as the use of the cinema can be found in Bagwell, *The Railwaymen* and Beers' article, "Is This Man an Anarchist?" *Industrial Action and the Battle for Public Opinion in Interwar Britain*, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 30-6

²⁴⁴ Beers, "Is This Man an Anarchist?" & Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (London, 2010)

sympathetic to the railwaymen. This chapter will begin by considering who were the most significant owners and editors of the national press.

This chapter will include a new regional analysis of the press during the strike. How the county and regional press in the heavily industrialised north east of England reported on the strike will be compared with the regional and county papers in the largely agricultural northern Home Counties, including Essex, Bedfordshire, and Buckinghamshire. It would be expected that the local and regional papers in the north east would have largely come out in support of the strike. This was because the north east had a highly unionised and industrial workforce. With the northern Home Counties being largely agricultural, it is expected that the local and regional papers there would have taken a far less sympathetic approach to the strike. Whether this hypothesis holds true will be assessed in this chapter.

To finish the chapter an explanation of why there was a change in how the press reported on the strike from 1 to 10 October will take place. This will include new government sources from the Cabinet archives on how the Cabinet responded and reacted to the change in how the press was reporting on the dispute.

This chapter proves just how importantly the government valued both the national and regional press during the strike. Lloyd George and his cabinet released statements to the national and regional press on every day of the dispute. The use of the press was central to the government's overall campaign against the railwaymen and discussions on how best their case could be presented in the papers occurred before the strike began. At a War Cabinet meeting on 26 September, it was decided that a short statement be released to the press with the purpose of "giving a brief summary of the points at issue and drawing

attention to the dastardly nature of this sudden strike.”²⁴⁵ It was also decided that on 27 September, the following day, the Prime Minister “should send a short and crisp telegram, to be read at the public meeting in Wales which he had not been able to attend, drawing attention to the character of the present strike and to the fact that the railwaymen had placed the nation in this very serious predicament after the Government had offered to give consideration to the case of any grade of railwaymen.”²⁴⁶ This telegram occurred as planned with Lloyd George contending the strike was part of an “anarchist conspiracy.”²⁴⁷

Northcliffe and the Daily Herald

The reason national newspapers were so influential during the rail strike was because of what has been described by Kevin Williams as the ‘Northcliffe Revolution’ in Britain between 1890 and 1922.²⁴⁸ Alfred Harmsworth, later to become Lord Northcliffe, played a pivotal role in the transformation of the British press from its contents and layouts to its economic structure in this period; transforming British national newspapers into mass propaganda machines.²⁴⁹ Crucially Northcliffe owned and founded possibly the most important national daily paper of the early twentieth century. The *Daily Mail* was first published in 1897 and by 1902 already had the biggest circulation in the world of over a million which made it a valuable weapon in any propaganda war.²⁵⁰ Northcliffe also owned the *Times*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express*.²⁵¹ Northcliffe had total control over his

²⁴⁵ (TNA), CAB 23/12/11, Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet regarding what the Government was going to do to combat the Rail Strike, 26/9/1919

²⁴⁶ Ibid

²⁴⁷ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 393

²⁴⁸ K. Williams, *Read All About It* (New York, 2010), pp. 125-50; J. L. Thomas, ‘Fleet Street Colossus: The Rise and Fall of Northcliffe, 1896 to 1922’, *Parliamentary History*, Volume 25, part 1, (2006), pp. 115-38; & M. Temple, *The British Press* (New York, 1996) pp. 28-30

²⁴⁹ Thomas, ‘Fleet Street Colossus’, p. 115-20

²⁵⁰ D. Griffiths, *Fleet Street: Five Hundred Years of the Press* (London, 2006), pp. 132-3

²⁵¹ Williams, *Read All About It*, pp. 125-40

newspapers and believed that he could “cause the whole country to think with us overnight whenever we say the word.”²⁵² Each of the papers that Northcliffe owned was staunchly opposed to the strike at the outset, and the press tycoon was able to promote his anti-strike message to both lower middle and upper classes. The *Daily Mail* was aimed towards the lower middle classes and city workers and *The Times*, according to Thompson, was, at the time of the strike, “the most politically influential newspaper among the elite classes of Britain.”²⁵³

The *Daily Herald* was the only politically left-wing daily newspaper during the strike, and this is represented in its pro-strike attitude at the beginning of the rail dispute. The left-wing press barring the *Herald* was not able to publish either weekly or monthly, and because of this, it was not possible for the railwaymen, particularly at the beginning of the dispute, to effectively respond to the conservative press. The major issue for the left-leaning press was lack of funds, and this was the case for the *Herald* which struggled to attract advertisers. At the time of the strike George Lansbury, the future Labour Party leader between 1932 and 1935, was the owner and editor of the paper. Under Lansbury’s control, the *Herald* was strongly socialist blaming capitalist forces for the First World War and supporting the Russian Revolution of 1917. With Lansbury as the editor of the *Herald* the railwaymen were guaranteed an ally in the propaganda campaign, however, one, financially unstable socialist daily paper, could realistically do little against the Northcliffe led anti-strike press empire.

²⁵² P. Brendon, *The Life and Death of the Press Barons* (London, 1983), p. 116

²⁵³ Thomas, ‘Fleet Street Colossus’, pp. 115-6

The Opening Reaction: 25 to 30 September

When the strike began at midnight on 26 September 1919, the national press began an attack on the railwaymen and the railway unions for calling the strike. Lloyd George and his Cabinet could not have asked for a better start to their propaganda campaign, with nearly all of the major national daily newspapers, including the *Daily Mail*, *The Times*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Telegraph*, printing the government's viewpoint on the strike. The argument which was presented in the national papers at the beginning of the dispute was that the strike was unjust and an attack on the power of the government and the British public. The *Daily Mail* on 27 September argued the strike was an attack on the British public and labelled the dispute a "Starvation Strike."²⁵⁴ The *Times* on the same day contended that the dispute was a "Challenge to the State" and that the government was going to "Fight with all resources" to beat the railwaymen.²⁵⁵ The *Morning Post* made its feelings clear with the headline "A Declaration of War," going on to argue that the railwaymen have "disregarded everyone's interest except their own."²⁵⁶ The idea that the strike was like a war between the British public and the railwaymen was a common theme at the beginning of the strike in the national press. The *Daily Graphic* described the railwaymen as being "like the Hun" and that the "Time had come to make a stand."²⁵⁷ It should be noted that even before the strike had been called the *Daily Sketch* was already damning the railwaymen and railway unions, on 26 September the paper claimed that the railway union leaders were "tyrants" and that "no self-respecting democracy can permit the use of lightning strikes in a

²⁵⁴ *The Daily Mail*, 27/9/1919

²⁵⁵ *The Times*, 27/9/1919

²⁵⁶ *The Morning Post*, 27/9/1919

²⁵⁷ *The Daily Graphic*, 27/9/1919

public service.”²⁵⁸ The epithet of a lightning strike for the railway dispute was common in the press during the strike, the term directly linked to the manner in which it was believed the Germans began the First World War.

Not all of the national daily press were opposed to the rail strike at the beginning of the dispute, the major exception being the *Daily Herald*. The *Daily Herald* directly criticised the other national newspapers on 27 September by arguing that the “Capitalist Press consoled itself, and presumably its readers, by arguing that “definitive” did not mean definitive.”²⁵⁹ The *Daily Herald* also emphasized that the railway union executive did not want to call a strike by arguing that, “Nobody likes striking. Nobody strikes lightly. Nobody faces what is involved in a great national stoppage of an essential industry with any but the heaviest sense of responsibility.”²⁶⁰ The only other national newspaper that presented a pro railway union strike story was the *Morning Post*. On the same day that the paper wrote the NUR had declared war on the nation it also presented “The Men’s Case – Mr. Thomas’s Tears.” In this article, the *Morning Post* argued, similar to the *Daily Herald*, that the railway union executive did not want to call a strike.²⁶¹ Mr. Thomas is quoted as saying that “This is the saddest day of my life. It is with the deepest regret that I have to announce the failure to arrive at a settlement.”²⁶² It is not clear why the conservative *Morning Post* chose to present a pro railway union article in their paper when none of the other conservative national daily papers did.

²⁵⁸ *The Daily Sketch*, 26/9/1919

²⁵⁹ *The Daily Herald*, 27/9/1919

²⁶⁰ Ibid

²⁶¹ *The Morning Post*, 27/9/1919

²⁶² Ibid

When comparing the regional and local with the national press, there are a number of differences. Firstly in both the Home Counties and the north east the weekly newspapers reporting on 25 or 26 September do not make any comment on the potential railway strike that is set to take place. All the regional newspapers do however comment on the strike in some detail in their next editions, the only paper to not do so was the *Morpeth Herald and Reporter* of the north east. The strange thing about the *Morpeth Herald* is that on 26 September the paper reported on 'The Labour Movement,' with articles including the 'Power of Working Classes' and 'Labour Awakening.' The paper clearly supported the labour movement, with their focus being on the Miners, however for whatever reason they chose to overlook the railwaymen's strike.²⁶³ Another difference between the regional and national press is that not all of the papers which reported on the strike at the beginning of the dispute completely followed the government's propaganda against the railwaymen. For example, the *Cambridge Daily News* reported on 27 September that Mr. Smillie, the miner's leader talking about the strike, claimed that "a great industrial upheaval could only be averted by the men securing their just claims."²⁶⁴ The *Cambridge Daily News* on the same day also included Mr. Thomas' side of the argument along with the government's. The article claimed that Mr. Thomas had attempted to negotiate with the Prime Minister in an offer which was regarded as a "ray of hope" in Mr. Thomas' eyes however Sir Eric Geddes put an untimely end to the negotiations.²⁶⁵ The *Sunderland Daily Echo* on 27 September ran the same article on Thomas and Sir Eric Geddes with the headline of 'Blames Sir E Geddes: Mr. Thomas Allegation.'²⁶⁶ The north eastern paper the *Evening Chronicle* on 27 September

²⁶³ *Morpeth Herald and Reporter*, 26/9/1919

²⁶⁴ *Cambridge Daily News*, 27/9/1919

²⁶⁵ Ibid

²⁶⁶ *The Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 27/9/1919

also presented both the government's and the railway union's case.²⁶⁷ The *Sunderland Echo* and *Cambridge Daily News* never reported on the strike at the beginning of the dispute without some sort of railway union response or article explaining the men's side. Not only was the men's case presented in these regional newspapers but there was also a lacking of the same sort of anti-strike rhetoric which was to define the national press on the same day. What the presentation of the men's case in these regional newspapers could suggest is that the government had less power, or concern, over these smaller circulation newspapers in comparison to the national press. It also could have been because the local papers had to appeal more to their local and regional readership.

While there were instances of regional papers being more neutral at the start of the strike in comparison to the national papers, there were still regional papers which strongly followed the government's anti-strike arguments. For example, the *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant* came out passionately against the railway strike. On 27 September in an article entitled 'Fighting the Strike,' the Newcastle paper argued that it "is evident that the extremists in the railwaymen's executive have won the upper hand, possibly against the saner counsels of the more level-headed, such as Mr. Thomas himself."²⁶⁸ The idea of extremists inside the railway union executive leading the railwaymen into mayhem was one of the most promoted pieces of government propaganda at the start of the strike. The *Northern Echo*, which was, and still is, a prominent regional daily paper serving the north east, followed the government's anti-strike case with as much rigor as any of the national papers on the opening days of the dispute. The *Echo* on 27 September argued that nothing "indeed could excuse the men for forcing the calamity of a general strike in September" and

²⁶⁷ *The Evening Chronicle*, 27/9/1919

²⁶⁸ *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant*, 27/9/1919

“Such madness and careless indifference to the public welfare would be condemned by 99 percent of the general public.”²⁶⁹ The *Echo* followed that up on 28 September with, “It is a strike against the community under conditions which the government consider unreasonable, and it will be fought with the full resources of the community.”²⁷⁰

A Change in Attitude? 1 to 4 October

Between 1 and 4 October, it is true that large segments of the national daily press, which were completely against the strike at the start of the dispute, began to publish more pro-strike articles. For example papers such as, *The Times*, *The Daily Express*, *The Daily News*, and *The Daily Sketch* among others all included articles which were sympathetic to the railwaymen’s cause by 1 October. The decision which was made by the government to withhold a weeks’ worth of wages to the striking railwaymen on 3 October even prompted the *Daily Mail* to be more sympathetic to the railwaymen with the argument presented in the paper on 4 October that the government should “pay them what they have earned.”²⁷¹ The reason for this change and the Cabinet’s response will be assessed in the last section of

²⁶⁹ *The Northern Echo*, 27/9/1919

²⁷⁰ *The Northern Echo*, 28/9/1919

²⁷¹ *The Daily Mail*, 4/19/1919

this chapter.

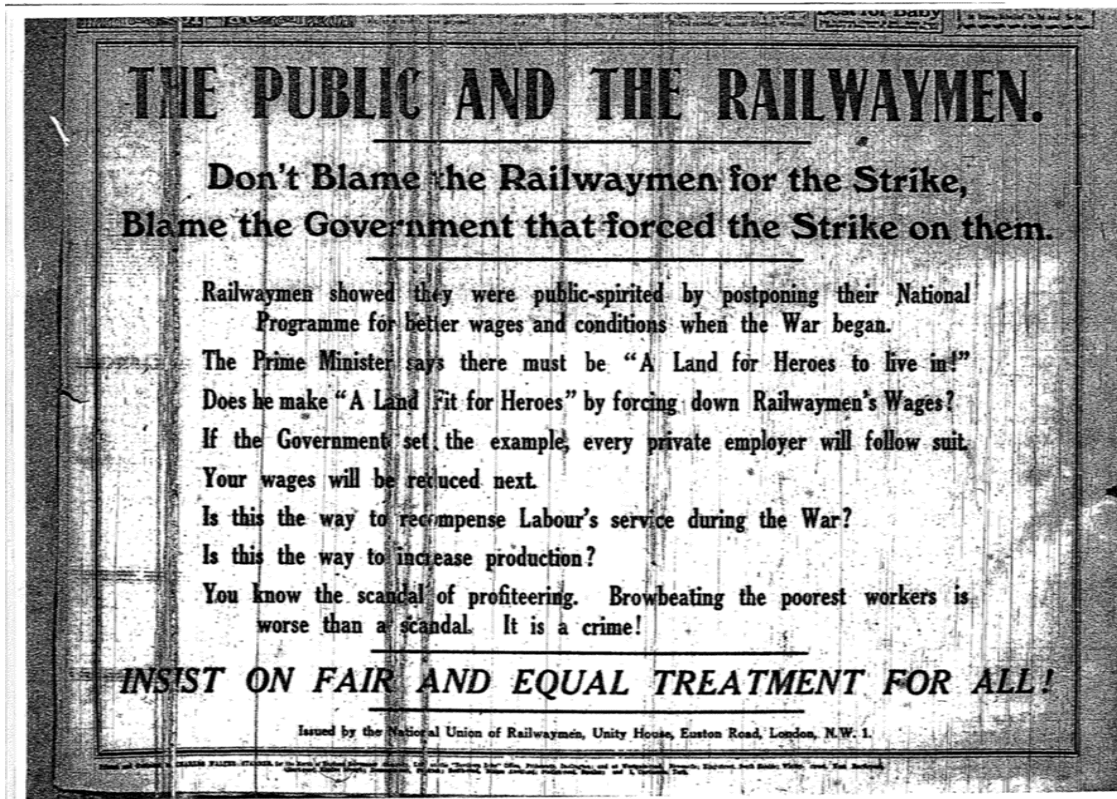


Figure 6: Example of NUR Propaganda during the 1919 Railway Strike, *The Northern Echo*, 4/10/1919

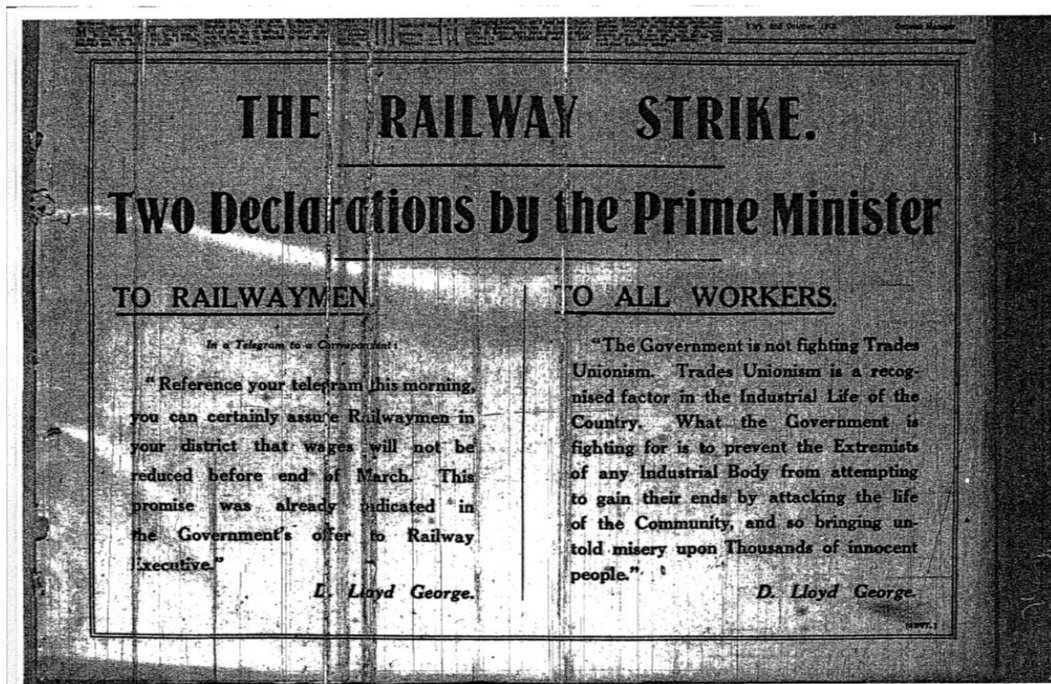


Figure 7: Example of Government Propaganda during the 1919 Railway Strike, *The Northern Echo*, 4/10/1919

From a regional perspective, from 1 to 4 October, some papers did change their stance towards the strike. For example, the *Northern Echo* became more sympathetic to the railwaymen's case. The *Echo* on 1 October presented the men's case under the headline that Mr. Thomas was 'Fighting with his Back to the Wall.'²⁷² The *Echo* is particularly interesting because it includes on 4 October relatively large examples of government and railway union propaganda which can be seen in figure one and two above. Propaganda like this does not appear in the same respect in any of the other regional newspapers which have been assessed in this study. The reason the government and the railway unions may have picked the *Echo* for these pieces of framed written propaganda could have been because the *Echo* served the whole region and had a particularly large circulation. The *Newcastle Journal* continued its anti-strike stance. The *Journal* argued on 4 October that "the government and the public have every right to object to the present or any other strike which takes place on the lightning lines of the syndicalist movement and before the public have been given any opportunity to understand and consider the issues."²⁷³

In regards to the weekly regional newspapers which did not comment on the strike at the beginning of the dispute, the majority in both the north east and the northern Home Counties published the government's side. The *Cambridge Independent Press and News* on 3 October argued that it was of "general opinion that the present strike is nothing more than a declaration of war on the community."²⁷⁴ The idea of the strike being a war on the community is exactly how the government presented the strike in the majority of the national papers at the beginning of the dispute. The *Essex Newsman* on 4 October, keeping

²⁷² *The Northern Echo*, 1/10/1919

²⁷³ *Newcastle Journal and Courant*, 4/10/1919

²⁷⁴ *Cambridge Independent Press and News*, 3/10/1919

with the theme of the strike being like a war waged on the community, published an article containing this fierce condemnation of the dispute; "There have been some happenings this week, making us think there is still a war on. And so there is, though it isn't of the 'over the top' sort. Of the two I think I'd prefer the latter, because, you see, our women and kiddies weren't in it."²⁷⁵ The *Buckingham Advertiser and North Bucks Free Press* refrained from the same rhetorical excess as the *Essex Newsman* however they delivered a similar message on 4 October; "The general sense of the country will condemn the precipitate strike of the railwaymen. They had no urgent grievance, and yet they have plunged the country into the gravest of all possible industrial disasters."²⁷⁶ The *Essex County Chronicle*, on 3 October sided with the government's case with the headline, 'Prime Minister's Message,' in which Lloyd George explains the dispute is "not a strike for wages or better conditions. The government have reason to believe that it has been engineered for some time by a small but active body of men who wrought tirelessly and insidiously exploit the labour organisations of this country for subversive ends."²⁷⁷

There were also various examples of the regional press either being sympathetic to the strike or at least remaining impartial, giving the views of both sides. For example, the *Bucks Herald* on 4 October presented the 'Government's Case' followed directly by the 'Men's Case'.²⁷⁸ The arguments for both sides in the *Bucks Herald* are of equal length, however the government's does appear first. The *Cambridge Daily News* supports the railway strike more so than any of the other regional press with the headline, on 2 October, 'Mr Thomas' Message: "Not Striking for Striking's Sake".²⁷⁹ While the headline does suggest

²⁷⁵ *The Essex Newsman*, 4/10/1919

²⁷⁶ *The Buckingham Advertiser and North Bucks Free Press*, 4/10/1919

²⁷⁷ *The Essex County Chronicle*, 3/10/1919

²⁷⁸ *The Bucks Herald*, 4/10/1919

²⁷⁹ *The Cambridge Daily News*, 2/10/1919

that the *Cambridge Daily Press* were more sympathetic to the strike than the majority of other regional papers the Cambridge paper still printed the government's case first and also gave approximately three times as much space to the government's perspective in comparison to the railwaymen's.²⁸⁰ The *Cambridge Daily Press* can be viewed as being more sympathetic to the railwaymen's strike than most other regional newspapers however the government's case still took the priority.²⁸¹ The *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* maintained the sympathetic stance towards the striking railwaymen that it had presented at the beginning of the dispute. The government's case on 3 October was presented first, which was no different to nearly all of the regional and national press, however, Lloyd George was only given a very short segment in the Sunderland paper with the rest being geared toward the railwaymen's position.²⁸² This is what makes the Sunderland paper stand out in comparison to the other regional papers because it focused on the railwaymen's case and to an extent ignored the government's position.

The Dispute Finishes: 5 to 10 October

It is unquestionable that the British national press did begin to side with the railwaymen as the strike progressed; however how far the national press sided with the railwaymen's case can be disputed. There are various examples in the national press at the end of the strike which suggests that at least portions of the national press remained anti-strike throughout. These anti-strike articles written at the end of the strike are just as condemning of the strike in their tone that they were at the beginning of the dispute. For example, the *Daily Mirror* argued on 6 October that the strike "should never have

²⁸⁰ Ibid

²⁸¹ *The Cambridge Daily News* on 3/10/1919, presented both government and railwaymen's cases, however, similar to the day before, the government's case was both first and in more depth.

²⁸² *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 3/10/1919

happened. Nine days ago the lightning strike was sprung upon the community. It came suddenly and secretly, like most declarations of war do.”²⁸³ The *Daily Mirror* here is criticising the railway union leaders’ choice to strike just as fervently as any national daily newspaper did at the beginning of the strike. The *Daily Graphic* on 6 October also criticised the railway strike claiming “the lightning strike is over” and that a settlement has been agreed “which saves the faces of the strike leaders, whose effort to throttle the British nation in a time of difficulty is one of the most hideous events in history.”²⁸⁴ The *Daily Mail* also continued to produce anti-strike articles, on 6 October the paper published the story, “Why the Strike Failed – England is too Strong for the Extremists.”²⁸⁵ The *Evening Standard* on 6 October argued that the “strike did savour of Prussian methods.”²⁸⁶ It is clear to see that sections of the national daily press which were opposed to the railway strike at the start remained so until the end.

In the regional press, there are examples of continued anti-strike rhetoric. For example, in the *Newcastle Daily Journal*, on 6 October, the paper included the story, ‘When the Strike Weapon Must Fail.’ In which it was argued that the strike was not a question of wages but more about “broken faith, of holding the country to ransom, of a lawless attack on the very life of the community.” The *Buckingham Advertiser and North Bucks Free Press*, on 11 October, also emphasized their disapproval of the strike, by claiming the dispute was ‘Needless.’ The *Buckingham Advertiser* cites the Food Controller, G. H. Roberts, in their main story on the fallout of the strike, in which Roberts explains how the settlement agreed on 5 October was the same as the one offered on 26 September.

²⁸³ *The Daily Mirror*, 6/10/1919

²⁸⁴ *The Daily Graphic*, 6/10/1919

²⁸⁵ *The Daily Mail*, 6/10/1919

²⁸⁶ *The Evening Standard*, 6/10/1919

However, the general sentiments of the regional press, in the north east of England and the Northern Home Counties, is of relief and overall neutrality. The *Biggleswade Chronicle and Bedfordshire Gazette*, on 10 October, claimed they welcomed the news that the strike had been settled satisfactorily and that they were pleased the railwaymen were commencing their duties. The *Cambridge Daily News*, on 6 October, claimed the settlement was a “triumph for the Prime Minister and the Trade Union Mediators.” The *Cambridge Daily News* also led with the story of the General Secretary of the NUR’s relief and delight at the settlement. The *Northern Echo* remained neutral and described the settlement as a “truce” on 6 October. The *Darlington and Stockton Times* also remained neutral at the end of the strike, arguing, the end of dispute “gave a feeling of intense relief to all classes of community, for there were many who were not at all hopeful that there would be a settlement reached.”

Why the Apparent Sudden Shift?

One of the most important reasons which forced the press to begin publishing more pro railway union articles was because of the unofficial threat of a printer’s strike. The printers’ union leader George Isaacs argued in the *Railway Review* on 3 October that the “railwaymen’s case is too sacred to the Labour movement as a whole to have it prejudiced...This fight is going to be seen through and the railwaymen’s case is not going to suffer.”²⁸⁷ Isaacs clearly understood the importance of the strike to the overall trade union movement in Britain and also, like the railway union leaders and the government, believed the press had a substantial role in influencing public opinion. The threat to stop printing papers sent a message to both the newspaper editors and the government, and without this

²⁸⁷ *The Railway Review*, 3/10/1919

threatened intervention it would have been hard to see such a drastic swing in favour of the railwaymen.

The government took the threatened printers' strike very seriously as reports from Robert Horne, the Minister of Labour, signify. On 1 October Horne reported back to the War Cabinet that he was concerned there was "unrest among operative printers in some London newspaper offices" and that printers would refuse to set up statements believed to be biased against the railwaymen.²⁸⁸ The reason Horne and the War Cabinet were so concerned about the press refusing to print the government's side of the argument was because they could not afford to lose ground on the all-important propaganda campaign against the railwaymen.²⁸⁹ On 8 October, Horne wrote a report for the War Cabinet looking back on the strike and the worrying "attitude of certain printers' organisations."²⁹⁰ Horne emphasized in this report the importance of the press in shaping public opinion and how "the Government has always been able to secure full publicity for at any rate their side of the case in any dispute, but this conceivably might not always be so in the future."²⁹¹ Horne also points out that in the days of the revolutions in Russia, Germany and Hungary in the years leading up to the strike, "trouble centred in general not round the government buildings, but round the newspaper offices."²⁹² The British government was used to having a near monopoly of control over what was presented in the press to the public, and this was beginning to change during the 1919 rail strike.

²⁸⁸ (TNA), CAB 24/89/56, R. S. Horne, Report from the Ministry of Labour on the 1919 Rail Strike and the Importance of the Press, 1/10/1919

²⁸⁹ The importance the government placed on the press is also emphasized by the use of the RAF to maintain newspaper circulation during the strike.

²⁹⁰ (TNA), CAB 24/89/90, R. S. Horne, Report by the Ministry of Labour looking back on the 1919 Rail Strike, 8/10/1919

²⁹¹ Ibid

²⁹² Ibid

Another reason for the swing towards more pro-union articles in the national press was because of the work of the Labour Research Department who took control of publicizing the railwaymen's case on behalf of the railway unions. The LRD was and still is an independent research organisation focusing on trade unions, based in London. At the time of the strike Robert Page Arnot was leading the organisation; two notable members of the society included George Douglas Howard Cole and William Mellor.²⁹³ These members of the group would go on to play a significant role in the labour movement in Britain, and Arnot and Mellor would go on to help found the British Communist Party in 1920.²⁹⁴ On 27 September 1919, the LRD began preparing for how they would best combat the government's statements and how they would boost public support in favour of the rail strike. The LRD created posters and articles which were to be included in the national daily newspapers.²⁹⁵ These articles and posters were paid for out of NUR funds, 1500 pounds a day for the duration of the strike.²⁹⁶ During the strike the LRD were helped by various journalists who also worked for the *Daily Herald*; Mellor himself worked for the *Herald* and went on to succeed Lansbury as the editor for the paper in 1926.²⁹⁷ Bill Paton in a brief review of the LRD during the rail strike in 1982, questioned whether or not the public was actually swayed either way by both sides propaganda. Paton argues that it "was clear throughout the strike that the government, the NUR and the LRD all thought that it was important to have public opinion on their side."²⁹⁸ Paton goes on to argue that if "it is

²⁹³ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 393

²⁹⁴ A. Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester, 2000); & M. Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2002)

²⁹⁵ B. Paton, "The Labour Research Department and the Railway Strike of 1919", *Bulletin - Society for the Study of Labour History*, Issue 44, (1982), p 9-10

²⁹⁶ Bagwell, *The Railwaymen*, p. 394

²⁹⁷ Paton, "The Labour Research Department", p. 10

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10

accepted that newspapers have the power to provide information upon which people form opinions, then the campaign, by modifying that power, can be seen as a success.”²⁹⁹

Conclusion

The government utilised the press as part of its sophisticated strike breaking network. The importance placed on the press by the government is represented by the War Cabinet Meetings and reports written by the Minister of Labour Sir Robert Horne. Fortunately for the railwaymen, and the trade union movement, the railway unions combatted the government with propaganda of their own. If the government was allowed to have had unopposed propaganda, it is plausible that the strike would have failed. It would have failed because public opinion would have remained against the strike; which could have boosted volunteer numbers and surely would have disheartened the striking railwaymen.

There was no clear regional distinction between the north east papers and the northern Home Counties papers. There were papers which came out against the strike in the north east, such as the *Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant* and the *Northern Echo* at the start of the strike. There were papers which came out against the strike in the northern Home Counties such as, the *Cambridge Independent Press and News*, the *Essex Newsman*, and the *Buckingham Advertiser and North Bucks Free Press*. There were also papers which supported the strike in both the north east and the northern Home Counties. It is interesting that there were papers in the agricultural northern Home Counties which supported the strike; particularly in Cambridge where the Member of Parliament was, in fact, Sir Eric Geddes. It would appear that the support of the strike from the local newspaper's

²⁹⁹ Ibid., p.10

perspective was unaffected by broader patterns in Britain of unionisation and industrialisation.

(5) Conclusion

This study has sought to rethink Bagwell's research on the 1919 railwaymen's strike by examining new research from TNA. It offers a different interpretation to the railway union approach of Bagwell, by assessing the government's attitude and actions towards the strike. A new regional assessment of the strike has also been included focusing on the local and regional press in the north east of England and the northern Home Counties.

One aim of this study has been to draw attention to how serious the railway strike was for the government. It was a strike that was to test the resolve of the State to its fullest capacity. One element that made the dispute such a challenge for the government was the sheer number of railwaymen who came out on strike. On the 19 systems which had 3000 or more railwaymen, 80.65 percent ceased work. The strike was solid in all areas of Britain, not just in the heavily unionised populations of, for example, South Wales and the north east of England.

One reason for the extremely high strike turnout was because of the increased organisational capacity of the railway unions following the Great War. Contributing factors to the development of railway trade unionism were the foundation of the NUR in 1913, the growth of union membership, and the fact the railway unions gained recognition from the companies during the First World War.

Another reason why the strike was so complete was because of the solidarity of the railwaymen. It could almost be expected that the railwaymen in the north east would have come out on strike in high numbers, considering the high level of unionisation in the overall population. It is much more surprising to note that the northern Home Counties experienced a similar walkout. Why would railwaymen, isolated from broader patterns of

unionisation, strike in such high numbers? One reason, as this study highlights, could have been the importance of community and social standing to the railwaymen. If a railwayman had decided to return to work, he and his family might have faced being ostracized from the community. This is one reason why the holding of events by the railway unions would have been so effective. Not just to boost morale, but to stress the importance of community and togetherness. The fear for a railwayman of losing their standing in the community would have been an even greater concern in smaller communities, more reliant on the railway.

This unprecedented walkout caused a complete stoppage on the railway at the start of the strike. This is in agreement with Bagwell's assessment of the extent of the strike. Official records released after Bagwell's study show that the government and railway companies were able to run a continually improving emergency train service from the opening weekend of the strike to the finish.

The ability of the government to combat such a large scale industrial crisis was only made possible by the implementation of a series of emergency measures. It is evident that the government had a sophisticated network of departments and committees working together to ensure the best possible emergency policies were implemented during the strike. Arguably the three most influential emergency measures were the call for public volunteers, the organisation of emergency road transport, and the utilization of the police and the Armed Forces. The effective application of these measures was fundamental to the government's success during the strike.

The government's volunteers helped not only on the railways but in the emergency road transport scheme and in civil aviation. The success of the volunteers was so that in the aftermath of the strike it was considered that there might be a permanent voluntary strike-

breaking organisation set up. This organisation was decided against but did eventually come to fruition in 1925 with the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, which played a role in defeating the 1926 general strike. Regarding the operation of emergency road transport, the success of the measure is highlighted by how there were no noteworthy food shortages anywhere during the strike.

While there was very little violence or disorder during the strike, the police and Armed Forces still played an important role in the guarding of vulnerable and strategic positions. The RAF also played a pivotal role in delivering essential government communication and newspapers.

Another tool in the government's strikebreaking machine was propaganda. The press was vitally important to the government's campaign against the railwaymen, which is symbolised by how one of the RAF's primary roles was to distribute newspapers during the dispute. The government issued press releases on each day of the strike and at least on the first day of the dispute the War Cabinet had pre-discussed what the press release would contain. The tone of these early messages was extreme with the railway union leaders being accused of anarchism and attempting to create a revolution.

In the historiography on how the press reported on the strike, both Bagwell and Beers provide a similar argument, that the national press was opposed to the strike at the beginning of the dispute, but were more supportive of the strike as it developed. This study has tested that hypothesis by analysing both national and regional publications.

The national press at the start of the dispute, barring the *Daily Herald*, resoundingly supported the government's view of the strike. At a regional level at the beginning of the dispute, there were papers which were more sympathetic to the strike such as the

Sunderland Daily Echo and the *Cambridge Daily News* and then papers which were totally opposed to the strike like the *Newcastle Daily Journal* and the *Northern Echo*.

The aggressive and unfounded approach the government took in their press releases further exemplifies how desperate the government was to defeat the rail strike.

Unfortunately for the government, the unfair accusations made against the railway union leaders and the strike prompted the printers to threaten to strike. This threatened strike combined with the railway union's own press campaign caused a shift in favour of the railwaymen in the propaganda war. The national press began to print more articles sympathetic to the railwaymen however there were still papers, such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Graphic* and the *Evening Standard* which remained anti-strike until the end of the dispute. From a regional perspective, the daily paper which changed its stance the most significantly was the *Northern Echo*, which became more strike sympathetic after 1 October. The other daily papers did not experience such a change such; the *Sunderland Echo* started pro-strike and finished pro-strike, the *Newcastle Journal* began anti-strike and finished that way.

With its heavily unionised population, it was expected that the papers in the north east of England would have been, for the most part, sympathetic to the strike. With its population largely involved in agriculture, it was expected that the papers in the northern Home Counties would have been, for the most part, opposed to the strike. This was not to be the case for either, with both regions papers providing examples of pro-strike and anti-strike bias. Probably the most notable being the *Cambridge Daily Press*, which was highly sympathetic to the railwaymen and the strike; even though the Member of Parliament for Cambridge was Sir Eric Geddes himself. The fact there is no clear regional distinction,

between two regions with such vastly different socio-economic structures, suggests that local and regional papers were unaffected by broader patterns in Britain of unionisation and industrialisation.

This study has brought some attention to a crucial event in British trade union history, and there is potential for further research. The trade union perspective could be brought up to date and railway union archives, such as the NUR archives held at the University of Warwick, re-examined. As this study emphasized, the historiography on the strike is very limited. In the 1980's, when labour history was moving more towards studies focused on community and culture, the 1919 railway strike was left unexamined. A cultural element of the history of the strike, which this study has touched upon that would benefit enormously from further research is how important community was to the railwaymen and their families during times of crisis. There could also be a more comprehensive regional analysis of the strike in the future which would help build the national picture of the dispute.

There is potential for further research on the government's network of departments and committees which worked to defeat trade unionism in this period. There is a multitude of materials at TNA which can be examined.³⁰⁰

The railway strike tested the resolve of both the railwaymen and the government. From the railwaymen's perspective, they were able to stand up to the full might of the

³⁰⁰ (TNA), CO 323/806/57, Transport and Accommodation of Essential Staff during the 1919 Rail Strike, 10/1919; (TNA), CO 323/806/54, Disrupted Attendance of Civil Servants at their Offices and Authorised Payment of Excess Expenditure Incurred through Abnormal Conditions, (1919); (TNA), LAB 2/501/ED9580/27/1919, Employment Department and Employment and Insurance Department: Correspondence Concerning Emergency Arrangements in the Event of a Railway Strike, (1919); (TNA), MAF 60/373, Disposal of Stocks Collected from Railway Companies: Correspondence and Reports, (1919); & (TNA), POWE 26/20, Precis of minutes of the Coal Committee and Coal Sub-Committee during the 1919 Rail Strike, (1919)

State's resources and not be crushed. This in itself was a victory for the confidence in the overall trade union movement of the time. From the government's perspective, they were able to cope with an almost complete strike on the nation's most important transport system. The crucial thing for both sides was that neither had lost. In the longer term, the settlement won by the railwaymen from the strike was far better than those in other industries, such as in the mining industry where workers were to suffer substantial wage cuts in 1921. The railwaymen were an organised and disciplined workforce willing to follow union orders. Thomas was a pragmatic and flexible negotiator. This combination did not just lead to success in the 1919 rail strike, but it also protected the railwaymen from future defeats to their wages and conditions throughout the turbulent 1920's.

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