Organized for a Fair Deal: African American Railroad Workers in the Deep South, 1900-1940

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Abstract

This study concerns the organized activity of African American railroad workers in Deep South states such as Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana. The study opens with a broad discussion of wage labour as an aspect of the political economy of the Mississippi Delta and the Piney Woods of Mississippi. By establishing wage labour as a vital aspect of the Deep South economy, the opening chapter sets the scene for the main discussion on the activities of African American railroad workers.

This study shows that African American railroad workers protested various racial impositions on them, including their exclusion from white dominated craft unions within the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the ongoing push from white railroad trainmen to have them removed from lucrative posts in the train service, as well as railroad employers’ insistence on keeping them as lowly paid substitutes for white labour. They also took good advantage of federal wartime control over the railroads to challenge prejudiced notions of their skills and experience as workers.

African American railroaders were persistent fighters for fair employment practices well before the legendary A. Philip Randolph came on the scene. They engaged their employers and white workers in varying ways. African American railroad shopmen did not hesitate to join subordinate locals of the white-dominated craft unions in the AFL. They participated with white shopmen in the important railroad shop strikes of 1911 and 1922. Their counterparts in the train
service tended to build independent organisations and used subtle forms of protest such as letters, petitions and legal suits in preference to strike action.

Although organized African American trainmen used seemingly unconfrontational approaches to making their grievances heard, the study cautions against the presumption that these organizations were either weak or unassertive. Careful organisation and preparation for a court appearance or filing a petition with an employer such as the Illinois Central, involved a collective will that cannot be pigeonholed within a dichotomy of militancy versus conformity. African American railroad workers resisted their domination and exploitation on railroads in the Deep South by building effective organizations often within the fold of the AFL.
Acknowledgements

The road toward this dissertation has been a journey that has seen my transformation from a dilettantish South African intellectual to a serious-minded historian of African American labour and social history. This transformation has neither been a huge nor dramatic leap. Thanks to my thesis supervisor Rick Halpern, with his own interest in collaborative research on race and labour in the U.S and South Africa, I have constantly been aware of the spiritual affinity between the struggles of African Americans for democratic freedoms in the U.S and African people’s struggles against racial domination in South Africa.

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whom I believe do share with you and others back home, a common resource of spirit and optimism in the face of great adversity.
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Introduction: The African American Railroad Worker as Conscious Agent

In September 1919, station porter John Nelson of Rolling Folk, Mississippi, confidently aired his grievance over the low wage he received on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad in a letter to W.S Carter, director of the Division of Labor in the United States Railroad Administration (USRA). To persuade Carter that he deserved more than the measly $55 a month that he received, he was particularly assertive in expressing pride in the performance of his tasks. According to Nelson, the work of handling baggage, U.S mail, cotton and general station labour required a “strong active man” who could also read and write.1 The station porter was not the stereotypical Southern common labourer whose labour involved minimal experience or initiative.

However, despite the bold manner in which he informed Carter about the value of his work, Nelson chose to temper his approach by disavowing any organizational allegiance. He humbly declared that he was approaching Carter in his individual capacity, as “I am not eligible to membership in any labor organisation that I know of and therefore have no one to appeal through as members of labor organisations have.”2 Similarly, when Luther Porter of Water Valley, Mississippi, wanted to change his classification from shop labourer to machinist helper, he appointed white attorney Gilman Wood to represent him before Carter.3 W.S. Carter and other Washington-based officials who corresponded with John Nelson, Luther Porter and other African

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3 Gilman Wood to W. S. Carter, 30 April 1920, USRA, “Coloured Rates of Pay”, Reels 1-3.
American workers undoubtedly perceived these labourers as striking exceptions to the trend in which railroad workers made their voices heard with organized force.

Railroad workers’ correspondence with USRA officials (used extensively in chapter three) usually included groups of signatories often clearly identifying themselves as representative committees affiliated with a particular trade union body such as the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, the Colored Trainmen of American, or organizations of shop labourers and helpers within the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The correspondence bearing a list of representative signatories came from places as far afield as Houston, Texas; Little Rock, Arkansas; New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Bay St. Louis, Hattiesburg and Jackson, Mississippi; Knoxville, Paris and Memphis, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia and as far into the Southeast as Jacksonville, Florida. Collectively this correspondence conveys a sense that African American railroad workers’ organized presence in the Deep South was a latent movement with a consciously co-ordinated will across states. Besides expressing grievances around their poor wages and working conditions, Southern African American railroad workers vocalised the expectation that their reward for loyal service during the First World War would be wages based on justice and fair play rather than racial privilege.

To the extent that their wage demands involved an aspiration for justice and equality, African American railroad workers in the Deep South were expressing a sense of determination and consciousness that historians of the South have begun to explore in varying ways. The subjectivity and conscious agency of African Americans in the South has indeed been treated with great care and skill by recent historians sensitive to the silent (and sometimes open) resistance and community solidarity that African Americans created and sustained behind the dehumanizing effects of racial segregation and the idea of white supremacy. Some historians
have documented the manifestation of this “subjectivity” in local forms of organization such as
churches, fraternal clubs and benevolent associations. It was further manifest in movements for
political reform that occurred in parts of the South such as Texas, where resurgent NAACP
branches campaigned openly against racial injustice in the early 1920s, or in Florida, where the
1920 voter registration movement built solidarity on the basis of existing community and labour
institutions among African Americans in the state.⁴

In one illuminating study, historian Tera Hunter has captured the largely undocumented
world, the remarkably vibrant culture, and the silent forms of resistance among domestic workers
in Atlanta Georgia.⁵ Other recent studies by historians such as Stephen Hahn and Mary G.
Rolinson have drawn attention to the latent nationalism and separatist politics that took hold
among rural communities across the Deep South between the late nineteenth century and the
early 1920s.⁶ This nationalism was encouraged by grassroots movements for repatriation back to
Africa, and by the idea of racial pride and autonomy that Marcus Garvey and the UNIA adopted
in a radicalized form from the more moderate Booker T. Washington. Historians Hahn and
Rolinson have recently contributed insightful studies on the separatist nativity among African
Americans in the South, adding a fresh angle on previous works that had brought to light the
interface between race and class consciousness among working class and sharecropping African
Americans.

⁴ Steven A Reich, “Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for Citizenship, 1917-1921” Journal of
American History, Vol. 82: 4 (March 1996), 1493-1494; Paul Ortiz, Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of
Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920, (Berkeley,
⁵ Tera W. Hunter, To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War
⁶ Steven, Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great
Migration, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Mary G Rolinson, Grassroots
Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927 (Chapel Hill: The
Some of the best work on this score may be attributed to historians such as Peter Rachleff, Joe William Trotter, Jr., Robin D.G. Kelley, and most recently William P. Jones. Jones’ study of African American lumber workers in the Jim Crow South has sought to cast light on the self-identity of these workers as semi-proletarian small farmers against a long standing misconception of them as shiftless wanderers with no anchor in family, soil and settled existence. The opening chapter of the present study of African American railroad workers in the Deep South critically engages Jones and other historians (such as Jonathan Wiener and Nan Woodruff) who have written on the postbellum South as if it were solely a pre-capitalist society defined primarily by relations between semi-feudal landlords and an ill-defined “peasantry” of largely African American sharecroppers and tenants.

In the plantation economy, because wage labour was a marginal factor in a system of labour exploitation dominated by sharecropping and debt peonage, historians have tended to ignore the role of wage labour as an increasingly decisive factor for planters and other employers, such as the railroads and lumber industry, trying to maintain their labour supply. Thus, the first chapter of this study demonstrates the extent to which an embryonic form of modern industrialization centred on the railroads and the lumber industry contributed to increasing the level of competition for labour among the various competing sectors of employment. The main argument is that competition for labour had sufficient force to weaken

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grounds for historian Jonathan Wiener’s notion of the so-called “Prussian Road” to development, which was characterized by coercive methods of labour control rather than market mechanisms for allocating labour between competing sectors of the economy.10

Despite planters’ efforts to restrain the movement of African American tenants, their persistent mobility caused shortages in the labour supply. This compelled planters to rely on wage labour to a greater extent than they may have wanted. Although employers on the railroads and in the lumber industry adapted to the labour repressive practices of the plantation economy, their very presence as alternative avenues of employment outside of cotton plantation agriculture, gave African American workers room to evade their employers’ controls, to move from job to job, and ultimately to push for wages that these employers were initially reluctant to concede. The opening discussion on the emergence of wage labour in the lumber industry, on the railroads and on the fringes of the cotton plantation economy, deals with the essential material backdrop (if not the determining factor) behind the subjective presence of African American workers on the railroads of Deep South states such as Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

The themes developed in this study include African American railroad workers’ push for integration, even partial acceptance, into the established labour movement on the railroads in South, their establishment of a vocal and independent trade union movement on railroads such as the Illinois Central, and the race pride they articulated in their quest to have white railroad managers recognize their labour as equal in value (and dignity) to the work contributed by their white co-workers on the train service and in the railroad shops. A core theme that this study addresses in detail is the steadfast refusal of African American trainmen to submit to pressures

on them to give up the lucrative posts they occupied in the train service on railroads in the Deep South.

These pressures (including racial violence and secret deals between white trainmen and railroad employers encroaching on African American employment) occurred most vigorously after the end of federal control over the railroads following World War I. They involved both railroad officials and white trainmen, organized in the powerful “big four” railroad brotherhoods, namely, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Order of Railway Conductors of America, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, in ongoing moves to drive African American trainmen from posts in the train service that had become attractive to white workers in the post war years.

Post-war African American resistance to encroachments on their seniority rights from white trainmen was an organized movement that easily can be taken for granted or dismissed. Historian Eric Arnesen, for instance, describes African American trainmen’s organization and resistance as fraught with weakness and a pronounced lack of militancy.\(^\text{11}\) One can best evaluate and appreciate the confident persistence and tactical flexibility of African American railroad trainmen in the 1920s, if their resistance on the trains is seen within the context of the more long standing quest of broad sections of African American railroad workers to assert an organized presence on the railroads. With a view to bringing to light a deeper (and often ignored) history of labour organization among African American railroad workers, the second chapter of this study opens with an exploration of the efforts of these workers, well before legendary trade unionist A. Philip Randolph and the Pullman Porters gained a vocal platform within the

American Federation of Labor (AFL), to compel the AFL to live up to its paper policy of working class solidarity beyond divisions of race and creed.

Addressing the question as to why it was that a minority of African American railroad workers stayed within the AFL despite the racism they faced from the AFL’s base of craft unions, this study gets behind the internal politics of the Federation and investigates the ways in which capitalist development in the U.S since the 1890s continually undermined the traditional control skilled craftsmen had previously exercised in the workplace. As historians such as David Montgomery have shown, the ongoing process of industrialization and the emergence of mass production industries took control over the workplace from small, owner-managed workshops, and placed it in the hands of the increasingly centralized authority of corporations that valued increasing output above skilled workmanship. On the railroads, the unions of skilled shopmen, who continually had to deal with the power of corporate management over their wages and working conditions, often turned to their less skilled and darker co-workers during strikes (such as the Harriman strike of 1911 or the Shopmen’s strike of 1922) to ensure that they could face up to management without the risk that workers outside of their crafts would work in their place and further undermine their position.

African American shopmen, sensing the vulnerability of skilled white workers in an era when mechanization tested the basis of craft exclusiveness, used the limited organizational room that the AFL had provided them through so-called federal labour unions, to push for a greater degree of influence within the Federation. Although these federal labour unions, did not share the power or the full-fledged bargaining rights that the craft unions within the AFL enjoyed, they had been instituted in the early years of Samuel Gompers’ presidency of the AFL as a response

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to the relentless petitions and letters from African American workers urging the Federation to live up to the colour blind principle it had inherited from the Knights of Labor, and to allow them at least a minimal organized presence within the AFL.

The cumulative weight of the letters and protest petitions that these workers sent Samuel Gompers and AFL secretary Frank Morrison over a period of years gained African American railroad workers limited concessions to their demands, such as the organization of shop labourers into the Brotherhood of Way Maintenance and Shop Laborers. However, to the extent that the leadership of AFL never found rest from niggling enquiries and requests from African American railroad workers asking for union charters or membership of craft unions, these letters represent for the historian of Southern labour astounding evidence of African American confidence to make forthright claims on the white men who presided over powerful institutions such as the craft unions within the AFL. Such evidence provides useful material to both critically engage and further explore the concept of the “hidden” transcripts of resistance that scholars such as James C. Scott and Robin D. G. Kelley have deployed to illuminate aspects of popular thought, activity and culture that denote the ceaselessness of people’s conscious (though usually undocumented) resistance to their marginalization and domination.13

While African American shop labourers and machinist helpers found partial accommodation within the AFL, through their federal labour unions often under the jurisdiction either of AFL executive officers or within the subordinate fold of particular shop crafts, African American trainmen faced a far more closed and hostile environment from the “big four” brotherhoods on the trains and in the switching yards. Theoretically there was nothing, beside

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race, to block an African American porter from rising to the position of conductor or train master. Work in the train service did not rest on a lengthy period of apprenticeship and training. There was no clear distinctions of skill or craft, a reality that the big four brotherhoods overcame by resorting to a far more rigid regime of racial exclusiveness than that existing among the shop crafts. They fostered a rigid racial hierarchy over access to particular positions of employment in the train service. This was a superficial substitution for craftsmanship as a criterion for maintaining the privileged status of white trainmen, whose seniority ranking among fireman, brakemen and flagmen, allowed some of them promotion to the highest positions in the train service. African American workers in the train services, it was presumed, would be confined solely to such low-paying and service-oriented positions as coach cleaners and porters.

However, railroad employers in the Deep South, who clearly understood racial exclusion to be a poor substitute for craft, did not always adhere to the rigidities of the racial hierarchy of employment in the train service. Although they almost always shared the racial prejudices of white trainmen, railroad employers’ primary motive was to increase the returns of their shareholders by cutting the costs of the railroad business as far as possible. An easy means employers found to do this was to use African American porters to perform the work of firemen and brakemen, often without changing the formal description of their jobs as porters. In this way they were able to employ African Americans as firemen and brakemen at a lower wage than white workers received, and without provoking significant opposition from white workers. This was to change during World War I however, when federal government, which had assumed control over the railroads, issued an order enforcing the principle of equal pay for equal work on the railroads and which set out to specifically define the duties of brakemen, firemen and flagmen as a means to clearly distinguish their work from the work of porters.
The order known as General Order 27 (particularly Supplement 12 to that order) was issued, in part, because of vigorous agitation from African American trainmen. Before and during US intervention in the European war, African American railroad workers in the Deep South began organizing themselves both formally and informally to take advantage of labor-friendly reforms being introduced by the Wilson government. The third chapter focuses on African American railroad workers’ activities on railroads in Deep South during World War I and shows how these black workers, in the shops and the train services, organized and demanded reforms that went beyond improved wages and working conditions. In particular, through collective petitioning and individual correspondence, they made a strong and partially successful effort to convince officials of the United States Railroad Administration (USRA) of the dignity, initiative, responsibility and skill involved in their work.

Although African American workers’ petitions and letters to the USRA, like the ones which earlier had covered the desks of Samuel Gompers and Frank Morrison, often sounded contained and quietly assertive, they were in every way an ideological challenge that confidently expressed their rejection of racial devaluation of their labour. However, if General Order 27 was a victory of African American railroad workers’ organization and protest, it was an affront that railroad employers did not easily forgive once the railroads were handed back to their private owners in 1919. The employers’ backlash was to work toward removal of African Americans from employment opportunities on the railroads for which they would have received an equal wage with white trainmen. This employers’ response occurred side by side with the move among white trainmen to assume pre-dominance over posts in the train service such as brakemen and firemen.
Despite the post-war scenario in which railroad employers moved to cut back on the wage hikes that railroad workers had gained during the period of federal control, African American workers’ sense of class and racial agency was not sapped. The fourth chapter shows how black shop labourers and machinists in the Deep South participated fully in strikes of railroad shopmen in 1919 and again in the major strike of 1922. Despite white shopmen who were sometimes all too wary of the potential of African American workers to engage in strike breaking, it is clear that the participation of the majority of African American workers in the strike involved both class conscious purpose and a pragmatic sense that it was necessary to stand with their white co-workers against the railroad employers’ onslaught on the labour movement in the shops.14

The key factor facilitating African American shopmen’s willing participation in the 1922 strike was the recognition among the shop craft affiliates of the AFL that the boundary that separated them as skilled craftsmen from semi-skilled and unskilled workers, was a fragile safety net against railroad employers ready to break whatever remained of the semblance of control in the workplace railroad workers had once enjoyed. The uneasy labour solidarity between white and black workers that featured most dramatically in the 1922 shopmen’s strike stands in dramatic contrast to the often dire situation African American trainmen faced in their relationship with their white co-workers in the train service during the 1920s and early 1930s.

Despite the violence white trainmen were prepared to exercise in securing a monopoly of the best paying positions in the train service, and contrary to the approach taken by historian Eric Arnesen emphasizing the agency of white labour, the evidence with respect to the situation

14 Colin J. Davis, Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen’s Strike, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 69. Although Davis displays an awareness of African American involvement in the 1922 strike, he gives insufficient attention to the interplay of racial tension and class collaboration between white and black workers throughout the strike.
of African American trainmen as discussed in chapter four demonstrates that the imperatives of employers and their relationship to African American workers had a more significant impact than the power of white labour in shaping the racial hierarchy on the roads. During the 1920s, at the same time that they tried to ward off encroachments on their seniority rights from white trainmen, organized African American trainmen also fought vigorously to defend the wage gains they had made during the brief period of federal control. They made a determined effort, seen most dramatically in the legal suit of Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad (covered at length in chapter four), to compel employers to see them as more than porters, and to legitimize their status as fully fledged trainmen well versed in the rules and technical operations that the safe movement of the trains required.

In making their claim for formal recognition as brakemen or firemen in the train service, African American trainmen in the Deep South were prepared to question the norms of Southern racial culture that dictated their acceptance of racial domination and social inequality without protest. Behind Charles Sideboard’s courageous court appearance, there was evident organization, solidarity, and determination to win among members of the Association of Colored Railway Employees in the Mississippi Delta. Although trainmen led by the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen did not take an openly militant stand in challenging their employers and white co-workers’ competing for the positions they had attained in the train service, they did not necessarily act from a position of weakness. They had fairly effective organizations in bodies such as the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, which they well used to act with common purpose and a show of solidarity with each other over state boundaries in the South. Their determination to win is evident in the sweep of court proceedings that occurred in the early
1920s against the trend among employers to renege on the wage increases due to them in terms of General Order 27.

This study closes with a comparative reflection on the situation on two railroad systems in the South during the Great Depression – the Louisiana & Arkansas system, which had lines that stretched between Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana, and the Illinois Central system, whose mainline coursed southward from Chicago, Illinois, through Memphis, Tennessee, the Mississippi Delta and the Piney Woods, all the way to New Orleans, Louisiana, and Gulfport, Mississippi. The situation on the Illinois Central system involved a repetition of the white labour violence against African American trainmen that had occurred in 1921, and the situation on the Louisiana & Arkansas system was squarely a stand-off between a union-bashing employer, who had a colour blind disregard for any labour organization. For African American workers the common thread was that they were pitted against railroad employers who had no patience for any show of restiveness, organization, or quest for collective bargaining rights. While Harvey Couch, president and controlling shareholder of the Louisiana & Arkansas system, come down as hard on African American labour organizations as he did on the white ones, officials on the Illinois Central effectively turned a blind eye to the violence perpetrated by white labour on African American trainmen, all with the underlying purpose of beating down the push from African American trainmen for recognition of their independent organizations as collective bargaining bodies. In both cases, African American trainmen kept up a relentless fight to overcome the powerlessness that their employers strived to impose on them.

African American shopmen and trainmen on railroads in states such as Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, were part of the minority of wage workers located in the small but impactful modern economy beyond the cotton plantations which themselves had begun to use wage labour
on an intermittent basis. Far from the usual perception among historians that the South during the era of racial segregation was a world defined almost solely by the agency of white racial domination, the African American railroad workers observed in this study demonstrated their vitality as conscious, acting agents, who stood up to white domination and their exploitation as cheap labour. They built impressive and lasting trade union organizations. They co-operated with their white co-workers in confrontations with their employers when such solidarity seemed feasible and necessary. They challenged the racial hierarchy of employment on the railroads. They questioned the poor standard by which their skills and experience as workers was judged by railroad employers set on using them as cheap and subordinate substitutes for higher paid white labour.

They experienced violence and intimidation from their white co-workers on the trains, alongside the intense unwillingness of their employers to entertain their trade union leaders as their legitimate collective bargaining representatives. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, against the violence and ongoing attrition of lucrative openings in the train service they had once enjoyed, they maintained a resilient presence on the railroads, continually organizing and challenging low wages, racial domination and unequal opportunities for employment.
Chapter One: Railroads, African American Labour and the Mississippi Delta Economy

Illinois Central system, Mississippi (Illinois Central Magazine, August 1925)
The Mississippi economy shared key features with the local economy of the state of Arkansas on the western side of the Mississippi River, and with Louisiana, on the southern border of the state. At the time of the thirteenth census in 1910 all three states shared a high concentration of wage workers in various aspects of the lumber trade including logging, saw and plane mills, paper and box manufacturing. Thus, 76.7 per cent of wage earners in Arkansas, 66.3 per cent in Mississippi and 60.5 per cent of the total wage earners employed by manufacturers in Louisiana, were engaged in lumber manufacturing. In each of these states, railroad corporations, such as the Illinois Central System (which hauled the biggest share of lumber and cotton goods in the vast territory between Memphis, Tennessee; Gulf Port, Mississippi and New Orleans) and the Missouri-Pacific Railroad Company (which handled 35 per cent of tonnage in Arkansas), were indispensable to the functioning and development of key sectors of the economy.¹

The railroads had exclusive ownership of large machine shops and railroad car manufacturing plants. This strengthened their strategic position in relation to vital local economic sectors, which were dependent on the railroads for the delivery of cars to move their goods. The strategic position of the railroads in the most vital sectors of the economy of these states was strengthened by their exclusive ownership of large railroad machine shops and car manufacturing plants. These states shared another key feature: a plantation agricultural economy characterized by large-scale cotton farming and closely supervised sharecroppers. Despite the predominance of sharecropping, a small wage labour force often was used as a substitute during

peak seasons, while industries such as lumber and Louisiana sugar relied almost exclusively on wage labour.\(^2\)

With these common features in mind, the primary focus in this chapter is to provide an outline of the labour and political economy of railroads and lumber in the state of Mississippi. Developments in Mississippi’s neighbouring states will be addressed, in so far as these bring to light similar approaches among employers to issues of discipline and control over supplies of low-paid African American labour. Central to the concerns of this chapter is the extent to which industrial development in this region had an impact on the predominant forms of labour exploitation, particularly sharecropping and debt peonage, while contributing to the emergence of a nascent wage labour market on the fringes of the plantation and within the lumber industry, which was a strategic sector of the modernizing economy.

The economy and society of Mississippi (and the wider South Central railroad region) developed along two opposing lines between 1900 and 1930. On one side, the plantation economy remained impervious to mechanization because, as historian Jonathan Wiener has suggested, “planters lacked incentives to mechanize; they organized their plantations on the basis of a guaranteed supply of low-cost labour tied to the land.”\(^3\) Despite the prevailing labour-repressive system that included debt peonage, anti-enticement, contract and vagrancy laws, cheap labour never was guaranteed in any absolute sense as long as planters competed against each other, and increasingly, against modernizing sectors of the economy for supplies of cheap labour.

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On the other side, despite the continuing predominance of agriculture, the region saw impressive levels of industrial growth in the first decades of the century, which can best be appreciated from the evidence of an elementary indicator, the growth in the value of capital investments which, between 1899 and 1909 soared by 120 per cent in the state of Louisiana, from $100,875,000 to $221,816,000; about 176 per cent in Arkansas from $25,385,000 to $70,174,000; and about 219 per cent in Mississippi, from $22,172,000 to $72,393,000.\(^4\) Undoubtedly, these impressive increases in capital investment were largely spurred on by the penetration of the railroads through the cotton plantation lands and into the piney woods that spanned across the Deep South.\(^5\)

These appreciable increases in capital investment and the industrialization stimulated by the railroads had a significant impact on the plantation economy. By creating competing sectors of demand for labour, this modernization of the economy, although limited, affected the degree to which planters and other local employers could rely on coercion to secure their labour. In Wiener’s classic thesis on the “Prussian Road” to development in the South, “formal restrictions on labour mobility, laws that tied the workers to the land and restricted their access to alternative employment”, provided both a material and political basis for planter hegemony over industrial capital in the New South.\(^6\) However, this basis of planter hegemony was not sustainable in a context in which the effects of a small, but lucrative, industrial wage labour market created the need for more flexible approaches to meeting labour needs. Although capitalist economic development in the South may not have been of sufficient depth to undermine planter’s tight control over labour, as Alex Lichtenstein has suggested in defence of Weiner’s thesis, it had

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\(^4\) The Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Vol. 1X, 51, 415 and 617.
enough of an impact as to encourage planters to adapt to the use of wage labour when coercive forms of labour exploitation such as debt peonage could not overcome sometimes critical shortages of labour.  

The railroads provided the vital stimulus for the rapid growth of forestry and the associated development of naval stores and sawmills in the region. By the late 1920s, the Illinois Central system, with its shops and roundhouses, had became one of the most significant employers in Mississippi, employing more than 13,000 people who, with their families, the Illinois Central Magazine claimed boisterously, “are greater in number than the entire population of the largest city in the state.” In Tennessee, the Illinois Central system employed more than 5,600 workers and in Louisiana about 5,800.  

The growth of lumbering and sawmills was intimately tied up with railroad development. Throughout the period under review, 1900-1930, as logging operations used up timber, they met their need for sustained supplies of lumber by building single gauge trunk lines that penetrated deeper into untapped forest resources. These trunk lines sometimes became “common carriers hauling both freight and passengers.” A number of common carriers such as the New Orleans & North-eastern Railroad, running between New Orleans and Meridian, Mississippi, and the Gulf & Ship Island Railroad, had their beginnings in the business of forestry.

According to Nollie Hickman, between 1890 and 1905, “adjacent to the railroads, hundreds of sawmills were erected … and near them villages, towns, and even a few small cities grew up overnight. Many of these were erected along the Gulf & Ship Island Railroad,” which in

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1907 transported one-tenth of all the yellow pine lumber manufactured in the South.\textsuperscript{10} The association between railroad development and the lumber industry was not solely a matter of moving logs to diverse consumers. The growth of the yellow pine industry in the Mississippi interior was, since the 1870s, closely associated with the manufacture of railroad cars. In the years 1873 to 1880, for instance, “many circular mills cutting 10,000 to 12,000 board feet were built primarily for the purpose of sawing car materials.”\textsuperscript{11}

African American workers involved with the railroads beyond the Illinois Central System, included semi-skilled shopmen, labourers, firemen and railway trainmen (i.e. porters and brakemen). Railroad shops in the South were sizeable employers of African American workers. By 1910, for instance, official data on employment in the shops of the Southern railroad district suggest that there were well over 40,000 workers engaged in railroad car building and repairs.\textsuperscript{12} In the early 1920s, with well over 170,000 labourers and helpers in the railroad shops and on railroad tracks and bridges throughout the U.S, this class of labour (in which African American workers were largely concentrated) would likely have constituted a significant portion of close to 340,000 railroad workers employed on Southern railroads.\textsuperscript{13} With the addition of an unknown number of workers on short line railroads owned by lumber operators, it is possible to speak of a “railroad economy” existing alongside the predominant plantation economy. This “railroad economy” was not only significant for the alternative employment it provided for workers wanting to escape the harsh conditions of plantation agriculture, it was also significant for the

\textsuperscript{10} Hickman, 156-157.
\textsuperscript{11} Hickman, 59.
\textsuperscript{13} Statistical Abstracts of the United States 1924, (Washington D.C: GPO, 1925), in Congressional Serial Set, Vol. 8495, Session 71, 68\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session, H.doc. 585.
indispensable outlet to external markets that it provided for cotton, lumber, naval stores and other products.

Well into the 1920s, the Illinois Central Railroad System was still a significant buyer of Mississippi yellow pine for railroad cross ties and “thousands of the system’s bridges, station buildings, platforms, and roadway and shop buildings, North and South.” By the late 1920s, Illinois Central, with its subsidiaries, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad and the recently acquired Gulf & Ship Island Railroad, cornered “48 per cent of the total railway mileage in Mississippi.” Through the Gulf & Ship Island Railroad, incorporated into the system in 1924, Illinois Central had privy to a significant source of forest supplies. When it first opened in the 1850s, 97 per cent of the freight tonnage of the Gulf & Ship Island Railroad, which serviced the Mississippi forest region between Jackson, Saratoga, Laurel and Gulf Port, was forest products such as “lumber, ties, rosin and turpentine.” Forest products were still a substantial 58 per cent of the total tonnage handled by the road when it was incorporated into the Illinois Central system in 1924.

Even before this 1924 takeover, the forest commodities of Mississippi, Louisiana and Tennessee, constituted a considerable part of the freight handled on the Illinois Central system as a whole, increasing from “7.3 per cent in 1881 to a maximum of 18 per cent in 1910.” In 1909, manufactured products for the state of Mississippi represented “53 per cent of the total value of products of all manufacturing industries in the state.” The lumber industry, which included logging, sawmills, planing mills and box manufacturers, employed 33,397 wage earners or “66.3

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15 Illinois Central Magazine, January 1926; February 1927.
16 Illinois Central Magazine, August 1925, 5.
18 Severson, 212.
per cent of the total average of wage earners reported by the manufacturing industries of the state, as against 22,431 or 58 per cent in 1904. Lumber manufacturing was of strategic importance to the state of Mississippi: in 1909, the value of products represented 53.1 per cent of the total value of products of all manufacturing industries in the state.

In 1921, a Department of Mines, Manufacturing and Agriculture survey, showed that forestry and lumber manufacturing had a similar primacy in the economy of neighbouring Arkansas where 54 per cent of all employees in manufacturing and mines were employed in 1,252 plants involved in lumber and timber manufacturing. Historian William P. Jones has convincingly demonstrated the significance of these figures in terms of the capacity for the lumber industry to absorb potential African American workers away from agriculture and speed up their proletarianization. According to Jones, southern lumber was the largest industrial employer of African American workers in the U.S. in the years 1890 to 1930. African American workers had the largest share of jobs in the industry, holding 60 per cent of positions in the lumber mills of the South.

The railroads encouraged the emergence of overlapping systems of labour exploitation, which ranged from peonage on plantations and in the turpentine woods, to the seasonal employment of an itinerant supply of unskilled labourers, to the fairly settled class of wage workers on railroads and in saw mill towns. This wage labour force included workers in a range of semi-skilled and skilled occupations in the forests, in the saw mills, cotton seed oil factories, and in the lumber and railroad machine shops. It included semi-skilled occupations on the railroads such as firemen and enginemen, brakemen and porters.

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19 The Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Vol. IX, 618.
20 The Thirteenth Census, 618.
21 The Lumber Trade Journal, 15 June 1921
By the 1880s, African Americans were beginning to be deprived of the political gains they had made since Reconstruction in the South. At the same time, the plantation economy submerged the emergence of a fully-fledged wage labour market as well as semi-autonomous small-farming class among African Americans. As one historian of the Mississippi Delta has observed, “by 1900 blacks dominated the lists of the Delta’s landowners,” and yet “the glow of opportunity faded after the turn of the century. Black farmers lost hope of climbing up the agricultural ladder, and whites took political and economic advantage of their greater access to credit. The proportion of black landowners ceased expanding, and many farmers slid swiftly down into tenancy” or rather, as Harold Woodman has well suggested, into wage labour paid in kind rather than cash.23

Despite repressive laws and customs in the South circumscribing the social and economic advancement of the majority of African American sharecroppers and tenants, the formal status of African American workers as relatively free agents on the labour market was no fiction. African American sharecroppers had essentially become a rural proletariat, well before the wave of mechanization in cotton in the 1940s and 1950s formally transformed tenants and sharecroppers into wage workers. Sharecropping, as historian Harold Woodman has argued, was little more than a form of wage labour in kind. Through the lien they held on the entire crop, planters exercised managerial (as opposed to contractually shared) control over production. 24 Many sharecroppers, from this perspective, may be seen in same light as Russian “allotment holding wage workers”, whom Lenin in 1899, described as a class involved in “insignificant farming on

a patch of land” of such limited economic potential that it was virtually impossible for allotment
holders to “exist without the sale of labour power.” It needs to be borne in mind moreover, that
the plantations were not in a region defined by a closed world of landlords and sharecroppers –
on Louisiana sugar plantations for instance, wage labour prevailed, with a workforce that used
seasonal peaks in the agricultural cycle to gain better conditions or higher wages by “protesting
with their feet”, a situation that appeared in monthly crop reports between 1885 and 1910 as a
“clear picture of the labor shortage that had struck sugar parishes particularly hard.”

The seasonal shortage of labour was accentuated by the simultaneous growth of
railroads and the lumber industry, which became significant employers of labour from the 1890s
onwards. In Mississippi, where the majority of the African American working population was
generally occupied in sharecropping arrangements, the railroads and lumber industry often had to
deal with a shortage (made more severe during the cotton planting or picking seasons) of
unskilled African American labour to meet the demand for labour to perform the heavy work of
cutting and hauling of wood in the forests, track laying on specialized lumber railroads, or on
main line railroads such as the Illinois Central, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad and the
Gulf & Ship Island Railroad. Throughout the period under review, and especially during World
War One and the era of the Great Migration, employers in the lumber industry often complained
bitterly that the mobility of African American workers was having a critical impact on
productivity and on their very capacity to stay in business at all. Employers often attributed this
shortage to the differences in wages African American workers could bargain for in competing
regions such as the Mississippi hills or the plantations of the Delta or between plantations and

26 Rick Halpern, “Solving the ‘Labor Problem’: Race, Work and the State in the Sugar Industries of Louisiana
Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880,
other sectors of work such as railways, river transportation, levee camps, and in urban employment.27

Historian William P. Jones has suggested that the high level of mobility among African American workers has encouraged a myth of black Ulysses. According to Jones, this myth, which became a fixture among novelists such as William Faulkner and Richard Wright and among scholars like E. Franklin Frazier and W.J. Cash, was first articulated by sociologist Howard Odum in the 1920s in a series of popular novels.28 According to Jones, Odum’s black Ulysses was like the Ulysses of ancient Greek literature, and symbolized African American men who were essentially unsuited to the settled life encouraged by industrial modernization. Odum fictionalized the lives of African American lumber workers in the South, whom he described as rambling minds who had “loose morals and weak connections to family and community.”29 These lumber workers, in Odum’s depiction, were prone to a life-style of aimless wandering rather than that of the settled proletarian given to a life of family and steady work. Drawing on the experience of semi-proletarian African American small farmers whom he identified around the timber industry in South Carolina, Louisiana and East Texas, Jones has argued that to the degree that there was mobility among African American workers, this movement usually involved male householders focused on using temporary wage employment in lumber or the railroads in close proximity to their farms in order to secure a settled future as small holders. According to Jones, “Before World War I, the majority of black and white southerners viewed industrial wage work as a temporary means to achieve their long-term goal of family farming.

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29 Jones, 2-5.
They sought such “public work” as young men and hoped to abandon it after purchasing equipment, a house, or land that would ensure their economic independence.\footnote{Jones, 47} With respect to African American workers in the countryside around the saw mills specifically, Jones argued that most entered the wage economy merely to sustain a yeoman existence, which in practical terms meant that they were resisting proletarianization by accepting seasonal rather than long term employment.\footnote{Jones, 13.}

In the process of dispelling one myth however, Jones has created another. In place of the shiftless black Ulysses, he has given exaggerated prominence to the existence of the semi-autonomous African American yeoman, who shares with the emergent African American proletarian of the 1920s, an orientation toward permanent location and family life. Undoubtedly lumber operators in the Mississippi Piney Woods and Louisiana attributed shortages of common labour to the seasonal movement of African American workers to occupations in agriculture. However, as significant opportunities for a viable autonomous small farming African American population had been foreclosed as early as the 1880s and 1890s\footnote{James C. Willis, Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 3, and James C. Cobb, The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 91.}, lumber operators may generally be taken at their word when they complained that the seasonal movement of African American workers into agriculture was driven by the competitive wages planters were willing to pay at peak season rather than by the imperatives of family life and small farming. While Jones may be commended for bringing to light the role of the lumber industry as a catalyst for a small (but strategic) degree of industrialization and the emergence of a settled, family oriented African American working class from the late 1920s, other evidence suggests that the emergence of an embryonic agricultural and industrial proletariat among African Americans in the South had
begun well before 1910. By shifting the time frame for the proletarianization of African American workers in the region, the purpose here is to demonstrate that sharecropping and wage labour were intrinsically woven together in the development of newer industries alongside cotton agriculture, and that employers always faced the need to balance wage labour with more familiar forms of control over their African American employees.

An unpublished U.S. Industrial Relations Commission analysis of census data covering the decade 1900-1910 showed, that despite the increasing use of labour tenancy over wage labour in the cotton plantation economy of the South, increased payments in wages in states such as Mississippi and Arkansas matched the national trend in which there was an increase of about 82 per cent in the total amount expended on agricultural wage labour. Mississippi, according to the report, saw an increase of about 83 per cent in wage payments, Arkansas, an increase of 141.4 per cent, and Texas, 109 per cent. This was comparable with increases in Northern states such as Montana, Nebraska and Nevada. Although 50 or more of all farms were operated by tenants, hired hands in agriculture were a very small but by no means, insignificant part of the agricultural labour force in the South. During 1909, for instance, 26 Louisiana and 24 Mississippi planters out of every hundred reported the employment of wage hands. Out of every hundred, 33 planters in Arkansas, 36 in Tennessee, and 38 in Texas, reported the employment of wage labour in 1909. It has been estimated recently that in 1910 overall, about “25 per cent of improved acres were cultivated with wage labor” on plantations in the South – a mere quarter of

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34 Coulter, 18-19.
the total, which nevertheless demonstrates that wage labour cannot simply be ignored as a
phenomenon involved in the making of modern plantation agriculture in the South.\textsuperscript{36}

It is possible to gain a broader picture of the extent to which African American workers
in the South had been proletarianized early on in the century if we take into account Woodman’s
observation that African American tenants were most likely to work under close supervision with
no control of the crop compared with white small holders who were described as owner
operators of their farms. The tenant was, as the Bureau of Census reported in its thirteenth census
(1910), “very similar” in “economic position to the hired farm laborer, practically the only
difference being that he works by himself and that he is paid by a share of the crop instead of
wages.”\textsuperscript{37} This point is further illuminated in an analysis by the U.S. Commission on Industrial
Relations (USCIR), which declared that, although “tenant laborers were married and have
families” and “were furnished a small home in which to live … they are none the less immediate
substitutes for hired laborers; often are looked upon as hired laborers by the landlords; receive
for their labor approximately the same amount per year as hired laborers employed for the entire
year and are merely called a different name because they assume more or less of the risk of
farming and are paid in a different form.”\textsuperscript{38}

This calls into question the validity of historian Pete Daniel’s argument that many
sharecroppers were not rural proletarians so much as they were a class of peons coerced into
labour until such time as they settled their debts with their landlords for advances on the crop.
Despite sometimes violent means used to restrain tenants from leaving a plantation, landlords
could not easily contain the movement of tenants off their plantations. Thus, according to the

\textsuperscript{36} Nancy Virts, “Change in the Plantation System: American South, 1910-1945”, \textit{Explorations in Economic History}
\textsuperscript{37} Harold D. Woodman, “Class, Race, Politics and the Modernization of the Postbellum South,” \textit{The Journal of
\textsuperscript{38} Coulter, “Agricultural Industrial Problems,” 41.
USCIR, “the share tenant … does not remain longer working for the same landlord than does the hired labourer in other parts of the country. In other words the tenant labourer moves from farm to farm as much as does the hired labourer.” To the extent that it indeed had a coercive effect, indebtedness was often more of a push than a restraint on the movement for a significant proportion of sharecroppers, who moved in order to overcome their indebtedness by seeking the best deal for their labour. Thus, in 1910, compared with just 2 per cent of debt free owners, a significant 38 per cent of African American sharecroppers in Mississippi resided on the same plantation for less than a year. According to the USCIR, this was much the same as the pattern for farms in the West and the South as a whole, where “of all farm families who reported a residence of less than one year, less than 10 per cent were owners free of debt, while 54 per cent were share tenants.”

It may be conceded that movement from one plantation to another did not necessarily involve free choice. For indebted tenants a move might simply have meant transferring their indebtedness from one landlord to another. As Wiener has stated, “the movement of tenants among landlords preserved the system’s repressive nature as long as the debt moved with the tenant.” A Delta planter advertising for labour in the Memphis Commercial Appeal for instance, appealed to any “reliable gentleman in the boll weevil district of Mississippi” to provide him “ten or fifteen families of good labor” for whom he would “pay any reasonable amount they might owe.” He made the offer with due regard for the need to appeal to prospective

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41 Wiener, “Class Structure,” 979.
tenants, promising “them a good place” and to “pay any gentlemen getting such labor for me handsomely.” 42

However, sharecroppers often moved with a manager or foreman they trusted to secure the best conditions, such as a prospective plantation manager who advertised that he had “fifteen or more good colored families, fresh from the hills, ready to move on your plantation on condition that I go with them as manager.” 43 The possibility that movement from one location to another proved successful for sharecroppers and tenants trying to overcome their indebtedness is a question that deserves further investigation by historians, notwithstanding a pointed critique of neoclassical econometricians who made the exaggerated claim that “black sharecroppers enjoyed returns that exceeded their marginal productivity; that relative to slaves, they had comfortable standards of living, ‘well above the subsistence level.’” 44 For the Mississippi Delta historians James R. Irwin and Anthony O’Brien have offered a preliminary answer. These economic historians have calculated on the basis of census data that in the Mississippi Delta, between the years 1879 and 1910, real per capita income among African Americans in agriculture increased from $64 to about $132. According to Irwin and O’Brien, this growth was at a similar annual average rate as the increase in per capita income for the United States as a whole, which was just over 2.3 per cent a year over the same period. Since Irwin and O’Brien excluded from their sample income derived from work outside of agriculture, a question that begs to be answered, and which cannot be addressed here, is the extent to which tenants succeeded in substituting their income from other sources such as day labour in agriculture and other sectors of the economy. 45

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42 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 9 November 1913.
43 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 14 December 1913.
As Jones has suggested, with respect to the majority of Southern sawmill workers before World War I, most sharecroppers were usually married men who moved from job to job with their families.\textsuperscript{46} With a large proportion of the men (some 41.4 per cent of the sample Jones cites from Census data) having never married, those who were married probably merged in the movements of younger, usually single and more egocentric men, who moved between industrial and agricultural sectors of employment. For married men, as Jones has observed, taking up a job in a saw mill or on the railroads or other industrial pursuits would have involved commitments to meeting long term goals such as family and indeed (a crucial point which Jones downplays), obligations to their landlords. However, for younger and most often single men, working intermittently in varying situations often involved fulfilling more ephemeral goals. Memphis resident Joe Kearney hinted at precisely this dynamic when he told interviewers in February 1977 that during his youth in the early 1920s he simply wanted to travel and see more of the “world” by tramping around and working for a while as a sharecropper, brick yard labourer or as a labourer on a railroad bridge project.\textsuperscript{47}

Some of the work songs that Odum and Johnson published in the 1920s and gathered from as far afield as New Orleans, Natchez and Memphis, and in locations as far east as Charleston, South Carolina, provide a good sense of workers’ motivations for staying or moving between locations and jobs. Southern workers - including workers in railroad camps, forests and chain gangs across the South - who sang the opening lines of a work song that declared, “I’ve been all over the USA, I’ve seen most everything, I’ve shot craps with the president, played cards with

\textsuperscript{46} Jones, 46.
\textsuperscript{47} Charles W. Crawford and Paul Vanal, Interview with Joe Kearney, 8 February 1977, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN, 18-25.
the queen and king\textsuperscript{48}, were expressing a fantasy, not of family life, but of footloose existence free of obligation. If workers moved jobs frequently, it was often to gain small and perhaps rare comforts in the workplace. This comes through clearly in the repetitive refrain:

\begin{verbatim}
Hot flambotia an’ coffee strong,
Yes, Lawd, hot flambotia an’ coffee strong.
O Lawd, hot flambotia an’ coffee strong,
Reason I stay on the job so long. \textsuperscript{49}
\end{verbatim}

Few however, would have been satisfied merely with fulfilling the wish for “hot coffee” or for “biscuits and butter” when it came down to bargaining on the job.\textsuperscript{50} There were workers who would not keep a job too long if it were too onerous, as some indeed were expressing when they sang, “Captain, captain, little too hard on me. Captain, captain, I’ll be glad to get home. I’ll never come this way no more.”\textsuperscript{51}

Most crucially, workers were inclined to persist with an employer (as lumber operators were all too aware) if there were room to bargain for the best possible wage, a theme plainly expressed by workers who sang, “Reason I love my captain so, cause I ast him for a dollah, lawd, he gave me fo’”\textsuperscript{52} As Steven A. Reich has observed of African American workers in the Piney Woods of East Texas, these work songs convey that, far from younger African American workers moving from job to job with the aim eventually of securing the means to settle as independent yeomen in the countryside, many of these workers “sought to harness wage labor to their own needs and dictate their terms of employment, coming and going as they wished.

\textsuperscript{49} Odum and Johnson, 112.
\textsuperscript{50} Odum and Johnson, 105, 114.
\textsuperscript{51} Odum and Johnson, 101.
\textsuperscript{52} Odum and Johnson, 112.
Transiency thus emerged as one of the foremost strategies Blacks deployed to combat exploitation and shape their industrial destinies.\textsuperscript{53}

Behind seasonal shortages of labour (especially for low paid unskilled African American workers) there was often the push-and-pull factors of intra-industry competition for labour as well as regional variations in the wages workers could receive. For instance, a Memphis cotton factor informed the Industrial Commission of Agriculture in 1901 that the Mississippi Delta did better in terms of labour supply than the hills because day labourers on the Delta plantations could earn 75 cents compared with just 50 cents in the hills. This pattern seems to hold true for later years, as in 1920s and early 1930s, African Americans in the region were said to be prone to swarm into the Delta from the hills, believing as one old resident stated in the 1920s that they could make a better living in the Delta than they could back in the hills.\textsuperscript{54} The appeal of the Delta is mirrored clearly in the population data: according to James C. Cobb, “By 1890 seven of the twelve blackest counties in the nation were in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. By 1910 Issaquena (94.1 percent) and Tunica (90.6 percent) were the nation’s first and third blackest counties and only Quitman at 76.5 had a black population percentage below 80 percent.”\textsuperscript{55} There was a wider economic reality behind the comparative appeal of the Delta for wage workers and prospective African American sharecroppers. Not only did the Delta have soil that was naturally more fertile than other parts of Mississippi but it was also richer, containing an average value per acre

between $31.67 and $47.76 in its nine core counties, compared with areas outside of the Delta in which “farm land ranged in value from $5.88 to $21.00 per acre. 56

In the Delta, African American workers also found wider opportunities to earn ready cash as labourers on levee building operations and as roustabouts on steamboats. Roustabouts in the Memphis territory were sometimes able to bargain for quite favourable day or monthly wages on the river packets that moved cotton between landings in the Delta, Memphis and as far North as St. Louis. Here variations in the wages paid roustabouts on the steamboats and by employers on the levees, seems to have given workers the edge in bargaining. It was reported in one instance of a shortage of labour on the steamboats that it “is dawning on the river men that the heavy amount of work on the levee at Memphis at higher wages than for a number of years has attracted many negroes who formerly ‘roustered’… At this work, they make from $2 to $3 and even for $4 per day, work for the most part on a level, do not have high banks and long hours, and are at home every night, and altogether their positions are far better than as rousters.” 57

Situations that often appeared simply as a shortage of labour were often, in fact, strikes meant to push daily rates of pay ever higher. A Memphis news reporter commented on this phenomenon, observing, all “efforts to get the rousters to work proved unavailing yesterday. The wages offered were spurned as dross. When they demanded $100 per month and the owners and masters agreed to pay this sum, they asked $125.” 58

These situations on the levees and steamboats of the Mississippi River tell a wider story of an economy in which a wage labour market had became sufficiently established in the interstices of the plantation economy as to have a real impact on its functioning. This is well conveyed in the words of an observer of the labour situation on the levee, who wrote that, “the difficulty just

56 Cobb, 99.
57 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 26 October 1904.
58 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 18 February 1904.
now appears to be that there is so much work around the country for negroes, such a variety of employment, that they are not particularly anxious to tackle the work of hustling cargoes … The cotton fields are clamouring for pickers, the government works are brisk, there is employment in all the industries, and the negroes find that life comes right smooth for them.”

Seasonal shortages of labour expose variations in wage rates and competition for workers between various public, agricultural and industrial sectors. In October 1902, W.L. Smith, freight agent of the Illinois Central Railroad, although acknowledging the scarcity of labour in cotton picking, said that “this shortage is also felt to a considerable extent by the railroads, all of the available Negro hands preferring to work with the levee camps where pay is high and work steady.” In May 1904, large lumber mills in south Mississippi were said to have “been forced to shut down because they were unable to get common labor with which to run and, this too, in spite of the fact they were offering $1.40 a day to the workers.” These sorts of closings later occurred repeatedly among smaller lumber operators in the Mississippi Piney Woods during World War I and the early 1920s.

Employers’ methods to secure an adequate supply of labour involved a combination of peonage, paternalism, and some recognition of workers as free agents on the labour market. The landlord’s customary obligations came into play for a Delta planter who faced persistent pressure from his labour tenants to provide suitable living conditions if he was to overcome a critical shortage of labour at picking season. The tenants also used the situation of his pressing need for labour to compel him to remove from his book $40,000 they owed him and to allow them to “start the season free of debt.”

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59 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 17 October 1909.
60 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 7 October 1902 and 14 May 1904.
61 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 2 December 1906.
Although the railroads experienced seasonal shortages of unskilled labour as often as their counterparts in lumber and cotton, they could more easily than employers in these sectors overcome their own difficulties by becoming actively involved in the movement of African American workers between competing sections of the South and, increasingly, in the growing migration to the North. Investigators of the Department of Justice, who were reporting on the movement of labour out of the South shortly before U.S. intervention in World War I, observed that an agent of Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad had long been involved in moving African American workers between locations in the Mississippi Delta, Arkansas and Louisiana.62

It is important to observe that the practices of the railroads involved both persuasion and the compulsion of indebtedness. Henry Johnson, African American labour agent for the New Orleans & North Eastern Railroad, who was involved in the recruitment of workers out of the sawmill towns of Hattiesburg and Laurel, Mississippi, most likely used a good deal of persuasion, as he was said to be “a strong man among his race and a leader.”63 A more potent mix of coercion and persuasion was involved in a long standing practice of the Illinois Central Railroad in the Mississippi Delta which, according to a federal investigator’s report, authorized “the section foreman or what they called a “straw boss” who seemed to be “a kind of assistant foreman” who “would furnish transportation for himself and so many laborers.”64 Some of this labour would be transported to the North, for work on railroads and other industries there. They would be accompanied by an Illinois Central Railroad section foreman or straw boss, who kept a

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tight reign over the imported workers by running a commissary in which the workers were boarded. \textsuperscript{65}

The railroads involved in the movement of workers within the South and across the line into the North included the Illinois Central and the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroads, the Louisville & Nashville, the Erie Railroad and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company. The straw boss could be called on to ship workers back into the South if that were needed. However, the power of the straw boss to hold onto his recruits was never absolute, as the Baltimore & Ohio experienced when its Southern recruits deserted the railroad and “entered the employment of other industrial concerns where they can obtain higher wages and … in this way the railroad frequently loses whole section gangs at one time.” \textsuperscript{66}

The ability of the Illinois Central Railroad to re-allocate labour around the Deep South and into the North may be explained by the fact that the railroads were in a better position to secure their unskilled labour supply over local competitors by paying higher wages. \textsuperscript{67} The Illinois Central’s ability to recruit and move African American labour made it a key resource during the emergencies that occurred as a result of major Mississippi River floods. An observer at Greenville, Mississippi, in 1913 graphically captured the swiftness of the railroad in holding back the flood that year, writing that:

Material and men were quickly assembled for the work … With the assistance of the bridge crews of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad for this division assembled on short notice by Division Superintendent T.L. Dubbs, with material gathered promptly and labor forces organised, within an hour the loop of 400 feet was ready for large loads of gravel and sacks before daylight this morning. \textsuperscript{68}
After a severe crevasse in the levee caused a crisis at Beulah, Mississippi, the Illinois Central and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad companies received resounding applause for their effort, using waged employees rather than the convicts who had been deployed by local levee boards in both the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas. The success of these associated companies in closing a dangerous breach that threatened to overflow a “a large portion of the Delta” was trumpeted as “the greatest piece of emergency work ever done on the Mississippi River,” a feat that was a singular demonstration that without the railroads almost nothing in the economy of the region could be moved.69

By 1922, the Illinois Central system had direct connections to lumber resources in four southern states -- Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi -- which together accounted for 26.9 per cent of the total production in the country.70 Despite their ongoing work of building and extending logging (so called “short” or “dummy”) roads that would bring Southern pine forest resources within easier reach of their sawmills, lumber operators were wholly dependent on railroads such as the Illinois Central with a reach to terminals in the North to get their logs to the most lucrative markets. Unlike cotton planters in the Delta who had ready access to the Mississippi River and the steamboat traffic that moved goods north to Memphis and beyond or downriver to New Orleans, lumber operatives were particularly vulnerable to shortages of railroad cars.

In the most critical years, including 1906-1907 when lumber operators received only 20 to 30 per cent of their usual supply of cars, and in the years leading up to World War I and afterwards, large lumber operators within easy reach of main line railroads or with sufficient

69 Memphis Commercial Appeal, 30 March 1913; 7 August 1913
capital (such as the Richton Lumber Company, Mississippi) to invest in machine shops with the capacity to build their own railroad cars, could easily overcome the worst of the shortages. By contrast, smaller, more remote operators, found themselves in dire straits. According to a report in early 1918 on the situation of the lumber trade around Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for instance, car shortages were so acute that many sawmills in the region closed down.71

Apart from situations of labour strife (such as the 1922 Shopmen’s Strike), railroad car shortages often occurred because the railroads were looking to quick profits in other sectors of business. During a severe car shortage in the Memphis territory in 1919, it was observed, for instance, that the cause of the crisis was “the continuous withdrawal of cars for moving the wheat and other grain crops to the market. Idle new cars on spurs, siding and terminals at Memphis and the Memphis territory are being moved to the Western roads”72 Shrewd business operators, however, understood that car shortages had a critical ripple effect that could help stabilize their supplies of cheap labour. In October 1920, it was confidently reported at Hattiesburg, Mississippi that “there’s an improvement in the labor situation as a great many men have been released because of so many small mills closing down and others curtailing.” A few weeks later, numerous closures and cutbacks gave lumber employers at many plants in the Hattiesburg area the wherewithal to require their men to “speed up so that wages can remain where they are at present.” However, a slow down in operations did not necessarily guarantee that employers could easily impose their will on employees. The Lumber Trade Journal reported in late 1920 for instance, that even though mills were “working under adverse conditions there has been no reduction in wages and no indication as yet that there will be any.”73

71 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 February 1918; 15 March 1918; Hickman, 229-230.
72 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 August 1919.
73 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 August 1920; 1 November 1920, 16; 15 November 1920.
Coercion was a ready means for employers to discipline or gain supplies of African American labour at the lowest possible wages. According to Hickman, employers in the Mississippi turpentine woods were especially notorious for using credit and its concomitant, indebtedness, as the most effective means to maintain a steady supply of labour. Every turpentine camp, Hickman suggested, had a “commissary where the Negroes drew supplies and provisions against the money payments owed them for their labour. After 1900 most operators issued coupons to their workers good only at the company store. In many localities, cash payments for labour were made only once each year.” However, the extent and effectiveness of coercive strategies to hold labour in the region can be exaggerated, as historian Nan Woodruff does in suggesting that “convict labour and peonage underwrote much of the Delta expansion since 1900.” Woodruff’s argument rests on the notion of a plantation economy that did not have to deal with competing interests for supplies of African American labour. Although many labour tenants may indeed have been trapped by indebtedness, the limited but increasing use of wage labour on plantations, and within highly capitalized sectors such as railroads and corporately owned lumber operations, opened up for less repressive means of economic expansion than sole reliance on exploitation based on convict labour and peonage.

According to Jones, during the 1920s, “most mill owners maintained that the only way to secure labour from a black man was to ‘keep him broke,’ but an influential minority of owners claimed that ‘the time has arrived for a more enlightened programme’ of labour recruitment.” This “enlightened” trend appears, however, to have gained ground well before the 1920s. The clearest evidence for this was the widespread use of wage incentives rather than indebtedness and coercion to hold supplies of labour. In a context in which the Great Migration and the

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74 Hickman, 143.
75 Woodruff, 33.
76 Jones, 28.
military draft had a marked impact on labour supplies, larger lumber operators such as J.J. Newman Company in Mississippi began to increase wages substantially. In Arkansas during 1917, there was a general increase in wages of the workmen in the sawmill industry in the vicinity of Malvern … [with] increases in wages ranging from 10 to 15 per cent.” The same year, the Great Southern Lumber Company announced to its employees that it would no longer issue scrip but pay in cash to allow them to “get the most of their money and not confine them to any one business between pay days.” In early 1918, the Arkansas Shortleaf Lumber Company and the Sabine River Hardwood Company gave employees bonuses ranging “from 5 to 25 per cent of salaries for the year.”  

In 1918 Mississippi hardwood operators said that wages were advancing “at an unprecedented rate.” They were not making an idle complaint; the wage increases these operators perceived, were not an ideological fiction meant to justify a customary bent towards coercive discipline over African American workers. In September 1920, the Southern Pine Association made an assessment showing that for the three and a half years between 1 January 1917 and 1 July 1920, wage rates in the lumber industry had increased substantially. According to the Association’s calculation, “Logging operations of 128 representative firms, increased wages 110 per cent; mill operations, 98 per cent.” In the first seven months of 1920, with selling prices for lumber products little more than the cost of production, “wages of common labor in logging operations increased 12.9 per cent; sawmill crew, 6 per cent; planing mill, 7.7 per cent.” The upward trend in wages did not appear to abate as the post-war years began. The Southern Pine Association reported that over the course of 1921, wages for unskilled labour in Southern pine states increased by 15 per cent, while wages for skilled workers remained virtually

77 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 June 1917, 26; 15 June 1917; 1 February 1918.  
78 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1920.
unchanged. These persistent wage increases in the Southern lumber industry during the war and early post-war years might have been an anomalous situation, though it clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of African American workers in Southern Lumber industry at using the leverage of the scarce labour supply to gain improvements in the price of their labour.

Employers used any means available to them in the face of wartime labour shortages and wage increases. At one extreme, employees saw the potential of solving the problem of their labour supply by more liberal rather than age-old repressive means for acquiring a work force. Thus, according Jeanette Keith, in August 1917, “the Mississippi State Council of National Defense took up the problem of black workers’ leaving the state. The assembled members of the council agreed that something had to be done ‘to satisfy the labor of the state by the payment of better wages and the rendering of justice on all counts’ and passed resolutions calling for all Mississippians to respect ‘the liberty and property rights of the negroes.’”

At the other extreme, there were moves to compel men who had evaded the military call-up to work or face conscription, or indeed imprisonment. When Provost Marshal General Crowder issued a national “work or fight” order in May 1918, he merely was confirming a trend set in Southern states, which had already passed “work or fight” laws. The passage of “work or fight” laws within the South, further encouraged lumber employers, as the Lumber Traffic Association did in August 1918, to implement measures to issue all men with a registration card so that management could see whether those who were temporarily off work were “just lazing off” or whether they were genuinely ill. Workers who were indeed off because of illness were

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81 Keith, 131.
required to produce proof, while those out of work without cause were either forced to “work or are turned over to the proper authorities to be fined and jailed for vagrancy.” 82

In addition, through local volunteer bodies called loyalty leagues, employers drew on a tradition of voluntary association to enforce control over the movement of African American workers. At Richton, Mississippi, lumber operator, J.M. Anderson, suggested that African American men and women between the ages of 15 and 60 be compelled to carry registration cards, which were backed by a local ordinance, imposing a maximum fine of $50 for vagrancy. 83

Despite the publicized success of loyalty leagues at Vredenburg, Alabama, having brought mill labour efficiency “up from 68 to 98 per cent”, lumber employers felt that such surveillance over African American lives could produce resistance counterproductive to their purpose of securing labour supplies. A lumber operator from Wiggins, Mississippi said, for instance, that while most of his white employees signed the registration cards, the majority of his African American employees refused to sign them. 84

Some lumber operators looked to increased surveillance and control over workers’ personal lives as a way to resolve their pressing labour needs. Attempts were also made to use compulsory medical examinations for sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea as a means to weed out men who had a condition that was seen to have the effect of crippling their productivity. 85 Though most employers were confident that compulsory medical examinations assisted in ensuring that they had a constantly efficient labour force, there were those who thought the examinations caused more trouble than they solved. A lumberman from Quitman, Mississippi, declared that the issue of medical examinations had been discussed for

82 Lumber Trade Journal, 1 August 1918.
83 The Lumber Trade Journal, 15 November 1918.
84 The Lumber Trade Journal, 15 November 1918.
85 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1922.
quite a while among his employees and he found that it did not work, as “one big end of the job is getting along with everybody.” Another dropped the physical examinations because of a $12,000 loss in a law suit taken up by an employee who had a physician prove that he was wrongfully dismissed, while another argued against the examinations as they simply drove African American workers away.86

Unlike plantation owners who had far less stake in investment in modern plant and equipment that required a fairly stable and efficient labour force to justify such capital outlay, the railroads and lumber manufacturing operators had greater motivation to see that the question of achieving an adequate labour supply was separate from the question of the price they were prepared to pay for that labour. In the 1930s, Southern mill owners opposed the National Recovery Administration’s proposal for a national minimum wage on the grounds that Southern workers had fewer needs and were less efficient workers than workers in North.

However, the more far sighted employers strived to keep their costs down by retaining experienced workers and increasing the efficiency of their operations rather than focus unyieldingly on trying to minimize wage increases.87 Although the most enlightened among lumber employers were equally opposed to their workers (especially African Americans) formally organizing and demanding wage increases, many nevertheless were willing to concede wage increases to keep workers from moving off. Despite the unfortunate tendency for his African American workers to “lay off every few days” despite the favourable wages they received, C.B. Lindsey of the Gulf Lumber Company was still pleased to inform his peers in the Southern Lumber Association that things went “pretty well”, which meant that he was doing far better at retaining his workers than his neighbours who scrambled for their labour. Standard

86 The Lumber Trade Journal, 15 November 1918.
practice did not necessarily entail giving universal wage increases. Many companies provided bonuses to the most efficient or to those most prepared to endure a full six days of work until pay out on Saturday evenings. Employers discriminated between men according to their efficiency. Oscar Marsan, a Louisiana lumber operator, told members of the Southern Logging Association in 1917 that “he had men in his crew that were better men than others and were paid more. He had had men come to him and say, ‘Cap, why is it I am not getting as much money as this man over here?’ and he would tell them, ‘When you get so you can do the work and study my interest like that man does, I will give you the extra quarter’” This method worked so well, Marsan boasted, he had “Negroes on his crew that had worked for him at three different concerns he had himself worked for over the years.”

Lumber operators widely employed this approach, paying according to the quality of the work or paying different rates, for instance, by the log or according to the grade of felled trees or the achievement of minimal wastage in sawing. Pay based on the quality of work was both a useful incentive for workers to earn the highest wages possible and as a means for management to exercise decisive discipline. The Long Bell Lumber Company of Quitman, Mississippi, used to pay a flat 45 cents a thousand for cutting and found that this did not help with improving the quality of timber produced. By paying a graduated price, which could range between 50 and 75 cents per thousand logs, Long Bell owner Clarence Vandercook told members of the Southern Lumber Association, “there has been more pleasure and joy in my crews since we adopted that plan than I ever had seen before … no trouble with the sawyers on account of the scale” If the plan of graduated pricing for cut lumber was enticing for the sawyers, it was only acceptable to

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88 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1917.
89 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1924.
management to the extent that it was a means to guarantee the desired quality, which the employer secured through a merit system.

At the Long Bell Lumber Company, a straw boss enforced this system, exercising the power to promptly dismiss a man after he had been booked for up to 25 demerits involving lumber that was cut too short. This was lenient in comparative perspective: the Sumter Lumber Company, Mississippi, allowed an inefficient sawyer only a second chance before he was dismissed, while the Dierks Lumber and Coal Company, Arkansas, fined “the boys $2.50 for each log cut short in length, up to and including ten, and then discharge them.”90 A similar method was used to boost efficiency among workers on railroad track laying teams – one operator told his colleagues in the Southern Logging Association that he paid his rail crew by the rail, “twenty five cents a rail each way” and “when they make eight rails they earn $2 a day.”91

Pay incentives were not the only means that employers used to try to retain experienced workers. In tandem with pay incentives, employers often would show recognition for differences of experience or skill among African American workers whom they usually conceived simply as common labour. In the Mississippi turpentine woods, for instance, men (called chippers) who were particularly dexterous at chipping above the box in a rosin-producing tree were seen to be “aristocrats among turpentine workers … young Negroes looked forward with eagerness to the time when they would be given a crop to chip.” According to historian Nollie Hickman, though rates of pay to chippers varied over time, naval stores in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas generally paid higher wages for chipping than employers in states to the East. In Mississippi,

90 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1925.
91 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1922.
wages for chippers advanced steadily, rising from between forty-five and fifty-five cents at the beginning of the decade to about eighty cents per thousand in 1909. 92

Another option favoured by more daring employers was to employ African American workers, in place of white workers, as foremen. R.E. Loper of the Apolonia Lumber Company, Pelahatchie, Mississippi, told members of the Southern Lumber Association in 1922, that he had “a Negro foreman, taken from the steel gang” because “it won’t hurt for a Negro to whip a Negro, but a white man can’t do it; they will leave you, but will listen to a Negro foreman.” 93 An Arkansas lumber operator claimed that he had been using African American foremen to supervise railroad steelmen for fifteen years; and at Quitman, Mississippi, the Moreton Brothers & Company had a railroad steel gang of 12 with an African American John Ham, as their foreman. 94 Though employers were careful to ensure that the supervisory role of African American foremen was confined to men of their race, some employers were prepared to act in the face of local custom as the Moreton Brothers did, when they employed an African American Charlie Norwood as the railroad grade foremen with a crew of “20 Negroes wielding long handled shovels and two white teamsters with slips drawn by mules.” 95

Even though African American workers held a minority of skilled or semi-skilled posts in forest, railroad, and mill operations, employers promoted the most experienced and efficient African American employees to skilled positions such as sawyers, foremen or brakemen on their logging railroad operations. From the perspective of employers’ need to minimize the turnover of their least paid labour supplies, it is worth noting that employers did not necessarily have the luxury to dispense with the services of unskilled workers with any more ease than they could

92 Hickman, 124-125.
93 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1922.
94 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1923.
with skilled men. The worth of a worker was often culturally defined. For instance, a track caller, as Alan Lomax observed among railroad workers in the Delta, who could succeed in keeping the pace of a section gang with songs and chants to suit each subdivision of the work process, was perhaps as valuable in employers’ perception as the best among foremen. It is also certain that for the work to progress without mishap, there had to be a high degree of rapport between members of a steel gang who “worked in pairs, each with a six pound hammer, their blows alternating into the tie on the head of a spike until it seemed to flow into the tie and catch the edge of the rail like a live thing.”96

Employers did not concede the need to improve the remuneration of labour without seeking alternatives, short of force, to cut their costs. The key alternative was to increase or at least sustain investment in labour-saving technology. This seems to have been the choice taken by the largest lumber establishments who also employed the majority of lumber workers in the states of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. Large lumber operators (often owned by Northern-based corporations) increased capital investment in southern lumber operations substantially between 1880 and 1890, according to Peter Thompson.97 By 1909, these establishments were highly capitalized corporations. Even though corporations were a minority among the owners of lumber manufacturing establishments in the region (in Mississippi there were just 220 corporations compared with 920 individually owned establishments), these corporations were more efficient than their smaller competitors. They employed larger numbers of workers and indeed had a much higher level of labour productivity. Whereas individual firms in Mississippi employed about 7,809 workers in 1909 and contributed $6,216,909 in value-added

to production, corporations employed 19,982 workers and contributed $17,044,580 in value added to production.98

The majority of smaller lumber operators were not necessarily convinced of the efficacy of investment in technology. Many of these tended to resist investment in newer plant and machinery. During annual meetings of the Southern Logging Association, for instance, some operators vouched for the productivity of railroad steel gangs working with their hands, while dismissing the need to adopt machine technology such as the Bell track machine.99

The Bell track machine, its promoters among lumber operators claimed, had the advantage of setting down between five and ten rails to the man compared with the standard of four rails achieved with the use of steel gangs to lay track by hand. A lumber operator, who had used the machine with exemplary efficiency, claimed that he used seven or eight men with the machine as opposed to the twenty men he would normally have used. The machine helped in freeing up labour to proceed with spiking the tracks behind the machine.100 Most of the larger employers were aware of the strain of hand labour on the track men and were in favour of adopting the Bell machine.

In 1921, a sales manager for the Clyde Iron Works, Minnesota succinctly made the case for technology over hand labour when he told members of the Southern Lumber Association that, “laying and taking up railroad track is a laborious and muscle racking job. The heavy lifting keeps them fagged out so that the lighter and easier positions of the work go on correspondingly slow. The crew is continuously changing and therefore constantly green.”101 For the more farsighted lumber operators who had adopted the machine, the salesman’s comment that “with

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99 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1922 and 1 November 1923.
100 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1922.
101 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 May 1921.
machine work the men become more expert because they stay on the job” had indeed been proven in practice. Lumber operator, G.W. Blackledge of the Gilchrist Fordney Company, Mississippi, had learnt this lesson some years before, when he found that by working a track machine eight hours a day, and ten on the grade, “he had no lack and no shortage of labor. Some crews have been there several years, married men mostly.” 102 Likewise, Mr. Stevens, lumber operator at Picayune, Mississippi, had learnt that “you can’t get hand labour any more if they don’t get a job on a machine.”103

Although railroad car construction and repair shops were mostly owned by the railroad corporations, there were a number of foundry and machine shops in Louisiana (about 40 concerns in 1909) and Mississippi (24 the same year) under a range of individual and corporate owners.104 Nevertheless, lumber operators generally were dependent on railroads and large manufacturers of steel products, both North and South, for equipment such as skidders for hauling logs in the forests, locomotives, railroad cars, and steel rails to build their logging railroads that needed constant renewal as forest resources became exhausted and new crops of trees had to be accessed. However, some of the more medium-sized operators, who wanted to exploit the labour saving advantages of machinery while saving on the expense of purchasing or renting equipment, were constantly seeking to minimize this dependence on the railroad shops and steel manufacturers.

In 1917, G.W. Blackledge of the Gilchrist-Fordney Company, Mississippi, for instance, claimed that he used a track machine with a carrying capacity of 60 to 65 pound rails that he made in his own shop. Four years later, Mr. E.P. Cassidy of the Great Southern Lumber

102 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1917.
103 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1921.
Company at Bogalusa, Louisiana, said that he had “one Bell machine and two home-made machines that will haul 50 to 60 rails.” Mr. Cassidy explained that the Bell machine had been built in the shops of the Great Southern Railroad and that he had taken patterns of it and built his own machines, which he much preferred even though they were “practically the same machine.” Mr. Vandercook of Mississippi also informed members of the Southern Lumber Association that he had designed and built two cars each for his steel gangs that were 40 feet long and could carry up to 60 rails. Lumber operator Y.C. Langley of Laurel, Mississippi, had a rail straightener that straightened 60 rails a day; it was a gas fuelled machine that he made in his own shop and was based on a model he had seen in Birmingham.105

Given the lack of primary material extensively detailing local patterns of investment among lumber operators in the South, it is difficult to quantify the impact of such local instances of industrial innovation on existing practices of labour exploitation and control among lumber firms in the region. However, the very presence of employers with both the resources and the will to adopt the latest techniques of production highlights the flexibility of attitudes among the most advanced employers with respect to dealing with questions of labour supply and control over their workforces, without resort to coercion and exclusive focus on minimizing the price of that labour.

In so far as it still provides a thoroughly researched approach to the study of the complex relation between a nascent form of modern capitalism within a predominantly semi-feudal society and economy, a very brief digression on some of the relevant insights contained in V.I. Lenin’s classic The Development of Capitalism in Russia, forms a fitting segue to the conclusion of this chapter. Of especial pertinence here is Lenin’s attentiveness to the emergence of a small

105 The Lumber Trade Journal, 1 November 1917; 1 November 1921 and 1 November 1923.
but highly mechanized agricultural sector along with a small wage labour force (between 10 and 25 per cent of the working male population in rural districts) as it began to co-exist (or even share similar features) with the land-poor peasantry of a semi-feudal economy. Beyond a concern with abstract economic theory, Lenin was a close observer of the continuing predominance of semi-feudal forms of labour exploitation in the pre-revolutionary Russian countryside, which involved features similar to the modern plantation economy such as farming on the halves, forced labour and retention of peasant labour through indebtedness.106

As the rich (essentially capitalist) peasants increased their effective control over capital, agricultural resources and land, which middling and poorer peasants had formerly accessed by renting or performing labour service for their landlords, the poorest were deprived of any meaningful means to fulfil their labour and debt obligations to the landlords. This began to undermine the very bedrock of an economy that was based on payments in kind or cropping on the shares. As Lenin observed, in some cases landowners were forced by the ruin of their tenants to “increase the area cultivated on capitalist lines,” in other words, on the basis of wage labour.107

In general terms, a similarly transitional co-existence prevailed between the plantation economy and a nascent capitalism in the Deep South in the years 1900-1930. In the plantation economy, because wage labour was a marginal factor in a system of labour exploitation dominated by sharecropping (and reinforced by debt peonage), the role of wage labour has been ignored as an increasingly decisive factor for planters trying to maintain their agricultural labour supplies and as an important factor in the development of strategically significant sectors of the economy such as the railroads and the lumber industry.

106 Lenin, 206-209.
107 Lenin, 206-209.
It would require a great deal of quantitative data to unravel the fullest extent of the impact of wage labour on the plantation economy of Mississippi and the other states covered in this chapter. Though my intention has not been to venture into a quantitative study of wage labour in the plantation South, I have in this chapter deployed the tools of social history to show the extent to which an embryonic form of modern industrialization centred on the railroads and the lumber industry, contributed to increasing the level of competition for labour among the various competing sectors of employment. This competition for labour had sufficient force to weaken grounds for the so-called “Prussian Road” to development, which was characterized by coercive methods of labour control in contrast to the market mechanisms for allocating labour in the more advanced capitalist mode production of the North.\textsuperscript{108} Competition for supplies of low-paid labour effectively destabilized planters’ complacency in the control they were able to exercise over the majority of African American workers by intimidation, violence, or a crop lien system meant to keep sharecroppers indebted and permanently tied to the land.

Despite their best efforts to coerce and restrain African American tenants from moving, the high levels of mobility created constant shortages in the labour supply, which compelled planters to rely on wage labour to a greater extent than they were inclined to concede given their expectations of the sharecroppers on their land. The corporate (often Northern) investors in railroads and lumber might have come into the Mississippi Delta and the Piney Woods of Louisiana and Arkansas, with the hope of making profits on the basis of a cheap labour force that was altogether coerced and constrained. However, as much as the railroads (and most, certainly the lumber industry) adapted to using local practices of coercion as a means to acquire and retain their African American labour supplies, their very presence as alternative avenues of employment outside of cotton plantation agriculture, gave leverage to a significant, though small,

\textsuperscript{108} Wiener, Social origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885, 70.
segment among African American workers to evade their employers’ controls, move from job to job, and ultimately to push for wages that these employers were initially reluctant to concede.

In the end, these employers were dealing with a labour market in which the workers were active agents, whose silent resistance, in the form of movement between jobs and varying locations, had an impact where it mattered most – the investment decisions of the largest employers. Thus, while the smallest and most numerous lumber operators tended to remain attached to the old method of pushing their labour to efficiency by sheer physical compulsion, the largest and most capitalized operators, who also employed the largest concentrations of workers, looked more and more to making wage concessions and ultimately to increased investment in machine technology as a more flexible means to reduce their costs and increase the stability, efficiency and experience (if not the formal skills) of their African American workers.

To the extent that it illuminates the tendency among more corporate lumber operators to opt for mechanization, use incentive payments, or even grant outright wage increases, perhaps the last word should go to Lenin. Observing industrial employers in rural Russia, he noted that we “see that the worker is particularly oppressed by small capital. The big employer is forced by sheer commercial considerations to abstain from petty oppression ... That is why the big employers … try to keep their workers from leaving at the end of the week and some even adopt a system of wage increases if the price of labour in the area goes up – and all evidence goes to show that these increases are more than compensated by better work and absence of disputes.”

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109 Wiener, 245.
Chapter Two: Testing the Walls of the House of Labour:

African American Railroad Workers and the AFL in the Samuel Gompers Era, 1900-1920

When A. Philip Randolph, using a threatened march of a 100,000 African Americans on Washington, compelled President Franklin D. Roosevelt to pass an executive order that would usher in the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), he achieved a symbolic victory that gave him legendary status as a pioneer of the civil rights movement. With his March on Washington Movement collapsing by the end of the forties without a major political success on the scale of the FEPC, biographer Paula F. Pfeffer has argued that Randolph’s real achievement was the inspiration he provided to later generations. His most enduring legacy, according to Pfeffer, was the ideology and tactics that prefigured the “many goals and methods of the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s: a non-partisan political bloc, mass voter registration, institutes for training in non-violent, goodwill direct action.”

Randolph’s status as a “pioneer” of the civil rights movement rested on his unique ideological prescription of a movement that, like Marcus Garvey before, advocated African American self reliance, racially exclusive leadership and direct action, alongside an integrationist politics that went beyond the separatism of Randolph’s militant nationalist predecessors.

Although existing scholarship has illuminated Randolph’s role as a civil rights leader, his role as a labour leader and head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters begs fresh and detailed analysis. Since Brazeal’s contemporaneous 1946 study, there has been a paucity of work on the rank-and-file members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) as the active

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1 Paula F. Pfeffer, A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1990), 304.
class agents behind the charismatic figure of Randolph in the challenge against the Pullman Company as an employer and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as an institution in which these workers pushed for change.\textsuperscript{2} Beth Tompkins Bates recent book, although a significant work on the political impact of the BSCP on African American communities in Chicago, falls short of the challenge of providing a detailed assessment of the history the BSCP as a labour organization with a peculiar relationship to the AFL.\textsuperscript{3}

Although the limitations in the existing literature on Randolph and the BSCP deserve further investigation, the main purpose of this chapter is to bring attention to the struggles of African American railroad workers against racism within the AFL in years before Randolph and the BSCP emerged on the scene. This opening discussion on Randolph and the BSCP serves merely to stimulate reflection on the continuity between an older generation of organized African American railroad workers and the strategies used by the BSCP within the AFL. The legacy of that older generation may indeed have been an encouragement to the political battles that Randolph and the BSCP put up within the AFL.

An anecdote contained in Jarvis Anderson’s earlier biography of Randolph tells of a significant moment in October 1935 when John L. Lewis and the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) made a triumphant exit from the AFL despite their expulsion. Lewis, as leader of the United Mine Workers which had up to 20,000 African American members at its organizational peak in the early 1920s, had been one of the few trade unionists within the AFL to support Randolph’s vocal attempts to challenge the racial status quo in the federation. On the way out of the convention hall, Lewis stopped by the BSCP’s table and said to Randolph, “Are

you coming with us? You know you belong to us.” To this straightforward and comradely invitation, Randolph supposedly replied: “I have no quarrel with your [CIO] unions. You organize black workers. My fight, the fight to organize Negro workers, is in the AFL. I must stay here and carry on that fight.”

Whatever the truth of this anecdote it captures the dilemma that Randolph faced as he tried to use the leverage he gained as leader of the first African American labour organization to achieve a charter as an international rather than a federal labour union within the AFL, just a few weeks before the CIO walked out of the Federation.

While the CIO would go on, as various historians have well demonstrated, to provide an organized voice for African American workers through its militant and inclusive brand of industrial unionism, Randolph and the BSCP would stick it out and fight from within the AFL. It is possible that overconfidence encouraged the BSCP to make this choice; after all, it had won an international union charter after a decade-long fight in which it had put up with its lesser status as co-ordinating body for individually chartered federal unions of African American porters.

The BSCP had chosen that status in preference to allowing porters’ federal unions to be absorbed under the white-dominated Hotel Workers’ Alliance as auxiliary unions. At the 1943 AFL convention, Randolph equated auxiliary unions under the jurisdiction of particular craft unions with “colonies of colored people to the empire systems” with “none of the rights that the

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5 Brailsford R Brazeal, 1946, 148.
7 Brazeal, 133.
white population in the mother country enjoy, except the right to be taxed.**8** Auxiliary unions, which may be distinguished from federal labour unions that were under the direct authority of Federation’s executive committee, were usually appendages to particular craft unions affiliated to the Federation. These auxiliaries had no voting power over the executive officers of these crafts although their members were subject to suspension by the president of the parent body.**9**

Without international charters neither auxiliary nor federal labour unions on the railroads had any real collective bargaining capacity. The Railway Labor Act of 1934 specified that a trade union had to be a national body in order to exercise the right to present cases before the National Railroad Adjustment Board.**10** Randolph enlivened AFL conventions each year with rousing speeches against discrimination, and proposed resolutions meant to break down the tradition of racial exclusion within the affiliated crafts of the AFL. Although assertive in tone, his criticisms were never intended to increase African American antagonism toward AFL affiliates, but to make small gains for African American workers within the Federation. Thus, in the 1940 convention, Randolph stood up in defence of the federal charters of African American freight handlers and red caps, whom the Committee on Resolutions had proposed should be transferred to the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks.**11** The issue here, it appears, was the need to defend at all cost the smallest degree of autonomy that African American workers enjoyed in the federation against encroachments from craft unions that still had racial exclusion written into their constitutions.

In the end, however, with CIO unions providing African American workers far greater scope for assertiveness than the BSCP could achieve in the AFL, the question arises as to why an

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**9** Karson and Radosh, 181-182.

**10** Karson and Radosh, 141-142.

**11** Karson and Radosh, 165.
organization such as the BSCP, which presented itself as a fairly relentless fighter on behalf of African American civil rights, should have persisted in a losing battle against racism within the AFL. At Memphis, Tennessee, where, in the 1940s, the CIO was said to be only second to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) among organizations that locals believed were “trying hardest to get the Negroes more rights,” it is remarkable that a World War II survey found that African American people in that city were “about evenly split” in terms of their affiliation to either the CIO or the AFL.\(^\text{12}\) Randolph hinted at a decisive answer to the question in a 1973 interview with biographer Pfeffer.

In answer to Pfeffer’s question about his reasons for staying within a Federation that persisted in its racist polices, he replied that “one had to break down discrimination where it’s at. There could be no emancipation for black people unless black workers had an emancipated labour organization, rather than merely a racial one,” in which African American workers engaged in setting up an independent racially-focused union as the BSCP indeed would never become.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, if we look further back into the history of the AFL and its relationship to African American workers, we can see that the activity of black workers in around AFL railroad affiliates during the Samuel Gompers’ era points to a similar answer. Many African American railroad workers and their supporters would not allow the AFL to exist in their midst without making concerted efforts to gain greater influence within the Federation, which claimed the legitimacy of its existence on the grounds that it was a representative body of the U.S working class as a whole without respect to race, sex, or creed.

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\(^\text{13}\) Pfeffer, 28.
In order to assess the activity of African American railroad workers within the AFL before the 1920s, it is necessary to look beyond the conventional narrative of the history of the AFL as simply a bastion of racially exclusive craft unions. This is a tricky task as the history of African American labour on the railroads is only beginning to emerge and indeed with scant coverage of the years before 1920. Indeed, while this chapter is inspired by a wide range of literature dealing with the complexities of emerging trade unionism and questions of race and class in various industries such as the New Orleans waterfront, the Philadelphia docks, and the southern lumber and mining industries, it aims to open a new ground for historical investigation by taking up the activities of Deep South African American railroaders within the AFL well before the BSCP (and later the CIO) took up the challenge.

The difficulty of attempting to undercover the activity of essentially rank-and-file African American workers within a labour federation that gave them no effective voice, fully bears out the technical and methodological challenges of doing “history from below” or grassroots history, which social historian Eric Hobsbawm once suggested was a problem that cannot readily be addressed simply by uncovering new empirical documentation directly pertaining to essentially absent subaltern voices and activities. Taking Hobsbawn’s advice, I attempt to uncover the activities of African railroad workers, who left no significant documentary traces, by imaginative

use of primary resources that usually convey the mindset of white trade unionists who often were adversaries of the black workers studied in this chapter. The material which I have used here, largely the correspondence of AFL executives such as Samuel Gompers and Frank Morrison, as well as the officials of various AFL craft affiliates, often concern (largely suppressed or missing) correspondence with African American railroad workers making appeals for AFL trade union charters. Despite the limitations of such AFL records, the main goal here is to bring to light the ongoing and active quest of African American railroaders to have an effectively organized presence within the AFL. These workers left a legacy of patient resistance that no doubt encouraged similar efforts by A. Philip Randolph and the BSCP in later years.

From the very outset, the AFL, a loose federation of craft unions, was faced with the challenge of overcoming the dying legacy of the Knights of Labor, which had organized broadly among skilled and unskilled workers and had made the remarkable achievement in the South of engaging racially separate union locals in a surge of militancy that sometimes breached existing racial barriers. It is significant to observe that while the trade unions of skilled craftsmen within the Knights of Labor gained bargaining strength and became less sympathetic to the Knights’ principle of promoting solidarity among workers of varying skill, when they withdrew from the Knights of Labor in 1886 to form the AFL under Samuel Gompers’ leadership, they had not completely shaken off the ideological influence of the Knights. Thus, one of the earliest conventions of the new federation reaffirmed adherence to the “cardinal principles of the labor movement that working people must unite to organize irrespective of creed, color, sex,

nationality or politics.”

AFL President Samuel Gompers, perhaps sensitive to the fact that the boundary between skilled and unskilled work was constantly changing as a result of the “invention of new machines and the division and subdivision of labor,” took up the challenge of this ideological debt to the Knights, by asserting the need in 1897 for the new federation to organize unskilled workers alongside the skilled.

In April 1900, during a session of the Industrial Commission on Relations between Capital and Labor (1898-1900), Gompers expressed a sincere commitment to an enlightened policy on race within the AFL when he said:

We have consistently and persistently insisted that organizations which become affiliated … must of necessity eliminate the color clause from any constitution or laws which the organization may have. We have gone so far, in our convention in Birmingham, Ala, to refuse courtesies such as banquets, which had been offered, which had been arranged in honor of our gathering. We declined to participate in a banquet because we had three colored delegates who were not included in the invitation. The Cigar Makers’ International Union, of which I am a member, refused or at least boycotted a hotel. We quitted a hotel because our treasurer, who was a colored man, was given a room, a place for meals, outside of the dining room … We had to take inferior accommodations at some other place, but we simply desired to attest our adhesion to a principle.

As committed as Gompers may have been to adhering to principle, the history of the AFL under his presidency was one of general failure to live up to a supposedly colour-blind principle. On numerous occasions throughout the first two decades of Gompers’ presidency of the AFL, African American workers would try to compel the AFL to live up to its promise and allow them

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20 Foner and Lewis, The Black Worker Vol. IV, 326.
voice and effective representation within the federation and within the various craft unions affiliated to it.

Gompers was not alone within the AFL in his concern to project a colour-blind image of the federation. In the earliest AFL conventions some delegates were bold enough to argue for a more flexible approach toward African American workers in the South. Supporting a resolution that addressed the problem of the exclusion of African American workers from membership within affiliates to the Federation, at the 1898 Kansas convention, a delegate by the name of Noonan asserted that “the color line cuts quite a figure in the South. In that country we have mechanics of both colors, and there is where the trouble lies. There are people in the South who will not affiliate with colored people.” “In the South,” he continued, speaking in terms that playfully subverted existing racial categorization, “they had a white Negro and a black one, too, who were working for very small wages. The AFL must help them out.”21 Beyond such sympathetic appeals from forward-thinking convention delegates, the AFL was under constant pressure from African American workers in the South, who continually pushed the Federation to live by its stated commitment to organize “all workers, without regard to creed, color, sex, nationality, or politics.”22 Clearly exasperated by ongoing enquiries from African American workers, Samuel Gompers wrote in the April 1901 edition of the AFL’s publication, The American Federationist, that “for some time past we have received a large number of inquiries relative to the attitude of the American Federation of Labor toward the Negro worker, and the subject has been widely discussed by philanthropists, some Negro workers themselves, and particularly by some colored men who have advanced to positions of prominence in the realm of

thought.” The AFL did not, deal with the question of organizing African American workers lightly. The Federation placed in the field paid organizers with the backing of 700 volunteers, who were to concentrate solely on organizing African American workers into vaguely described federal labour unions.

The so-called federal labour unions chartered under the AFL to represent an undefined range of unskilled workers across the trades did not receive sufficient support or resources to make an effective and independent presence before employers. In this situation, African American workers did not simply walk away in frustration and shun trade unionism as some among the African American elite indeed advised them. Many did more than put up with the racism of the white dominated craft organizations in the AFL. As numerous items in existing AFL union correspondence files for the period suggest, African American workers’ unrelenting appeals for improved representation within AFL structures indeed reflect what historical sociologist James C Scott referred to as “hidden transcripts” or disguised expressions of resistance. African American railroad workers’ letters (as described by the white AFL officials who received them) were most often polite requests for information concerning the possibility of their accessing AFL charters or the possibility of their gaining representation under the jurisdiction of specific AFL affiliates. Their letters contain “hidden transcripts” in the sense that they were an indirect critique of the exclusive power white craft workers exercised within the federation. The critique was never stated in explicit terms, and yet, to the extent that the correspondence was persistent, it was an expression of defiance against the equally dogged evasion and rejection these workers received from AFL officials in response to their quiet but earnest requests for redress. Behind the ongoing letters from African American workers that

23 Kaufman, Albert and Palladino, 342-343.
Gompers and AFL secretary Frank Morrison had to deal with over the years, was an insuperable and perhaps collective unwillingness to accept the racism that denied them full and equal membership of trade unions in a federation, which they were aware had the organizing capacity to make real gains for workers.²⁵

The threatening prospect of such hidden resistance comes through in the subtext of an International Association of Machinists (IAM) response to AFL secretary Frank Morrison, citing requests from African American railroad shop operatives for admission to the Association in 1905. As the Association had gained affiliation to the AFL by dropping racial exclusion in favour of a clause in its constitution that declared it as an organization, “based upon the principles which recognize the equality of all men working at our trade regardless of religion, race or color,” International President of the Association, Joe O’ Conners, concealed his rejection of the African American railroad shop workers’ application in the language of craft rather than race, in writing to Morrison:

Replying to your favour of the 7th instant, in which you ask whether we will grant charters to machinists’ helpers, spring fitters and file workers, beg to say that what is known as ordinary machinist helpers, spring fitters or file workers, carried with it a broad jurisdiction. What is known as ordinary machinist helpers we would not grant charters to. From spring fitters I am not sure as to just what it means, but if it is the men who fit up springs in blacksmith or forge shops, we do not want them. The ordinary file worker we do not want, but there are employed in factories where files are manufactured, a skilled class of mechanics who came under the jurisdiction of the machinists’ union.²⁶

Race is implicit in O’Conners’ uncomfortable attempt to draw a distinction between “ordinary” machinist helpers, spring fitters and “mechanics” working in factories manufacturing files. However, despite noting the undercurrent of racism in O’Conners’ emphasis on skill as the dividing line in respect to the workers the IAM would represent, one need not discount craft as an important component of machinists’ self-identity. O’Conners’ insistence on allowing a very select class of labour in the machine shops under the organizational jurisdiction of the IAM is stated with a degree of hesitancy that may be taken to reflect a deeper uncertainty over exactly where to draw the dividing line of craft in a modernizing economy where ongoing specialization of production techniques was a levelling influence between skilled and less skilled workers.

Thus, O’Conners’ cautiousness can well be understood, given the situation in which machine shops had become since the 1890s less easy to define along lines dictated by the traditional craftsmen who had some autonomy over their labour and control within the shops. As historian David Montgomery puts it, “the line distinguishing craft worker from operative was anything but precise and constantly shifted within particular industries.” As industries (such as producers of light bulbs, steel mills and metal and railroad shops) came under the greater sway of corporate investors keen on overcoming the crisis of profitably in the early years of that decade, management over the workplace became more centralized. Under such highly capitalized and centralized control, standardized methods of production were introduced and tasks that were previously performed solely by highly skilled craftsmen were given over to semi-skilled operatives. In this situation, the craftsmen became ever more conscious of preserving their status. In the South, where employers such as railroads could access an abundant supply of cheaper African American labour, the question of preserving the craft status of skilled workers such as

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27 Montgomery, 115.
machinists, inevitably became enmeshed with the struggle to preserve craft distinctions against the aspirations of African American workers.

Montgomery, in a thought-provoking work, which unfortunately treads all too lightly on the issue of race in the workplace, has captured in broad sweeps the transformations in U.S. capitalism and its impact within industrial workplaces in the 1870s and more intensively, in the years following the Depression of the early 1890s. According to Montgomery, there was increased investment and concentration of capital, which in turn, impacted on the wider culture of growing business and professional associations that adapted the ideology of “acquisitive individualism into capitalist collectivism.” The concepts underpinning this “capitalist collectivism”, as Montgomery identifies them, included “organization”, “efficiency”, “responsibility” and “management,” which practically translated into an assertive push from employers to diminish the control that various skilled crafts (such as engineers, blacksmiths and machinists) had previously exercised in the workplace.28

Among machine shops, increased mechanization meant a new subdivision and specialization of work that began to encroach on a clear definition of craft that machinists (well schooled in the technological niceties of their trade) had enjoyed before the 1890s. In a paradoxical manner, Montgomery suggests “machinists became increasingly craft conscious as their craft became harder to define” in a context where the lines between the skilled craftsman and a wide range of operative (or semi-skilled) categories of labour in the machine shop had become less distinct.29 Machinists were resolute in maintaining their craft distinctiveness despite

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28Montgomery, 176-177.
29Montgomery, 182.
the encroachments of industrial development on their trade. They felt themselves a cut above other tradesmen, such as boilermakers, who “toiled in teams, amid deafening noise, covered with sweat and often with filth” and without the pride of individual workmanship that machinists possessed. On the railroads, the staying power of machinist craft identity emerged decisively in a wave of strikes against specialization and piecework systems that meant to raise “some workers’ wages above the average, while lowering the average.” In this way, Montgomery suggests, machinists were able to regain a measure of control over the work place in such companies as Hoe Manufacturing and the Union Pacific Railroad. They had gained an end to piece work and increased preference shown toward union members in hiring practices.

However, Montgomery overstates the case for the persistence of the control craftsmen could exercise in the workplace. On the railroads for instance, as indeed Montgomery observed without addressing the full implications, the power of management over the labour process seems to have grown extensively quite early on. Railroads, as Montgomery suggests, had become corporate establishments by the mid-1870s already and were pioneers at introducing salaried management over personal ownership. By the 1890s, railroad companies promoted the standardization of equipment, gauges, accounting methods, and even the time of day through zones of standard time established in 1883. All of this required enormous capital investment, which by 1910, gave the “four great financial houses [including the Morgan First National Bank and the Standard Oil National City Bank] control over five sixths of the railroad employees of

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30 Montgomery, 196.
31 Montgomery, 208
32 Montgomery, 211.
33 Montgomery, 54; The standardization of management was not solely a top-down imposition, according to Walter Licht, Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 270-271
the United States.” At top of the Illinois Central System, four of thirteen directors (most notably W.M. Harriman) were also directors of the Union Pacific, which held controlling shares in Illinois Central stock under the overall control of the Morgan First National Bank and the Standard Oil City Bank with a total investment of $141,930,000.

This concentration of capital and the integrated directorships at the top of major railroad systems such as Union Pacific and Illinois Central had a direct bearing on the men working on the railroads and in their shops. The Railroad shops, for instance, structured into divisions based on mileage, were under chains of command that came down from the board of directors, the president, vice president, general manager, master mechanic, and ultimately a range of foremen in the shops. Under this command structure, A.O. Wharton, president of the AFL’s Railroad Employees’ Department (RED) told the Commission on Industrial Relations in 1915, that the individual worker was absolutely helpless. According to Wharton: “An order issued by a general manager … is in turn communicated to each subordinate official until it is delivered to the man or men who actually execute it. A general order may thus be put to full effect and force over an entire system, and according to its character effect one division point or all division points or an individual employee or all employees.”

In the South, despite the best efforts of a well-organized trade union such as the IAM, the presence of a cheap labour supply of largely African American workers, gave railroad employers freedom to shape the situation in their shops more or less as they saw fit. By 1910, for instance, the ten Illinois Central shops in Mississippi were highly capitalized ventures. Thus, according to

35 Suner Slichter, Reel 2, 11.
the Thirteenth Census, while, “there were only 10 railroad repair shops reported in 1909, as compared with 15 in 1904,” these shops still showed a significant increase in the value of products between the years 1904 and 1909.\textsuperscript{37} In these shops, the various AFL shop affiliates, representing craft categories such as boilermakers, machinists, sheet metal workers and railroad carmen, had a strong presence. Despite this, the Illinois Central Railroad often drew non-union mechanics from small contract machine shops in and around cities such as Memphis, Tennessee, which by 1905 had about 15 foundries and machine shops, or Meridian, Mississippi, which was said to have had four machine shops in addition to a railroad car works (not owned by Illinois Central) employing 600 workers.\textsuperscript{38}

In recruiting for and building the IAM within railroad shops at Memphis, organizers in the early 1900s were frustrated by the numerous small contract shops in the city employing non-union labour. In 1905 machinist Matt Steinbrecher gave a rough estimate showing that, on average, shops in Memphis employed four non-union men each.\textsuperscript{39} IAM agent at Memphis C. Patterson thought that these shops could effectively be dealt with if they simply were driven out of business, as in the case of a shop that was forced to close so often “that we no longer notice it, and I am afraid this disease will spread among the shops if they continue to run without men who carry an I.A of M card in their pocket.”\textsuperscript{40} However, the problem of contract shops continually resurfaced. Patterson admitted that the problem was more widespread than could be managed by putting pressure on a few contract shops. There were, he wrote, “a great many industries

\textsuperscript{37} Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Vol.1X, Washington, DC, GPO, 1913, 618.
\textsuperscript{38} Robert A. Sigafoos, Cotton Row to Beale Street: A Business History of Memphis (Memphis, TN: Memphis State University Press, 1979), 74; Letter to Stuyvesant Fish from [Illegible], Meridian, Mississippi, 29 June 1906, President’s In-letters, IC1 F2.1, Illinois Central Railroad Company Archives, 1831-1984, bulk 1851-1970, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.
\textsuperscript{39} Machinists’ Monthly Journal, Vol. 17, Issue 1, January 1905, 44.
\textsuperscript{40} Machinists’ Monthly Journal Vol.18, Issue 7, July 1906, 642.
throughout the city that have a machinist or two, and we nearly always have men out of our
ranks in these places.\textsuperscript{41}

The purpose of the preceding discursion on skilled workers’ struggle over control in the
metal works and in railroad shops is to direct attention to the vulnerability of shop craft
organizations within the AFL to ongoing attempts from employers to minimize costs and tighten
management control over the workplace. Employers such as the Illinois Central Railroad did not
hesitate to recruit shop operatives or even aspiring African American machinist or boilermakers
from small contract shops around southern locations such as Memphis.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, since
modern railroad shops consisted of a workforce that ranged from shop labourers, helpers (who
worked closer to shop craftsmen than labourers), apprentices, and skilled craftsmen, the
challenge for the shop craft organizations could not easily be resolved by racial and craft
exclusion. Perhaps well aware of the predicament that skilled craftsmen faced on the railroads,
African American shop workers in the South kept worrying organizations such as the IAM and
Boilermakers and Shipbuilders with requests for incorporation as helpers under the jurisdiction
of these organizations.\textsuperscript{43}

The shop craft unions, for their part, were also aware that no strike could have sufficient
effect without involving less skilled and darker workers in the shops on their side. In fact, during
tense negotiations, employers and shop craft unions tried to play each other off in appealing to
the sentiments of workers outside of the crafts. Thus, in 1901, when the machinists on the Illinois
Central Railroad threatened a general strike over the entire system from the Burnside shops
(Chicago) all the way through to Vicksburg, Mississippi, in demand for higher wages and an

\textsuperscript{41} Machinists’ Monthly Journal Vol.18, Issue 7, July 1906, 642.
\textsuperscript{43} J. Giethorpe to Frank Morrison, 23 May 1905, American Federation of Labor Records: The Samuel Gompers Era,
1877-1937, Reel 34; J. O’Connors to Frank Morrison, 9 June 1905, American Federation of Labor Records ,Reel 39.
eight hour day, management called their bluff by granting an increase that included all the crafts and the “entire force of boys who serve as helpers to the various mechanics in the shops.” The goal was to ensure satisfaction among workers outside of the crafts, “so that they will not be in sympathy with the machinists or aid them in any way should they become involved in a strike.”

By contrast, a successful machinist strike in 1910, on the south-western lines of the Missouri Pacific against shop rules management wished to impose, involved machinists striking alongside “apprentices and helpers.”

Although most big strikes on the railroad were contests between craft organizations and management for control over the workplace and in defence of closed shops against employment of non-union men, African American workers within the shops were not in a position to take an indifferent stance towards the demands initiated by white shopmen. Increased management control over the workplace meant intensified exploitation and harsher discipline over both the highest and the least skilled shopmen. Even though the core demand of the system-wide strike in 1911 on the Harriman railroad lines (which included the Southern Pacific, Union Pacific, the Illinois Central and the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley railroads) was for employers to recognize the System Federation organized by seven shop crafts, the strike was an accumulation of years of frustration over management moves to increase productivity, minimize costs and tighten discipline over labour.

The increase in management power within the workplace pushed by advocates of scientific management during the Gompers’ era, involved not only turning machinists into “fractional machinists, whose knowledge of a trade or industry is confined to but a few simple

44 The Chicago Inner Ocean, 2 May 1901; The Chicago American, 6 May 1901, clippings, President’s In-Letters, 6 May-17 May 1901, IC1 F2.2, Illinois Central Railroad Company Archives, 1831-1984, bulk 1851-1970, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.
operations.”46 It also entailed, as president of the AFL’s Railroad Employees’ Department A.O. Wharton told the Commission investigating the strike, “all kinds of intimidation, coercion and discrimination” which would have come down hardest on those with least power in the shops, the African American helpers and labourers.47 Discipline in the railroad shops included a “personal record system,” compelling applicants for positions to “give a brief history of their lives, and as a condition of employment they were compelled to furnish reference satisfactory to the employer for a period of at least five years immediately preceding the date of filing the application.” This system, according to Wharton, “resulted in establishing what we term an absolute and positive blacklist and places the man who was out of a job at the mercy of the employer.” The system of blacklisting men was supported by routine physical examinations and age limits on employment ranging between 35 and 45 years, all of which impinged on the future employment prospects of railroad shopmen regardless of race or skill.48

When they embarked on their major strike on the Harriman system lines, the shop crafts included “federal labour unions composed of helpers and labourers” in a jointly signed declaration sent to Illinois Central management. The list of signatories to the declaration included representation from the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, International Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, Boilermakers and Iron Ship Builders’ International Union, International Association of Machinists and Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers’ Alliance, among others.49 Although it is necessary to avoid exaggerating the effect of the involvement of the federal labour unions among the unions taking on the railroads in the

strike, nonetheless one cannot ignore the role that they played in bringing African American workers into the strike.

Among the 30,000 workers involved in the strike, including carmen, machinists, boilermakers, blacksmiths, railroad clerks, freight handlers, machinist helpers and shop labourers, African American shop men on the Illinois Central and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad from Memphis through to New Orleans were a distinct rather than marginal presence in the strike. At Memphis, among 1,330 shopmen out on strike by 1 October 1911, about a month into the strike, African American helpers and warehouse truckers were a significant component among those out on strike.\(^{50}\)

Although the strike was a direct answer to Illinois Central and other Harriman line managers’ preference for negotiating separately with each craft union,\(^{51}\) the strike included demands – such as improved working conditions and a wage increase of about 20 per cent - that would have appealed to workers outside the skilled crafts. Further down the line from Memphis, the involvement of African American workers in the strike was also significant. At Jackson, Mississippi, the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported that along with 200 Illinois Central system machinists, car repairers, boilermakers and blacksmiths, “practically every negro helper walked out in sympathy”, and at Water Valley, Mississippi “The Illinois Central strike here was made complete this morning when all of the Negro labourers in the shops quit the system in sympathy with the strike. Not a man is working in the shops today, and for the first time in many years the whistles did not blow this morning.”\(^{52}\)

\(^{50}\)Machinists’ Monthly Journal, Vol. 23, Issue 11, November 1911, 1105; Memphis Commercial Appeal, 1 October 1911.


\(^{52}\)Memphis Commercial Appeal, 1, 6 and 7 October 1911.
At the height of the strike, the strong presence of African American workers is suggested by reports that the Illinois Central could not easily convince locals to engage in strike-breaking. In his December 1911 report of his visit to the Delta, IAM Vice President Buckalew explained confidently that:

We are still doing picket duty at every point, and can report at this time that in not a single shop has the company been able to get men to work who live out in the city. Even in McComb, where the State has spent over $150,000 to maintain martial law by the militia route, which has been the means of compelling the governor to call a special session of the legislature to pay the bill, not a single man who lives out among the citizens is working in the shops.\(^5\)

As the strike dragged on through 1912 and 1913, the weaknesses in the organization of federated shops severely constrained the effectiveness of the action on the local level. According to Carl E Person, a disgruntled strike leader who in 1918 published a feisty attack on the leadership of the strike, the strike call in September 1911 under the federation of shop crafts was a mere formality. The co-ordination of the strike, Person argued, was not handled in centralized fashion with strike funds going through a federated structure on an equitable basis to the strikers.

The International Grand Presidents’ of the various crafts, Person suggested, failed the federation by squandering funds, intended for distribution among workers on strike, for the coffers of grand lodge treasuries of the specific craft organizations. The fate of the strike was sealed even before it began, Person asserted, because “only three of the International organizations were paying strike benefits. These were the Machinists, Blacksmiths and Boilermakers. The other organizations had cut off their financial support to the men on strike.”\(^5\)

In this situation, it appears that the strikers went beyond traditional skill and craft divisions to support and sustain each other. As Person witnessed it, any sign of fellowship between strikers of

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varying skill, hints at the potential effect of the strike on pre-existing racial barriers, despite
counterbalancing accounts of scattered incidences of racial strife during the strike at Memphis,
Tennessee and at McComb, Mississippi.55 As Person’s account is a most observant contemporary
recollecction of the strike situation, it is worth quoting him at some length, with respect to the
breakdown of craft barriers that he perceived:

The only people who recognized the Federation were the strikers themselves. At each
terminal point they held their Federation meetings and co-operated in the handling of the
strike locally. Working together on the picket lines and in committees, they had forgotten
that they were machinists, carmen, pipe fitters or helpers, but jointly assisted and pressed
in service their best efforts and complied with that which made federation as effective as
possible. In financing the strike locally, everybody did the best to assist those who were
most in need, and when possible compensated those who gave the movement their
service and time, regardless of whether they were mechanics, helpers and laborers.56

Although Person made no specific reference to the issue of race during the strike, it is possible to
assume from his account that financial necessity among the strikers may have produced a degree
of rank-and-file solidarity that overstepped existing racial divisions. In particular, his reference to
joint committees and picket lines that included helpers, suggests the possibility that the
involvement of federal labour unions was a crucial component to this kind of solidarity.

Despite the involvement of federal labour unions in the strike, the shop crafts were
ambivalent (if not altogether closed) about the extent to which they were willing to encourage
organization among African American shopmen. African American workers used this
ambivalence, depending on the direction it was exercised, to gain some room to assert
themselves within the Federation. Indeed, during the Harriman Lines strike, federal unions did
not simply follow skilled white workers into the strike without making claims on the AFL. Thus,

55 Testimony of Charles H. Markham, President, Illinois Central Railroad, 7 April 1915, Commission on Industrial
56 Person, 33.
Machinist Railroad Helpers’ Union No. 12874 (for which no location was given) distanced itself from the strike because members were not “entitled to strike benefits.” Railroad Machinist Helpers and Laborers’ Union No. 1412 at New Orleans, on the other hand, did not withdraw from the strike for lack of benefits but pushed instead for the AFL Executive Committee to allow them an extension of time for payment of their union dues. The effect of this kind of pressure moved the Committee to pass a resolution sanctioning the continued payment of strike benefits to affiliated machinists’ helpers and labourers’ unions.

However, with prior claim on strike benefits being granted to members of the IAM, this was small respite for the cash-strapped federal unions involved in the strike. The Executive Committee’s resolution was a triumph no less of African American workers’ assertiveness within a federation that imposed extensive racial restrictions on their exercise of any voice or power. African American shopmen were not necessarily satisfied with making small gains through their localized federal unions. Machinist helpers pushed further. They made a request to the AFL Executive Committee, during the strike, for a charter that would unite them in a wider body with the proposed title – the National Union of Machinists’ Helpers. The location and source of this move is yet unclear, although IAM president Johnson was sufficiently alarmed by the request as to block its passage through the AFL executive committee with a counter proposal that the IAM be granted jurisdiction over machinist helpers’ locals, which he would grant IAM charters free of cost.

It appears that Johnson’s proposal passed through the Executive Committee and would contain machinist helpers’ aspirations for their own national trade union charter. Four years into

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58 AFL Executive Committee Minutes, AFL Records, 8-13 January 1912.
59 AFL Executive Committee Minutes, AFL Records, 8-13 January 1912, 9-11, 13-17 May 1912, Reel 5.
the Harriman Lines strike (for which there is no record of an officially declared end) President of the AFL’s Railroad Employees Department A.O. Wharton explained to the Commission on Industrial Relations that federal unions were taken under the jurisdiction of the various shop crafts, which had not conceded such jurisdiction in years before the strike. According to Wharton, this had “practically removed the necessity of the formation of a federal labour union, which embraces men and is a plan of the American Federation of Labor of offering, you might say, protection to men who are not eligible to any craft organization.”60 In the face of this, African American railroad shop workers did not shelve aspirations for broader and more independent organization among themselves. News surfaced from an IAM business agent at Atlanta, Georgia, that “considerable effort is being exerted in this city by agents representing an organization known as Brotherhood of All Railway Employees…with a view to inducing members of organized labor of the railroads to become members.”61 Beyond this single piece of correspondence, the so-called Brotherhood of All Railway Employees seems to be lost from the record, and yet this one mention of it stands as evidence of ongoing attempts at self organization among African American railroad workers across the South in the years before 1920, despite equally vigorous attempts to stifle them.

The most vociferous opposition to any kind of organizing effort directed at African American workers were the railroad brotherhoods outside the fold of the AFL. In response to a request for information from Gompers, who was frantically trying to gain relief from the irritating persistence of African American brakemen, switchmen and porters at Memphis whose

61 J.E Whitaker to Frank Morrison, 12 May 1917, AFL Records, Reel 39.
representatives had inundated his office with letters through the summer and fall of 1911, the Grand Lodge President of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen unreservedly declared that his organization’s programme was to eliminate African American employment on the railroads altogether. Along these lines, he bitterly declared to Gompers that:

The Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen does not admit to membership colored employees, nor do we claim jurisdiction over such employees. As to the advisability of organizing Negro train and enginemen, I have no suggestions to offer. We are gradually supplementing Negro brakemen and switchmen with white employees, and every effort has been and is being put forth by our organization to secure standard rates of pay for all such positions with the knowledge that if standard rates of pay for such positions can be secured white men will unquestionably be installed.62

From a purely material point of view, such expression of combative racism among white trainmen is understandable. White railroad trainmen, more than employees in the railroad shops who enjoyed craft exclusivity (as fragile as it was) to protect them from encroachments into the trade from African American workers, were generally semi-skilled operatives whom railroad employers did not hesitate to substitute with lower paid African American workers. As a Memphis-based observer, sympathetic to the interests of African American trainmen, put it in August 1911, “There are more colored men working as switchmen, brakemen and train porters in the South than there are white men.”63

The African American trainmen that Gompers attempted to swiftly shove onto the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen were probably aware that white trainmen had no inclination whatsoever toward entertaining their appeals for an organizational home, let alone a willingness to even consider bringing them under the jurisdiction of their Brotherhood. All the effort of these workers was focused on appealing for a charter that would bring them under the wing of the

62 Grand Lodge President [Illegible], Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen to Samuel Gompers, 28 October 1911, AFL Records, Reel 45.
63 I.M Levi to Samuel Gompers, 14 August 1911, AFL Records, Reel 45.
Switchmen’s Union of North America. Their persistence is evident in the numerous correspondence which, given its general absence from existing AFL union correspondence files, has to be surmised from the exchange of letters between officials of the AFL and the Switchmen’s Union dealing with their engagements with African American correspondents over a decade or more.

For the most part, the Switchmen’s Union (unlike the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen) was initially cautious about explicitly using race as their reason for declining African American workers’ request for a charter. They kept African American switchmen and trainmen at bay by diversion and delay. In July 1911, for instance, Grand Lodge Secretary of the Switchmen’s Union, M.R. Welch, told Gompers that he had been in communication with “some colored gentlemen in Memphis on this same subject of organizing” and had taken their case to the Switchmen’s Convention that year, “in which the opinion prevailed that the American Federation of Labor should take hold of this matter and give them a charter.” Welch himself was expressly sympathetic to the aspirations of African American trainmen to have an organization representing their interests. He encouraged them to organize a separate international union as opposed to the less effective local federal unions. He believed that this would assist African American workers in the South to compel railroad companies to give them wage increases that would be considerable enough over time, to contribute to ending the hostility that existed between white and African American trainmen in the region.

It should be noted that there were some men of sympathy within the AFL, whose presence may have encouraged African American workers’ persistence in trying to find accommodation within the federation. However, these sympathizers were few and their lack of influence could

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64 M.R. Welch to Samuel Gompers, 12 July 1911, AFL Records, Reel 45.
65 Welch to Gompers, 12 July 1911, AFL Records, Reel 45.
often be demoralizing for them, as in the case of E. W. Weeks, General Secretary of Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, who wrote Frank Morrison that:

I was the delegate to our Buffalo Convention in 1905 … and I did my best there to change the constitution to admit colored men, or at least to let them have lodges of their own, and to show you the sentiment that prevailed … at the time, my colleague from the other lodge in the same city and myself were the only two that voted in favor. I have never dared, since becoming a grand lodge officer, to even hint at such a thing, sentiment is that strong."66

Notably, as historians Spero and Harris suggested in the early 1930s, the men who had favoured admitting African Americans to the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen in 1905 had put up enough of a fight as to provoke “much debate.”67 At Memphis, Tennessee, AFL organizer Isaac Levi gave both vocal and active support to the goal of organizing African American trainmen. He was applauded by one of the leading African American trainmen in Memphis, J. H. Eiland, for having “spared no pains” in supporting African American workers’ petitions to the Switchmen’s Union appealing for a charter.68 Levi had indeed boldly announced that he was busy organizing “the colored switchmen, brakemen and train porters” into an “international union with headquarters in Memphis”69 The workers, who had received Levi’s efforts with enthusiasm, adopted a rather lofty name, The Colored Switchmen, Brakemen and Train Porters of South America, which in itself conveys the determination and ambition of African American workers to confront employers with the kind of organized muscle that they perceived the AFL “internationals” could wield.

66 E. W. Weeks to Frank Morrison, 29 October 1919, AFL Records, Reel 45.
67 Spero and Harris, 65.
69 Isaac Levi to Samuel Gompers, 2 July 1911, in Peter J Albert and Grace Palladino (eds.), The Samuel Gompers Papers Vo.8: Progress and Reaction in the Age of Reform, 1909-13 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 244.
The existing records do not indicate what became of this organizational drive. African American trainmen and switchmen in Memphis and its surrounding territory continued to get representatives such as J.H. Eiland to hound the top officials of the Switchmen’s Union with requests for a charter under the jurisdiction of that union for years on. Although no progress emerged from this ongoing correspondence -- in the 1920s J.H. Eiland would reappear as the president of an independent Memphis-based organization named the Colored Association of Railroad Employees -- the important issue is that behind the unrelenting correspondence from African American trainmen was a sense of indefatigable resistance to the racial barriers within the AFL. Testimony to this spirit of resistance is J.H. Eiland’s frustrated plea to Gompers, in which he stated that: “Most all the men have grown impatient, in fact they are pushing me because they want to organize.” This indeed shows that despite the fact that they did not gain any satisfactory end to their requests for a Switchmen’s Union charter, African American trainmen in the Memphis territory had achieved a degree of self-organization that gave them the confidence to urge leaders such as J. H. Eiland to keep up the pressure on the AFL.

Grand Lodge Secretary of the Switchmen’s Union, Welch, was to write Frank Morrison in March 1915 informing him that he had recently “been in communication with various colored men of the South relative to organizing the colored railway employees viz. the switchmen, brakemen, firemen and porters.” In 1915, this news was probably old hat for Morrison, though it is possible he shared Welch’s alarm at seeing that things had got to a point with the African American workers that they were “figuring on having a committee representing the various crafts to visit Buffalo during our convention period, May 17 to 30, or thereabouts.” At present, there is no record of the African American trainmen actually going through with putting such a protest

70 Gompers to Levi, 20 June 1911, AFL Records, Reel 45
71 Welch to Morrison, 22 March 1915, AFL Records, Reel 15.
72 Welch to Morrison, 22 March 1915, American Federation of Labor Records, Reel 45.
delegation together. However, the very open threat that such a committee was to be composed and sent to a convention of an exclusively white organization, testifies to the depth of feeling among these workers that the AFL was not merely a racist body to be let alone, but one which they desired to reform even if it meant constant embarrassment to the trade union officials and members who were bent on keeping the power in the Federation almost exclusively white.

Racial barriers against African American workers among AFL affiliates were not necessarily confined to unions of semiskilled trainmen or skilled craftsmen in the shops. In October 1910, AFL Secretary Frank Morrison, again seeking information on behalf of African American workers seeking membership in one of the more established organizations, received a reply from the Arkansas Secretary of the International Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, L.H. Moore, expressing little sensitivity to the Federation’s policy on race. Despite the fact that the organization had jurisdiction over both semi-skilled and unskilled labour on railroad tracks, bridges, and shops, Moore told Morrison straightforwardly that “our constitution provides that only white men are eligible to membership in this Organization”. The “Negro question” was not to be eliminated as the Maintenance of Way Employees’ Secretary imagined, and it would return to haunt the organization during a major wage strike on the Missouri Pacific, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway in 1917.

African American workers who participated in the strike demanded a charter giving them formal affiliation with the Brotherhood or one giving them the right to establish their own brotherhood with the proposed title, Federated Brotherhood of Railway Round House and Shop Employees. Their demand was for a charter that would give their proposed brotherhood jurisdiction over the same class of workers in states beyond Arkansas. T.M. Hollingsworth, a

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73 Secretary of Maintenance of Way Employees to Morrison, Frank, 29 October 1910, AFL Records, Reel 41.
spokesman for the African American workers making this demand, wrote to Moore at his office in Little Rock, Arkansas, on 17 June that year:

Dear Sir: Yours at hand relative to organization. It seems that I have not made our wants clear. We know the unions you mention [most likely local federal labor unions] are organized on this line, or mostly so except the track men, and they are now getting in communication with their organizations. But it seems there is no union for us. Now the kind of labor that want to organize are as follows; hostler helpers, engine watchmen or fire builders, sand house men; tool checkers, oil supply men, engine wipers, dopers and cellar packers, coal and cinder shovelers, water service men, pumpers and stationary firemen, repair track … helpers. It seems that there is no place in this big unionised world for us. You said you would take this advisement. Remember while so doing it is for a class of men who have no voice in their conditions. They have no voice in how much they get for their work or under what conditions, but driven like dumb brutes subject to the petty domination of the boss no matter how unjust the abuse we have no come back. Yet we are men. Real men with real blood in our veins. We love life, we know no Sunday or holiday. We love our wives and babies, but are with them only a few short hours. Our work is the filthiest, and hardest, and yet the least pay. We work from 12 to 36 hours without sleep or rest if the boss says so, no matter how bad the weather. Now back to organisation. If we accept the conditions of application blanks for charter and get it, will we have the right to organise the rest of the men at other terminals in other states.74

Hollingsworth’s letter, quoted in some detail above, is an extremely rare surviving record of African American railroad workers in the South writing decisively and clearly about their own conditions of labour and the possibility they perceived of overcoming these through stronger organization. Hollingsworth movingly conveyed workers’ appeal to both white workers’ sense of common humanity and identity as men. It is a vivid account of the workers’ frustration over their exclusion from a labour movement, which they nevertheless still believed was an indispensable means to challenge their employers. Most of all, the letter is a protest against the severe working conditions and the abuse they were forced to endure without the shield of solidarity and support that the established unions in the AFL could have provided.

74 T. M Hollingsworth to L. H Moore, 17 June 1917, AFL Records, Reel 41.
This protest, such as it was, from African American shop labourers calling for a union charter that would allow them to organize beyond isolated locals most likely helped to move things forward for these workers. AFL Secretary Morrison decided in favour of the protesting shop labourers. He provided them an AFL charter pending their eventual acceptance into the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees. General Secretary of the Brotherhood, George Seal, in a letter to Morrison conceded to the decision with an expression of pained reluctance that shows the real effect that self organization among African American workers could have even within a federation as dominated by white labour as the AFL. On 26 July 1917, Seal wrote Morrison:

Naturally we do not altogether approve of this. At the same time we do not believe that their receiving a charter from you and belonging to an allied union would make any difference to us at the present time because of the fact that our constitution will not allow us to accept their membership. Therefore, it is possible that if they insist on instituting an allied union under a charter of AFL, it cannot very well be refused. Therefore, it is quite evident that you should use your best judgement in connection with the matter.  

By the fall of the following year, African American track men and shop labourers had been brought into the Brotherhood renamed the United Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Railway Shop Laborers to accommodate for their inclusion. The AFL had passed onto the Brotherhood, the charter of about 135 local federal unions organized among railroad helpers and labourers. The total membership of these bodies (both North and South) consisted of well over 7000 members, with Southern locals stretched as far afield as Jacksonville, Florida; Meridian, Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee; New Orleans, Louisiana; Pine Bluff, Arkansas and Palestine, Texas. The begrudging acceptance of the African American workers into the Brotherhood did not, of course, spell an end to racism within the organization. At best, it shows

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75 George Seal to Frank Morrison, 26 July 1917, AFL Records, Reel 41.
76 Seal to Morrison, 27 September 1918 and 20 February 1919, AFL Records, Reel 41.
that African American workers’ somewhat silent but ongoing resistance to racial domination had the effect of producing debates within the organization that had the potential to sway some of the hardest conservatives.

During a session of a Brotherhood convention on 17 September 1919, for instance, a persuasive speaker managed to convince the majority of delegates to vote in favour of a motion allowing two African American workers to address the assembly. After a near walk out of several Southern representatives, Southern-born Grand President Barker, made a rousing speech in which he declared that while the organization fought and spoke on behalf of white and African American workers together, he felt that allowing the two delegates to address the assembly would be deeply divisive. In the best interest of this “organization of the white man and colored man,” he asked delegates to rescind their vote in favour of the motion allowing the “colored brothers to take the platform.” With no further dissent, the majority who had voted in favour of the motion withdrew it in a second and unanimous vote. If this showed that the pressure from African American workers to gain entry into the Brotherhood was a hollow victory, their success in gaining entry shows just as well that their previous exclusion from the Brotherhood was a denial of their humanity as workers which they would not accept without putting up a determined challenge that went all the way to the top of the AFL.

The number of federal unions, composed mostly of railroad workers, organizing among African American workers in the AFL showed an extraordinary increase in the years 1918 to 1922. During these years, the pressures causing this renewed organizing drive within the AFL were both internal and external. A significant external pressure was the growth in African

78 Spero and Harris, 102.
American workers’ interest in the AFL’s left wing rival, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). A British Home Office Directorate of Intelligence Report of 7 October 1919 reported that African American workers had shown limited interest in the IWW in previous years but observed that in the past two years thousands were joining as a result of vigorous campaigning.79 Although the National Urban league and the NAACP, which had Southern branches at New Orleans, Louisiana; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Memphis, Tennessee, petitioned Gompers in 1918 on the issue of organizing African American workers, a far more trenchant external push on the federation came from influential African American activist publishers of The Messenger, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, who promoted the IWW as an organization that did not subscribe to any racial barriers.80

In the pages of The Messenger, not only did Randolph and Owen tell African Americans to take courage from people in cities such as Memphis who took up arms and prevented a lynching there in 1918, they also urged workers to organize industrially and for every man and woman to “who does any form of work” to “be prepared to walk out in concert.” In the August 1919 edition of The Messenger they called upon “every Negro in the South” to begin to work towards labour organization by agitating in community structures such as “lodges, churches, schools, parlour and home conversation and while at work in factory or field.”81 African American railroad trainmen were willing agents of such calls for organization among African American workers in the South. They were active in transporting the opinions of Northern-based radicals such as the young Randolph and Owen across states. Thus, a federal agent observed:

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“That Negro porters running from Chicago and New York to the South have been carriers of radical propaganda has been indicated for a considerable length of time. A recent report from the Western Department now indicates that the Negro porters on the transcontinental lines are also being used as the medium for the transmission of radical literature and messages.”

In early 1919, the two editors of The Messenger were part of a much larger initiative of socialist and labour reformers, named the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism among the Negroes. The Association included among its supporters such strange bedfellows as Harold C. Keyes of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and prominent labour organizers and socialists in New York from such organizations as the United Hebrew Trades, the Workmen’s Circle, the United Miners and Smelter Workers of America and the Pennsylvania State Federation of Labor. One of the stated goals of the organization was to encourage a “combination of white and black laborers” as a “powerful lesson to capitalists on the solidarity of labor.” Although headquartered in New York, this initiative appears to have had a wide reach in the South. In the fall of 1919 under a revamped but no less cumbersome title, The National Brotherhood of Workers of America, the organization held a meeting in Washington with delegates from Northern and Southern states such as Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida and North and South Carolina. The delegates included workers from such trades as railroad firemen, stationary firemen and engineers, machinists, blacksmiths, porters and waiters, longshoremen among numerous other trades. The Messenger editor, Chandler Owen, was reportedly President of the organization.

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82 Confidential Weekly Situation Survey for Week ending 10 March 1920, Military Intelligence Division, 10 March 1920, Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, Reel 13.
83 Office of Military Intelligence Department, New York to Director of Military Intelligence, “Negro Agitation,” 5 April 1919, Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, Reel 21.
From the limited evidence available, it is possible to surmise that the influence of this organization extended even as far as African American sharecroppers in the Arkansas Delta who had organized under the title of the Progressive Farmers and Householders League, whose agitation for a fair price for their cotton ended in a disastrous massacre at Elaine, Arkansas in 1919. An indirect hint of the National Brotherhood of Workers’ presence within Arkansas is contained in a federal agents’ observation of African American lodges in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, which pronounced that at Pine Bluff, Arkansas, there were strong lodges which were known to “advocate equal wages, political offices and social equality for the colored people.” Two of the leaders of these lodges were also said to be members of a so-called “International Brotherhood of Colored Workers,” which could very well have been the National Brotherhood of Workers.85

Most significantly, the National Brotherhood seemed to be having an impact within the AFL. While there were just two resolutions from African American delegates at the AFL convention in 1917 calling for organizers of their race to work in southern industrial cities and among railroad workers, by the 1919 convention there were six resolutions, ranging from a request for the federation to provide African American organizers, a call for an international charter for African American workers, and criticism of unions under the Metal Trades Department of the AFL for imposing racial barriers against African American workers.86

At the Atlantic City, New Jersey, convention of the AFL in June 1919, not only did members of the National Brotherhood gain official endorsement for a Federation plan to organize African American workers, they also gained one representative to the AFL executive board. The representatives of the organization also claimed that they had dominated elections to

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86 Spero and, Harris, 104-105.
the presidency of the State Federation of Labor of Virginia. In early 1920, a Brotherhood official claimed that the organization was growing rapidly with most of its membership made up of railroad workers. At Jacksonville, Florida, the organization was said to consist of over 2,000 members. Likewise, in the state of Mississippi, the pressure of its presence was sufficiently intense as to result in a virtual “state of war, amounting almost to the intensity of a feud” when first vice-president Charles H. Franck, of the Mississippi division of the AFL sent hundreds of letters to local labour organizations in the state calling on them to engage in forming African American labour unions.

Whatever pressure the National Brotherhood was able to exert within the federation was unlikely to have occurred without the backing of the supposedly ineffectual African American federal labour unions which had been quietly attempting to have greater influence within the federation over the previous decades. During the 1920 convention convened in Montreal, Canada, federal unions of African American freight handlers, railroad express men and station employees with charters under the Brotherhood of Railroad Clerks, pushed for racially exclusive wording in the organization’s constitution to be removed. They succeeded in having a resolution passed which proposed that if the Railroad Clerks were to fail in removing the offending words, “only white” from their constitution, the organization would have to “relinquish jurisdiction over the Negro freight-handlers and thereby allow them to establish a separate brotherhood.

According to a National Urban League survey of African American membership within the AFL published in 1930, during the same convention, federal labour unions strenuously challenged the

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90 Spero and Harris, 89-90.
Federation to make a real commitment to organizing African American workers. They tabled a four part resolution, with fairly modest suggestions, which were nevertheless posed in language that conveyed a farsighted sense of class consciousness and clear understanding of the inner workings of the Federation. This resolution, as reported by National Urban League, called for:

- The launching of an educational campaign among white and Negro workingmen to convince them of the necessity of “bringing into the ranks of labor all men who work regardless of race, creed, or color”;
- Periodic conferences of white and colored leaders with the Executive Council of the Federation on questions affecting Negro labor;
- The appointment of an Executive Secretary of a special committee for organizing Negro workers who would be located at the headquarters of the Federation in Washington; and
- Negro organizers in all crafts whose duties would be to build up Negro membership.\(^91\)

The first and third sections of the resolution did not pass, the second was accepted without modification, while the fourth was slightly modified and referred to the executive committee to take action in lieu of funds. Although the reception given the resolution was lukewarm rather than encouraging, it may nevertheless be seen, beyond the obvious fact that it was yet another rebuff from the dominating white trade unionists, as a sign of the ongoing unwillingness of African American workers to accept their exclusion from unions in a federation that was then the largest organized body challenging employers on wages and working conditions as well as pushing for legislative reforms such as the eight hour day and workmen’s compensation, which were reforms beneficial to the working class in the U.S as a whole.

Since General Order 27 passed by the United States Railroad Administration imposed a principle of equal pay for equal work on the railroads, African American workers’ enjoyment of such benefits as AFL affiliates could negotiate and gain from employers in the immediate aftermath of World War I was reinforced by an order of the state. Thus, there was real content to

the claim made by president of the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen M.F. Ryan, in a letter to
Frank Morrison that, “on several occasions, rates of pay, etc. negotiated by the Brotherhood of
Railway Carmen of America, with individual railroads or railroads as a whole, apply equally and
without discrimination to the colored workers the same as the white man.” Ryan further claimed
that “the colored coach cleaners are now enjoying, through the efforts of our Brotherhood, the
eight hour workday and time and half for all the time worked in excess of eight hours.”92 The
Brotherhood of Railway Carmen had been among the most reluctant unions to give in to requests
to take African American workers under its jurisdiction in years before World War I. However,
four years since the Sheet Metal Workers’ Alliance had changed its constitution in order to
engage in organizing African American auxiliary unions, at its 1921 convention the Brotherhood
of Railway Carmen similarly amended its constitution.93 One may concede to the idea that the
organization of African American auxiliaries generally served to stifle these workers’ capacity
for independent collective bargaining. However, in view of the fact that some AFL affiliates such
as the Railway Mail Association would doggedly resist making even the smallest
accommodation to the organization of African American workers, it is possible to appreciate the
achievement of such accommodation as a fairly positive product of years of determined African
American workers’ resistance to white racial domination within the AFL.

The central question addressed in this chapter asks why it was that a minority of African
American workers stayed within the AFL, despite the fact that the affiliates of the Federation,
most of them white-dominated craft unions, barred them from membership in those
organizations and restricted their collective bargaining rights. One approach to addressing the

92 Morrison to Gompers, 23 July 1920, American Federation of Labor Records, Reel 45.
93 Spero and Harris, 64-67.
question pursued in this chapter has involved looking at the way in which capitalist development at height of Samuel Gompers’ leadership of the AFL, continually worked towards undermining the traditional control skilled craftsmen had exercised in the workplace before the 1890s, while effectively weakening any solid basis for craft and racial exclusiveness. As control over the workplace become increasingly centralized with management under the authority of highly capitalized railroad corporations, skilled shopmen faced an intensification of work and a lack of effective power in the workplace, which less skilled workers inevitably experienced most harshly. In this situation, skilled shopmen were often compelled to challenge the increased power of employers by joint action with workers outside of their crafts, as railroad shop workers did when they formed a System Federation in 1910 on Harriman line railroads.

During the 1911 strike on the Harriman lines, the System Federation (later named the Railway Employees’ Department of the AFL) relied on the co-operation of African American railroad workers organized under federal labour unions which had no independent bargaining position but a capacity to mobilize support in the situation of a strike. African American workers, perhaps aware of the vulnerability of skilled white workers in an era when mechanization tested the basis of craft exclusiveness, used the limited organizational room that the AFL had provided them, to push for a greater degree of influence within the Federation.

A second approach to the question adopted here has been to show that the AFL had an ambivalent attachment to an ideological line handed down from the Knights of Labor that called for workers’ solidarity beyond race or creed, despite the origins of the AFL as a federation of crafts organizations which were, as Spero and Harris have put it, narrowly focused on the interest of the skilled mechanic.94 African American workers and their supporters used this ambivalent commitment to a principle (often publicly expressed by Samuel Gompers), to push for the

94 Spero and Harris, 54.
leadership to provide them a limited presence as organized members of the federation. More than that, they often inundated AFL executives with petitions and queries about the possibility of their becoming members of affiliated crafts or, short of that, the possibility of their receiving union charters under the jurisdiction of these crafts. Although the response they received was usually dismissive, African American workers’ persistence in keeping pressure on the federation shows their quiet but determined resistance against continuing white racial domination of an influential labour organization. At the New Orleans’ convention of the AFL in 1944, A. Philip Randolph’s defiantly declared that: “Discrimination based on religion, nationality or race cannot live in the same country together.”95 Many of the workers, who had written and petitioned AFL secretary Frank Morrison or Samuel Gompers, would likely have heard in these words an echo of the sense of justice which had encouraged them to take on a seemingly hopeless fight against racial domination within the federation years before.

95 Anderson, 293.
Chapter Three: Seizing the Moment for a Fair Deal:

African American Railroaders in South during World War I

It’s the last fair deal goin’ down
Last fair deal goin’ down
It’s the last fair deal goin’ down, good lord
On that Gulfport Island Road

...  
My captain’s so mean on me
My captain’s so mean on me
My captain’s so mean on me, good Lord
On this Gulfport Island Road.

...  
I’m workin’ my way back home
I’m workin’ my way back home,
I’m workin’ my way back home, good Lord
On this Gulfport Island Road
And that thing don’t keep a-ringin’ so soon
That thing don’t keep a-ringin’ so soon ...
On that Gulfed and Port Island Road


The six years immediately preceding the United States’ intervention in World War I was an opportune moment for both organized and unorganized workers. The alliance struck between the Democrats under President Woodrow Wilson and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) set the agenda for important reforms in labour relations. Moves toward reform included legislative reforms such as the Adamson Act, which sanctioned an eight hour working day in 1916 after pressure from the big four railroad brotherhoods, as well as the government’s establishment of labour-friendly state agencies such as the Department of Labor and the United States Commission on Industrial Relations (USCIR).

The USCIR produced a controversial report in 1915 that “made workers’ rights a central focus of national reform efforts, placing the issues of authority and consent in the modern
workplace on the national political agenda for the first time in the Progressive era.”¹ Employers fastened onto their monopoly of control on the shop floor by engaging in “spirited attempts to undermine trade unionism,” in response to the Commission’s call for “the rapid extension of the principles of democracy to industry.”²

In the face of sharp price increases for housing and basic consumer goods since 1913, workers showed an equal measure of spirit in defending their interests. In the first six months of U.S entry into the war, workers engaged in an unprecedented strike wave with up to 3,000 strikes and a loss of 6,285,519 workdays. Between 6 April 1917 and November 1918 6,205 recorded strikes, according to David Montgomery, “took on an outlaw quality more than ever in the face of AFL’s official pledge not to strike.”³ Although this militancy usually involved unionized workers, previously unorganized African American railroad workers in the South were not indifferent to the ferment around them. On railroads in Texas, North and South Carolina and Birmingham, Alabama, African American railroad workers staged protest strikes (often without formal organization) over violent racist attacks on the job and against racial differentials in wage increases.⁴

This strike wave occurred in tandem with the marginalization of the antiwar left around the Industrial Workers’ of the World (IWW) and the strengthening of the alliance between the Wilson administration and the AFL. The alliance involved a consensus around the need to strengthen the war effort on the home front by containing industrial conflict through increased state intervention in industrial relations. In the wake of the strike wave in the first half of 1917,

²McCartin, 12, 41.
³McCartin, 39; David Montgomery, Workers’ Control in America (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 96.
state intervention in labour relations was achieved through the institution of new agencies and boards such as the War Labor Policies Board, the National War Labor Board and the US Railroad Administration (USRA).

President Wilson established the USRA under proclamation on 26 December 1917 with William G. McAdoo, the secretary of the Treasury, appointed as director-general. At the time of U.S. intervention in World War I, the railroads were under the control of competing private corporations. These corporations, despite their attempt, through the establishment of a co-operative body named the Railroads’ War Board on 11 April 1917, were unable to achieve effective co-ordination of their activities without government intervention geared at fulfilling the “extraordinary demands of the European belligerents for supplies”. In addition to their failure to achieve the co-operation necessary to deal with major congestion at terminals on the Atlantic Seaboard, the railroads faced pressing labour shortages and ongoing industrial unrest. According to Walker D. Hines who took over the post of director-general from the resigning McAdoo in 1919, in 1916-1917, on the railroads, “movement toward unionization was in the air.”

Following the success of white train and engine men, whose threat of a strike compelled Congress to pass legislation imposing an eight hour day in the freight train service the year before, in 1917 the railroads were faced with a significant strike threat from shop men, demanding standardization of hours, better wages and working conditions.

By November that year, under considerable pressure of such labour unrest, railroads under the auspices of the Railroads’ War Board, effectively surrendered authority to the state when they declared before the Federal Commissioner of Mediation and Conciliation: “As no interruption of continuous railroad operation can be tolerated under war conditions, we are ready,

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6 Hines, 18.
should any crisis now arise, unreservedly to place our interests in the hands of the President for protection, and for disposition as he may determine is necessary in the public interest.”

Soon after government take over of the railroads, USRA director-general McAdoo immediately set to work to improve labour relations. In early February 1918, he set up the Division of Labor under the direction of W.S. Carter, formerly president of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, who brought in trade unionist, J.A. Franklin, former president of the American Federation of Labor’s International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, and federal mediator, G.W.W. Hanger as assistant directors.

General Order No. 8, issued on 21 February 1918, gave the USRA prerogative over questions of hours and wages. At the same time, it both strengthened and challenged the status quo of organized labour on the railroads by prohibiting discrimination in “the employment, retention or conditions of employees because of membership or non-membership in labor organizations.”

Beyond the big four white brotherhoods of engineers, firemen, conductors and railroad trainmen, organized labour was compelled to extend its reach to workers “who were not already organized.” This likely had an encouraging effect on African American railroaders as various organizations of the shop craft, maintenance of way employees, clerks, station and freight house workers organized locals on roads in which they had previously had no recognition.

General improvements in working condition for workers during the period of federal control over the railroads were far-reaching. According to W.S. Carter:

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7 Hines, 19.
8 Hines, 154.
9 Hines, 302.
10 Hines, 155.
11 Arnesen, 75.
Prior to Federal Control the railroad employees were quite generally working on a ten-hour day … while the eight-hour day was formally established for all railroad labour during 1918 and therefore enforced as to all for all of 1919. As a result of this change it appears that, while in the year ending June 30, 1914, railroad employees worked 59.7 hours per week, they worked on an average only 51.4 hours in 1919.12

In addition, in a move that was clearly meant to improve the wages of the least paid workers, General Order No. 8 increased wages on a sliding scale – a move which gave an increase of 43 per cent to workers earning under $46 a month, and an increase of 16 per cent to workers earning $150 a month. Higher up, workers earning $200 a month received an increase of 8 per cent, while those earning $250 or more a month were given no increase.13

These developments, as historian Eric Arnesen has argued, impacted directly on African American railroad workers’ confidence to engage and test the willingness of state agencies such as the USRA. African American railroad workers, Arnesen has aptly observed, “quickly learned that new federal adjustment machinery responded far more to organized blocks of workers than to individuals.”14 However, African American railroad workers’ efforts to organize and take up their concerns with the USRA had more of an impact on their wages and working conditions than Arnesen admits in his brief coverage of their situation during World War I. By drawing on numerous African American railroad workers’ letter and petitions to the USRA, this chapter brings attention to the formal and informal organizational means these workers used to make gains from the labour-friendly environment existing during Woodrow’s Wilson’s wartime government. Beyond its value as a means for historians to recover the rarely documented voices of African American railroad workers in the Deep South, the correspondence of these workers with officials at the head of the USRA shows clearly that African American workers, even in

12 Hines, 89.
13 Hines, 161.
14 Arnesen, 56.
repressive regions such as Arkansas, the Mississippi Delta, and Louisiana, were able to use non-confrontational approaches to the USRA such as letters and petitions to great effect. The key ingredient in their effectiveness was their self-organization into trade unions and by informal means of co-operation.

These workers were able to persuade the USRA to introduce Supplement 12 to General Order No. 27. Although the Supplement expressly declared that it was not intended to “infringe upon the seniority rights of white trainmen”, it reinforced the principle of equal pay for equal work which General Order 27 had spelled out in Article VI which declared on 25 May 1918 that effective the following month “colored men employed as firemen, trainmen and switchmen shall be paid the same rates of wages as are paid white men in the same capacities.” Supplement 12 described in detail the duties to be assigned to brakemen and flagmen, including technical operations such as connecting hose and chain attachments, inspecting cars, testing of signals and brakes and the opening and closing of switches in order to marshal the movement of trains between alternating tracks. Brakemen and flagmen were also required to exercise keen judgment and initiative in order to maintain the safe movement of trains, as specified in the rules that required them to compare watches and to use hand and lamp signals.

By making a clear description of their work, Supplement 12 was an attempt to distinguish the duties of brakemen and flagmen from those of African American train porters (who, in theory, were meant solely to provide service to passengers) in order to ensure that porters working at tasks designated as the duties of flagmen or brakemen were paid accordingly. In

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15 National Railroad Adjustment Board First Division, “Award 6288, Docket 13033, Parties to Dispute, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Gulf and Ship Island Railroad,” Selected Documents of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, RG 228, Microfilm Reel 10, Collection No. 5662, Kheel Center for Labor Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY.
addition, Supplement 12 established clearly that African American brakemen be given equal compensation to white men working in the same jobs.\textsuperscript{16}

African American railroaders’ correspondence with officials of the USRA should not be read merely as petitions appealing for fair wage settlements over the heads of local railroad managers who tended to block effective implementation of General Order No. 27. Their letters also tell a substantive story about the ways in which railroads such as the Illinois Central and the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad integrated African American workers into the racial and craft hierarchies of employment on the roads. Most significantly, the letters speak to African American workers’ understanding and perception of the work they did on the railroads in ways that challenge the conventional assumption that African American workers were only employed to perform the least skilled and most unpleasant jobs on offer.\textsuperscript{17}

By allowing African railroad workers’ voices to emerge through their letters and petitions, it is possible to see that despite the restrictive racial culture of the Mississippi Delta and its surroundings, African American railroad workers’ experience of this oppression in years before World War I did not stop them from finding avenues that allowed some of them to rise above the station that whites in the region tried to impose on them. The letters and petitions of black railroad workers to officials of the USRA in 1918 and 1919 are of special interest because they bring to light African American workers in the Deep South, who managed to grasp the smallest opportunities offered to them by modernizing influences such as the railroads.

\textsuperscript{16} The controversy over the distinction between the tasks that porters and brakemen performed would resurface during World War II. As Arnesen suggests by World War II African American porters were doing the work of brakemen, with neither fair compensation nor reclassification of their jobs. See Arnesen, 221-222.

\textsuperscript{17} Most of the correspondence covered here is drawn from African American workers in the Mississippi Delta, although some of this material relates to the wider Southern railroad region which included the extended Illinois Central/Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad passing through Louisiana as well as lines such as the Louisville and Nashville that branched further westward into Arkansas.
African American railroad workers, as may be gleaned from some of their letters, grasped at opportunities in ways that afforded them more dignity and self-respect than one might have expected in an environment in which doors were increasingly closed to black achievement in the early years of the twentieth century. For instance, writing recently about the situation of Mississippi Delta sharecroppers at the turn of nineteenth century, John C. Willis described a rather bleak scenario: “The glow of opportunity faded after the turn of the century, black farmers lost hope of climbing up the agricultural ladder, and whites took political and economic advantage of their greater access to credit. The proportion of black landowners ceased expanding, and many farmers slid swiftly down into tenancy. The region became less a land of hope and more a scene of frustration, and it was here and now that the blues were born.” 18 My key intervention, however, is not concerned with discounting this portrayal of oppression and hopelessness among the majority of African Americans in the region who worked as labour tenants. Rather, it is to draw attention to railroads as a countervailing influence on the lived experience and agency of a small section of African American workers within a social environment that meant to stifle any oppositional expression of such agency.

My purpose is to show that even the smallest degree of modernization that industries such as the railways brought to the Deep South, provided African American workers the opportunity to shape their lives and working experiences in ways that gave them more leverage than was usually possible in a racially oppressive environment in which vigilante justice and peonage were common means to keep their aspirations in check. The opportunities that African American workers gained in terms of employment on the railroads in the Deep South hinged on their continuing status as a cheaper source of labour than organized white labour. As soon as this was

threatened by wartime state interventions such as General Order No. 27 which raised African American railroad workers’ wages substantially, railroad employers looked to restructuring the racial hierarchy of work in ways that began to undermine the position of African American workers on Southern railroads throughout post-war years and the decades to come.

**Competing Perceptions of African American Railroad Labour**

For some historians, the racial hierarchy of the labour market in the new South appears indeed much the way it was in South Africa after 1922 Rand Revolt when white workers achieved state-sanctioned industrial colour bars, such as the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 and the Colour Bar Act of 1926, which effectively barred black workers access to any positions of skill in the country’s gold mines and burgeoning secondary industries. As the U.S South achieved a small degree of industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, African American workers began to seek employment outside of an agricultural economy in which their opportunities to set up as semi-autonomous producers diminished and they became subject to systems of share-cropping and labour tenancy that sometimes bordered on the servility they had experienced before the Civil War.

According to historian Leon Litwack, in the New South, prospects of employment for African Americans outside of agriculture became increasingly limited to the lowest paying positions in industry. “Blacks seeking alternatives to field labor in the towns and cities of the New South,” he argued, “invariably found themselves confronted with the familiar reply, ‘this is

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white man’s work’ when they sought to improve their situation.”20 In effect, he argued, African American workers in the new South “dominated jobs that few white workers wanted and that paid the least wages for often gruelling work.”21 In his classic study of the New South, C. Vann Woodward offered a more flexible insight, suggesting that racial hierarchies on Southern labour markets were never an uncontested issue between white workers and industrial employers. “Fifty strikes against the employment of Negro labor in the period from 1882 to 1900 testify to white labor’s determination to draw a color line of its own,” Woodward argued. At the same time, he made the significant point that African American exclusion was not an easily assured outcome. It was clear, “that in its efforts to relegate to the Negro the less desirable, unskilled jobs, and exclude him entirely from some industries, white labor did not always have the co-operation of white employers.”22

In his recent study of black railroad labour, Arnesen captures the ambiguity involved for railroad employers in accepting a racial hierarchy of labour on the roads. “The racial division of labor in railroading rested on, and reinforced, racist assumptions about African Americans’ character and abilities,” he wrote, “Few whites questioned the suitability of blacks…. for the backbreaking and often dangerous work of grading track and drilling tunnels … Whites disagreed, however over the appropriateness of black labor in skilled positions: many railroad managers found blacks’ performance more than satisfactory, while white workers denounced it as sloppy and inadequate. Informing their perspectives, of course, were respective economic interests.”23

21 Litwack, 143.
23 Arnesen, 40.
However, railroad employers often shared white workers’ perception of the inadequacy of African American workers’ for certain types of labour. Among employers, such racial stereotypes were especially targeted at seasonal labourers who worked on digging ditches or laying tracks. Given the seasonal nature of their employment these workers often were perceived to be idle and unsettled. In the Mississippi Delta, litigation resulting from accidents on the roads often was blamed on the “large numbers of reckless Negroes, a careless, shiftless class,” which companies such as Illinois Central and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad employed in greater numbers when there were new tracks to be laid.24 Despite any reservations they may have harboured against employing African American workers in any capacity, faced with competition from cotton agriculture and lumber mills in the region, the railroads were prepared to allocate some resources to attracting these workers. For instance, managers of the Yazoo & Mississippi Railroad were constantly appealing to the Illinois Central head office in Chicago for funds to build labourers’ houses because of the difficulty of obtaining and “holding competent labor.”25

In view of the strong craft unions on the roads that kept the price for white railroad labour high, railroad employers often held racist perceptions of black workers that were consistent with their need for African American workers as a cheaper source of labour. This is well captured in Illinois Central president Stuyvesant Fish’s friendly letter to Thomas Robertson, Special Commissioner for Indian Railroads, in which he stated: “We have, on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, conditions somewhat similar to those prevailing in certain parts of India. At least we have a vast alluvial plain, populated in the main by an inferior – I might almost say servile race – the Negro. My experience with them has been that properly handled they are

24 Stuyvesant Fish to J.M Dickinson, 24 July 1902, President’s In-Letters, IC F2.1 Vol. 57 and 58, 847; Mayes and Harris, District Attorneys, Jackson, Mississippi, 11 October 1902, IC1 F2.1, Box 69, Vol. 559 and 60, Illinois Central Railroad Company Archives (IC), 1831-1984, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.
25 Expenditure requests to the Board of Directors, Box 51, Folder 1358; Box 52, Folder 1357, Box 53 Folder 1402 and Folder 1410, IC 6Y2.31.
excellent laborers on the railroad, and that properly handled they are good farmers and exceedingly docile.” 26

The racist notions railroad employers held against African American workers, it is significant to observe, were matched by an equal degree of paternalism and idealization of their African American workers as icons of days gone by. For instance, a porter on the Illinois Central Memphis Terminal Division, Benjamin Franklin, or “Old Ben,” was given honours on his retirement as “one of the old time type of Southern Negro, having been brought up under the old regime, which made him courteous and respectful to his superiors. He was faithful to his duties and employers, had regular habits of reporting on time and always gave his best to the company for which he worked.”27 Not only was another retiring worker, nicknamed “Uncle Tom”, a reminder of the good old days, he was also appreciated for qualities such as dedication, moral uprightness and efficiency on the job that simply belied the most negative racial stereotypes. This is well articulated in his brief biography published in the Illinois Central Magazine:

Uncle Tom, they call him at Malone Mississippi and he is the same kind of Uncle Tom that made Harriet Beecher Stowe’s great Novel. His real name is Columbus C. Moore and he is 74 years old. … Moor was born a slave in South Carolina in 1855. When he was ten years of age, Gadberry Fowler, an 18 year old white boy conceived a friendship for him and taught him to read and write and some of the rudiments of education. He moved to Mississippi in 1872 and worked on a farm and preached the Gospel among the members of his race. He lived by the rules that he taught. When he worked for the Illinois Central, he ran his pump by these rules. If the water was low he got up at four o’clock in the morning to start his pumps. If the tank was not full at six o’clock in the evening, he kept the pumps going until it was full. 28

Behind this idealization of the “old type of Southern Negro” lay the shadow of wilful African Americans such as Delta outlaw “River George,” who openly carried a gun and once told an Illinois Central section foreman, who had approached him with an offer of work, that “I wouldn’t

26 Stuyvesant Fish, 25 June 1902, IC1.1 F2.1 Vols. 57 and 58, 445.
27 Illinois Central Magazine, April 1926.
work for no white man living.” Closer home for local railroad officials during 1918 and 1919 was the spectre of the African American workers who had participated in the shopmen’s strike of 1911 as well the numerous workers beginning to organize themselves and going over the heads of their local supervisors to write and make demands for better wages and working conditions from the railroad administration in Washington.

Although the most privileged white employees such as conductors and engineers might have shared the paternalistic bent among company officials, for most white workers any opportunities that employers allowed African Americans threatened their position within the racial hierarchy of labour. Indeed, at moments when employers had the upper hand in manipulating the boundaries of the racial hierarchy, African American railroad workers gained leverage to carve out “for themselves a number of solid occupational niches.” According to Arnesen, black railroaders achieved this most easily in service positions such as Pullman porters that white workers simply shunned as “nigger” work. African American workers gained a fairly secure foothold before the 1920s, in occupations such as firemen and brakemen. This gave railroad employers the advantage of cheap labour in certain strategic posts as well as an “effective deterrent against white unions.”

Historians often have held the assumption that racism in the South confined African American workers to job occupations that were the least skilled, the lowest paid, most unpleasant and involved a maximum of physical strain. This image of African American labour in the

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30 Arnesen, 2001, 40.

31 Arnesen, 40.

32 Litwack, 142; Arnesen, 40.
South does not capture the full range of labour African Americans often performed above the most basic kind of work. On the railroads, where employers faced the need to minimize the collective bargaining power that white railroad workers gained from an all too rigid racial division of labour, African American workers often found opportunities for work such as brakemen or firemen that were less servile or physically taxing as the work performed by railroad porters or shop labourers.

However, railroad employers, who shared the racial stereotypes of their white employees, did not formally recognize and adequately remunerate African American railroad workers for labour they performed above a certain station. A key point in the foregoing discussion needs reiterating: During World War I, with railroads under the control of state administration, organized African American trainmen were able to petition and gain USRA passage of Supplement 12 to the administration’s General Order 27, which clearly defined the work African Americans performed in positions such as railroad brakemen and firemen, while also commanding that African Americans working in these positions be paid on the same level as their white co-workers.

**Restricted Aspirations**

Before World War I, on the Illinois Central, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, and other lines in the Deep South, railroad management struck deals with organizations of white labour unions such as the Brotherhood of Firemen and Enginemen in which the allocation of positions such as firemen and brakemen was split 50 per cent between African American and white workers. This allowed African American workers to become a significant factor on trains within the South. Railroad employers often overstepped this 50 per cent split in ways that tended
to undermine the strict segregation of posts on the trains. According to one report, “Employment of Negroes in train and engine services has always been confined almost exclusively to southern and border states. Until World War I, it was usual for railroads in those areas to use Negro firemen and trainmen (brakemen, switchmen or flagmen) on from 25 to 90 per cent of their runs.”33 Arthur Lewis, a fireman on the Illinois Central since 1917, testified in the 1940s that in the year he began working for the company, 50 per cent of firemen in the Memphis Terminal and a massive 75 per cent of firemen on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad were African American.34 Regardless of racial prejudices they may have harboured against African American workers, railroad employers in the South could not resist the advantages of using black workers as a cheaper source of labour, sometimes in work positions that were formally designated as skilled.

Railroad employers often used African American workers employed in lower paying ranks to perform work that was usually the prerogative of workers employed at a higher rank. After General Order No. 27 was issued in May 1918, black workers took courage from the Order’s provision of equal pay for equal work to demand that they be recognized and paid the scale of wages appropriate to job categories above the designations in which they were officially employed. Julius Cole, a porter working for the Southern Railway Company at Columbus Mississippi claimed compensation at brakemen’s rate of pay on the ground that he and other

33 “Railroad Industry and FEPC, 5 August 1945 ” Selected Documents of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Microfilm Roll 73, 5662, Kheel Center for Labor Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
34 “Summary, Findings and Directives in Re. Illinois Central Railroad Company, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen” before the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Washington, D.C, 15-18 September 1943, Selected Documents, RG 228, Microfilm Roll 11, Collection No. 5662, Kheel Center.
members of the Colored Association of Railway Employees were instructed to do all the work of passenger brakemen without getting the appropriate pay.\footnote{Julius Cole to J. A. Franklin, Assistant Director, USRA, 22 November 1918, National Records and Archives Administration (NARA), Copies of Documents Relating to Black Workers, 1917-1943, U.S Railroad Administration (USRA), “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2, Collection No. 5584, Kheel Center.}

M.S. Sledge of Greenwood, Mississippi, complained to Railroad official J.J. Gaines that he was a porter on train line 38.37 between Clarksdale and Greenwood and that the duties he performed included the porter’s tasks of “handling baggage and express” as well as the flagman’s job of using hand and lamp signals for the “protection and movement of trains.” He stated that he opened and closed switches, coupled and uncoupled cars as well as the hose and chain. For this, he was paid $60 a month while the “flagmen on the same run is paid $100 dollars and overtime.” \footnote{M. S Sledge to J.J Gaines, 23 January 1919, USRA “Colored Rates of Pay”, Microfilm Roll 2.}

Francis Wilson of Little Rock, Arkansas, wrote Walker D. Hines, director-general of railroads, on behalf of Neil Perry and George Tennessee, and drew attention to the fact that “General Order No. 27 provides that there shall be equal pay for the same work regardless of the color of the employee.” According to Wilson, Perry and Tennessee, who did repair work on locomotive trucks and springs at the railroad roundhouse, received 50 cents per hour whereas the other shifts in the same roundhouse, doing the same kind of work received the machinists’ rate of 68 cents per hour.\footnote{Francis Wilson to Walker D. Hines, 8 July 1918, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, Microfilm Roll 2.}

In the same breath as they demanded equal compensation for the work they performed, some African American workers also expressed sensitiveness to distinctions of skill among their ranks. For instance, Felix Robinson and Luther Porter, working on the Illinois Central at Water Valley, Mississippi, employed a white attorney, Gilman Woods, to petition W.S. Carter, director of the Division of Labor of the USRA, to correct the situation in which they were classified as
labourers but performed the work of machinist helpers. This sensitivity to differentials of skill within their own ranks suggests that African American workers had higher aspirations than they generally were afforded in the South. Thus, although, as Neil McMillen has suggested with respect to Mississippi, that African American “occupations were limited almost entirely to domestic and manual labor,” the emergence of industries such as railroads and lumber mills in the South with a demand for workers with varying degrees of skill did encourage some African American youth entering the labour market in the early years of the twentieth century to aspire to job positions above domestic service and unskilled labour. Most of the boys (58 per cent) approached by W.E.B. DuBois and other researchers in Atlanta with the question “What are you going to do when grown?”, said that they wished to be artisans such as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths or machinists.

The fulfilment of such aspirations was, no doubt, socially restricted. However, these aspirations hardly can be said to have been far-fetched even in a Deep South state such as Mississippi where African American institutions such as Alcorn A&M College, Westside, Mississippi or Tougaloo University near Jackson, Mississippi, offered, in addition to agriculture, courses in shoemaking, carpentry, blacksmithing, printing, wood-working, and a “thorough course in mechanical drawing.” Schools such as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia and Tuskegee, Alabama, had students enrolled in learning trades that could be put to good use in railroad shops as machinists, carpenters, steam fitters, plumbers, electricians and

38 Gilman Woods to W.S. Carter, W.S, 30 April 1920, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, Microfilm Roll 2
stationary engineers.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, despite the vast inequity in state spending on African-American education, the illiteracy rate among African Americans in Mississippi dropped by a fair degree from about 49 per cent in 1900 to about 23 per cent in 1930.\textsuperscript{42} Although there was still “one in four” illiterate African Americans in the state by the latter year, literate African American men provided a small but lucrative pool of recruitment onto the railroads.

The Illinois Central used the literate skills of Haywood Sumrall, an African American porter at Meridian Mississippi, to great advantage over his twenty three years of service before his retirement in 1926. Sumrall was known for his phenomenal record keeping skills. He was said to have handled the records of three of four railroads running into the freight station at Meridian and it was also claimed that he could immediately place his hands on any record in the office.\textsuperscript{43} John Nelson’s protest to W.S. Carter, director of the Division of Labor in 1919, conveys the deep sense of frustration that such literate African American working men experienced in a racially oppressive environment. Writing from Rolling Fork, Mississippi, Nelson made it emphatically clear that his job as a station porter on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad was work that “requires a strong active dependable man and one who can read and write.” He reiterated the combination of physical strength and intelligence that the station porter’s work involved by declaring that this was work that “cannot be done by a cripple or infirm person nor a child.”\textsuperscript{44} A.J. Stein, an African American shop man at Water Valley, Mississippi, feigned no modesty when he wrote Walker D. Hines that, “We have been building cars for eight years and we build as good a car as the white man,” while an African American

\textsuperscript{41} Charles H. Winslow, “Industrial Education: Report of the Committee on Industrial Education of the American Federation of Labor,” 17 August 1912, Congressional Serial Set 6179. Session 40, 62\textsuperscript{nd} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session, S.Doc 936, 93-96.
\textsuperscript{42} Winslow, 88.
\textsuperscript{43} Illinois Central Magazine, 21 October 1926.
\textsuperscript{44} John Nelson to W.S Carter, 30 September 1919, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2, 5584, Keel Center.
shop man at Memphis expressed a vehement sense of race pride when he asserted that, “We helped work and learn these green white men for 45 cents per hour with no chance of advancement” In a similar vein, an African American landowner in the Delta, who had once been a foreman under the supervision of a white man, told anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker that he quit the railroads because he was paid far less even though he knew “more about the work and did more than the white man.” 45

African American workers were keenly aware that the names and official titles of their posts on the railroads carried the advantages of status, recognition, and fairer remuneration. Black employees at the Illinois Central shops in Memphis, for instance, asserted in a petition that they were to be called “spring” men and therefore entitled to more pay than machinist helpers, “for when a man works up to a spring man he is next to the machinist.” 46 This sense of the distinctiveness of the positions in which they were employed was present even among workers on lower rungs of employment than machinist helpers. N. Daniels of Meridian, Mississippi, writing on behalf of members of the Negro Railroad Workers’ Association employed as fire and water tenders gave W.C. Carter, director of the USRA Division of Labor, a detailed account of the work performed by men of their trade. Daniels emphasized the delicate responsibility of building a fire in the engine and the good judgment the tender had to exercise to ensure that he used “not one bump of coal more than necessary.” 47

The fire and water tender also had to give serious thought to the work he did in filling the boiler and making sure that the water did not evaporate, cause damage to the engine and cost up

to $3,000 to the government. The fire and water tender “had to keep these engines in shape, that they may be moved from place to place at moment’s notice for any repair they may need. At the same time she must be kept in good shape in case she is needed for a troop train or to give any other service without delay.”48 Sadly, according to Daniels, although the fire and water tender was more responsible and productive than the machinist helper, who received $1.13 per hour, or the blacksmith helper, who received 45 cents per hour and was prone to strike when the blacksmith went on strike, the faithful and efficient fire and water tender received a mere 22¼ cents per hour and no overtime.49

Although information about the social networks that African American railroad workers on Southern lines may have formed is lacking, it is clear from the existing evidence that these workers did not base their claims about the status of the work they performed solely on their subjective understanding of the work. In railroad machine shops, for instance, machinist helpers often were used in place of machinists. An academic observer writing in 1915 described his surprise at seeing a number of workers officially classified as helpers in a large railroad shop, apparently assisting no one, but “doing the work of machinists.”50 African American workers were in contact with each other across railroad lines, communicating with each other on day to day matters such as job opportunities and varying conditions of work and pay on the roads. For instance, Ed Harnes, who wrote in his individual capacity to Walker D. Hines, knew through informal channels that men doing the same class of work on other railroads were making $120 to

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48 Daniels to Carter, 24 October 1918.  
49 Daniels to Carter, 24 October 1918.  
$170 a month compared with the measly $65 a month that he received as a train porter on the Missouri Pacific Railroad’s Memphis Division.\(^{51}\)

Likewise, trucker John Crocked on the Southern Railroad knew by word of mouth that truckers on the Louisville and Nashville had been given their back pay for work performed in terms of General Order No. 27.\(^{52}\) Some of the contact between workers had been facilitated through their trade unions. African American brakemen at Columbus, Mississippi, received information by correspondence with other members of the Colored Association of Railway Employees “stating that they have received their back time and are now receiving their new rates of pay and from what we can understand, we the Southern Railway in Mississippi passenger brakemen and Mobile and Ohio railroad passenger brakemen are the only two roads that are not complying with … General Order No. 27.” \(^{53}\)

Despite real restrictions on their opportunities to advance into skilled positions usually reserved for white workers, African American railroad workers did not necessarily shelve their aspirations to work in more skilled and higher paid occupations. Many of them had been trained at industrial schools such as Hampton and Tuskegee in mechanical skills that gave them reason to want more than labourers’ and helpers’ work. Southern railroad employers used African American workers in skilled positions without reclassifying them or paying them on the basis of the skilled grades in which they worked. With government commitment to policies of equal pay and a degree of fair employment during World War I, African American railroad workers in the

\(^{52}\) John Crocked to W.G McAdoo, Director General of Railroads, 27 July 1918, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, Microfilm Roll 2.
\(^{53}\) Colored Association of Railway Employees, Columbus, Mississippi to J.A. Franklin, Assistant Director, 29 August 1919, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, Microfilm Roll 2.
South made a bid to overcome such restrictions on their aspirations by sometimes eloquent expressions of protest to senior officials of the USRA.

**Getting Their Voices Heard, Organizing and Making a Difference**

The fact that African American railroad workers in the Deep South chose letters and petitions over work stoppages as their most vocal form of protest speaks, to some extent, to their confidence in the government’s broader overtures to the labour movement in the form of reforms such as the eight hour day and the labour-friendly state apparatus that emerged during the war. Southern Railroad trucker John Crocker, for instance, informed W.G. McAdoo in July in 1918 that “We feel that you are a man of your word, and we noticed in one of your speeches that there would be no discrimination.”

Matt Lewis, Fred Pryor and John High of Little Rock, Arkansas, expressed their political confidence in the government in words that convey awareness that their class and racial aspirations could be best met outside the sphere of private control of the railroads. “We wish to state here” they wrote, “that we are and always have been loyal to the company and it is our desire to be more so now that that all this class of work comes under governmental control.”

An African American organizer for the American Brotherhood of Railway Trackman at Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, combined loyalty to the government with a robust sense of class consciousness when he informed director general of railroads, Walker D. Hines, that he understood that “you and other members of the Administration are the laboring man’s friend and want to give them as much freedom, justice and unity as possible.”

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These expressions of confidence in the strategy of petitioning the government did not necessarily mean that African American railroad workers were avoiding confrontation at all cost. The very act of making written contact with railroad officials in Washington posed risks for the workers as government officials often referred them back to local officers, invariably the same men supervising them before the state took control of the railroads. Workers also organized in order to be more effective in their contact with higher officials. This brought them into immediate conflict with local managers. When A.B. Smith, head of the grievance committee for the Colored Association of Railway Employees on the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, took time off work to represent members of the Association before the company’s general superintendent, A.H. Egan, at Memphis, Tennessee, he was suspended from employment for 23 days.57

An incident between the African American general organizer of the American Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and his supervisor, C.W. Madison on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, illuminates the determination and defiance that African American railroad workers sometimes had to show in simply preparing to file a petition with the USRA. Writing Walker D. Hines in 1919, this organizer reported:

I was using the typewriter of Mr. W.H. Smith, who is foreman of Section 10-1/12 at Bay St Louis, Mississippi … at the time the supervisor Mr. C.W. Madison happened in the office. Mr. Smith introduced him to me and told him my business. Mr. Madison then stated that a man was mighty low down to organize a Negro institution. I told him that if a Negro wasn’t worthy of his organization and rights, and if he was too low down to belong to the organization, he was too low down to work on the tracks of their Maintenance of Way Department … He then turned to Mr. Smith instructing him to get me out of the building … upon reaching the door I asked Mr. Madison to give me his name and address that you might want to communicate with him, and he said it was none of my business. I turned and asked Mr. Smith what his name and address was and he replied “ask him yourself; he will tell you.” I then asked him again. He said “What’s it up

to you?” Upon that assertion I went to the station and obtained information from the station. 58

In the Mississippi Delta and the wider south-western region of railroads, African workers’ assertiveness was expressed in widespread and sometimes lasting organization even before World War I. Some of this organizing effort was with the support of white trade unionists associated with the American Federation of Labor. The tension within the AFL over the question of organizing African American workers was explored at length in the preceding chapter of this study. It suffices to observe here that as early 1911, a Memphis organizer of the AFL informed Samuel Gompers that he was about to “organize the colored switchmen, brakemen and train porters.” Significantly, he observed that “colored workmen of the South would join unions if they had the opportunity. This is the reason I thought it a good idea to form an international union, with headquarters in Memphis. … The name they want to go under is the Colored Switchman, Brakemen and Train Porters of South America.” 59 Gompers received confirmation from Maurice Welch, grand secretary and treasurer of the Switchmen’s Union of North America that moves to organize African American railroad trainmen in the South were on the go. Welch had “been in communication with some coloured gentlemen in Memphis on this same subject of organizing.” Although, there is no further record of an organization by the name, Colored Switchman’s Union of North America, one of the men Welch had been in communication with was J.H. Eiland, who would later emerge as the president of the fairly successful and independent Colored Association of Railway Employees (CARE). 60

60 Albert and Palladino, 246-247.
The AFL was constantly under pressure to take the organization of African American workers seriously. This pressure came to a head at the AFL convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in June 1919, when the Federation endorsed a plan “to organize negroes in the United States in labor unions.” This endorsement was the direct result of pressure from African American workers in the AFL who formed an organization called the National Brotherhood Workers’ of America with headquarters in Washington. At the convention, members of this brotherhood threatened to “withdrew or secede entirely” if the plan to organize African American workers did not succeed. 61 The AFL took the Brotherhood’s threat to “place the negroes in a body, which will fight both employers and labour unions who discriminate against Negroes” seriously enough to engage vigorously in organizing African American workers that year.

A conference of the Colored Railway Trainmen held in Chicago in September 1919, heard from A.B. Kelly, a Memphis representative of railroad shop workers that “the American Federation of Labor had come in and successfully secured a large number of men.” Such moves failed however, not because of a lack of enthusiasm, but as a result of swift repression from railroad employers, who were well on the way, since railroads were placed back into private hands, to unwinding any reforms that African American workers might have gained during the war. According to Kelly, “after this organization effort, Negroes with as many as 10 years’ service record in the shops in various positions had been removed from their positions and there was quite a bit of dissatisfaction.”62

Whether or not they had full endorsement from the AFL, African American railroaders had come a long way to organizing themselves in the lead up to U.S engagement in World War I.

62 Pullman Company Papers, O6/01/01 Box 1, File 6, Newberry Library.
Beside the Railway Men’s International Benevolent Industrial Association (RMIBIA) founded in 1915 with a commitment to organizing African American railroaders across North and South into a single federation, black workers formed numerous informal and formal organizations in order to take advantage of government labour reforms during World War I.\(^{63}\)

In the Delta, they were not, as it has been implied, simply acting in response to the racial onslaught from white switchmen and brakemen trying to remove them from their posts since January 1919.\(^{64}\) By 1919, the Memphis headquartered Colored Association of Railway Employees (CARE) later renamed the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, under the presidency of J.H. Eiland claimed to have “more than two thousand members in good standing in more than thirty eight subordinate lodges located in the different cities and states of the Union.”\(^{65}\) By the end of the 1920s, the CARE had an official membership of 3,000 with 60 locals throughout the South, as well as Colorado and New Mexico. Initially organized in 1912, the CARE was reorganized and officially incorporated under Tennessee laws on 27 February 1918. In Tennessee, there were seven locals; six in Mississippi and six in Louisiana.\(^{66}\) The CARE had jurisdiction over brakemen, switchmen and train porters.

The CARE was openly opposed to labour militancy. Its constitution stated that its objective was to “unite the coloured railway employees, to extend their interests and promote their general welfare … to use legitimate and lawful means of harmonizing and rectifying differences between members of the association and employers.”\(^{67}\) Yet the CARE was not successful in uniting African American trainmen. A similar body, the Association of Train Porters, Brakemen and

\(^{63}\) Eric Arnesen, 60-65  
\(^{64}\) Arnesen, 60-65  
\(^{65}\) CARE Petition to the Division of Labor, USRA, 28 July 1919, USRA, “Coloured Rates of Pay”, RG 14 Microfilm Roll 2, Collection No. 5584, Kheel Center.  
\(^{67}\) Handbook of American Trade Unions, 98.
Switchmen was organized at Florence, South Carolina in July 1918 with jurisdiction over African American trainmen in the same categories that CARE organized. The Association’s reach in the South, clearly overlapped with that of CARE. It had a membership of 1,700 workers with 15 locals in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

The association most likely attracted African American trainmen who wanted a more forthright approach than CARE’s commitment to “legitimate and lawful means.” Thus the constitution of the Association of Train Porters, Brakemen and Switchmen said nothing about harmonizing relationships between workers and employers but committed to “organize, develop and improve the condition of the coloured trainmen of America, to secure fair and just compensation for services rendered and maintenance of proper wages, together with fair working conditions.” CARE, the larger of the two associations, would work closely with RMIBIA in the 1920s on campaigns such as fair seniority rules, fair wages, and a campaign to prevent the replacement of the USRA and its wartime labour agencies with a more decentralized system of arbitration. These subjects will be taken up in the fourth chapter, which is largely concerned with the situation of African American railroad trainmen in the 1920s when direct state involvement in the administration of labour relations on the railroads was withdrawn under the Transportation Act of 1920, in favour of voluntary arbitration and agreement between private employers and employees.69

Although it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of organization among African American railroad workers during the war and immediate post war years, it is clear that they

68 Handbook of American Trade Unions, 89.
used letters and petitions as a useful means to pool resources. Thus, when the majority of porters on the Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad signed a petition addressed to Walker D. Hines through a collectively sponsored lawyer they demonstrated the great pains they had taken to have an organized impact even without the formal avenue of a trade union structure.⁷⁰ Many African American shop workers also took advantage of the USRA’s centralization of labour relations under its Division of Labor to make their voices heard with collective effect. Numerous letters from African American shop men to director-general McAdoo, for instance, give the impression that these were part of a petitioning campaign co-ordinated across state lines from Louisiana, Mississippi and eastwards toward the Atlantic, and over various railroad lines that included the Illinois Central System, the Southern Railroad and the Atlantic Coastline Railway Company. Some African American shop workers came together with the short term goal of appearing to have common purpose before USRA officials. A group of African American machinists in the South informed director-general W.G. McAdoo on 5 June 1918 that we “do assemble ourselves together” to “ask you through this letter if you will please give a listening ear to our cry.”⁷¹ It is evident however, that many African American shopmen were using the organizational leverage that they had been granted within the AFL through federal labour unions of helpers and labourers, to petition the administration with organized effect.⁷²

Although these federal labour unions often were locally-based structures, it seems that African shop workers in the South made an effort to use them to have organized contact with each other across states. Thus, the so-called Executive Board of the South-eastern Railroads of

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⁷² The Executive Board of the South-eastern Railroads of Colored Helpers and Laborers to the W.S. Carter, Division of Labor, 17 June 1918, USRA, “Coloured Rates of Pay”, R.G. 14 Microfilm Roll 2.
Colored Helpers and Laborers, with offices in Jacksonville, Florida; Norfolk, Virginia, and Raleigh, North Carolina, claimed to represent “helpers and labourers of the entire country.”\(^{73}\) The “Executive Board” was confident enough of its wider representation among African American shop workers as to appeal to director of labour, W.S. Carter, to allow them two representatives on the adjustment board established by the Division of Labor.\(^{74}\)

The wartime state takeover of the railroads provided African American workers with an opportunity to use federal reform to try to gain an equal footing with white workers in terms of pay and working conditions. Indeed, their efforts did not go unrewarded while the government ran the railroads. In a petition to the United States Railroad Labor Board in 1920, challenging the Illinois Central and numerous other lines in the Deep South over the longstanding issue of wage scales and the job classifications of African American trainmen, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen (formerly CARE) claimed that the United States Railroad Commission had introduced Supplement 12 of General Order 27 as a direct response to a petition from their organization.

According to the Association, they had presented a petition for an increase in wages to the United States Railway Commission, which on 12 December 1918 gave “full and free hearing of the complaint.” The Commission ruled in favour of the petitioners and the “passenger train porters who performed the service of flagmen and brakemen … were declared to be within the class of passenger flagmen and brakemen. This order is known as Supplement No.12 to General Order No. 27.” Several railroads responded positively to the order. According to the Association, “the St. Louis and San Francisco, the Missouri Pacific, the Chicago Rock Island and Pacific and

\(^{73}\) The Executive Board of the South-eastern Railroads of Colored Helpers and Laborers to W.S. Carter, Division of Labor, 17 June 1918.

\(^{74}\) The Executive Board of the South-eastern Railroads of Colored Helpers and Laborers to W.S. Carter, Division of Labor, 5 June 1918, USRA, “Coloured Rates of Pay”, RG 14 Microfilm Roll 2.
many others immediately increased the salaries of train porters .”\textsuperscript{75} Although Illinois Central was declared to be among the roads that “neglected and refused” to comply with the order, CARE lawyer L. Clyde Going stated in 1919 that “Our information has been that Illinois Central Railroad Company for a while complied with this order and increased salaries of train porters.”\textsuperscript{76}

This was consistent with the wider trend of wage increases on U.S railroads. According to John Stover, “labour costs on American railroads climbed rapidly during the federal operation. The part of the railroad revenue dollar spent on wages climbed from 40 cents in 1917 to 55 cents by 1920. The yearly average wages paid railroad labor climbed from $1, 000 in 1917 to $1, 419 in 1918, $1, 485 in 1919 and $1,820 in 1920. Rates of pay on the Illinois Central came very close to these national averages.”\textsuperscript{77} Further testimony to the impact of African American workers petitions and protests is the fact that the substantial wages increases that the Railroad Labor Board introduced were targeted at the lowest paid railroad workers. By May 1920, wage increases for the least paid workers ranged between 12.5 per cent and 26.2 per cent.\textsuperscript{78}

African American railroad workers, both in the railroad shops and in the train service, often were drawn into the service from a small pool of youth who had sufficient literacy and technical education as to aspire to positions on the railroads such as machinist helpers or “spring men”. These workers perceived the position of spring men, who worked more closely with machinists than machinist helpers, to have far more experience and skill than either shop

\textsuperscript{75} Before the U.S. Railroad Labor Board, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen vs., Illinois Central, Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, the Southern Railway Company and others, Miscellaneous Case, No. 32.1, RG13, Records of the National Mediation Board: Records of the Railroad Labor Board, Case files, 1920-26, Docket No. 38, Box. 146, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.
\textsuperscript{76} L. Clyde Going to J. A. Franklin, 28 July 1919, USRA “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2, 5584, Kheel Center.
\textsuperscript{78} B.M. Jewell and George M Cucich, “Historical Development of the Railroad Wage Structure” (Railway Employees Department, AFL, 1941), 6-8, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 1. Kheel Center.
\textsuperscript{79} Arnesen, 71.
labourers or machinist helpers. Aware of wartime administration measures intended to minimize
inequalities in the pay railroad workers received, many of these workers inundated the head
office of the USRA with correspondence asserting, over and above the simple demand for fair
wages, the sense of skill and responsibility that they brought to their work.

Behind the expression of pride in their work and their rejection of racist ideas
undermining of the value which they believed they contributed to the functioning of the
railroads, African American railroad workers in the Deep South had developed informal
networks by which they shared information about work opportunities and the different rates of
pay prevailing on the various railroad lines on which they were employed. They had also
developed independent trade union associations such as the Association of Colored Railway
Trainmen, which increased the effectiveness of their petitions to officials of the railroad. Even
more creatively, some of these workers (especially in the shops) used the organized leverage
they had attained through the separate locals, the so called federal labour unions that the AFL
began vigorously to establish during the war years. Through their petitions and organizing effort,
African American railroad workers were to share in the surge in railroad wages that occurred
during World War I.

Employers’ Backlash

Railroad wage rates would take a downward trend in the early 1920s, as railroads tried to
overcome the effects of the business slump at the end of the war. Since the armistice in
November 1918, the railroads were faced with a rapid drop in rail traffic and increased operating
costs. This situation did not foster any tolerance among railroad managers for wartime wage
increases, particularly increases for African American labour, which the railroads customarily leaned on as cheaper resource than organized white labour.

The threat to the position of African American workers on the Illinois Central reached a high point of tension in January 1919 when white trainmen in Memphis rioted against the employment of African American workers. Eric Arnesen has suggested the Memphis race strike did little to turn Illinois Central and the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company from their usual practice of employing African American workers for “economic purposes.” However, against the positive response of African American workers to the principle of equal pay for equal work sanctioned by General Order No. 27, railroad companies quickly moved to reshape the status quo in which African American workers had gained fairly secure pockets of employment in the past. Train porters on the Illinois Central experienced a backlash against wage gains they had made sometime before the return of the lines to private operators. Although African American workers were a useful buffer against the demands of higher earning white workers, especially in the transportation department, after General Order No. 27 they had become a liability.

On 1 July 1919, Illinois Central issued an order notifying train porters “that their salaries would be reduced by taking from them the keys and lanterns.” In light of Supplement 12 to General Order 27, which included tasks such as ‘opening and closing switches’ on the tracks and the use of lanterns for signalling train crews, railroad managers were aware that porters’ possession of switch keys and lanterns meant that they would have to be paid at the same rate as brakemen and flagmen in terms of Supplement 12. Depriving porters of switch keys and lanterns was a means for management to evade the necessity of complying with the terms of

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80 L Clyde Going to J.A Franklin, J.A, 28 July 1919 USRA “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2, 5584, Kheel Center.
the supplement, and giving into African American porters’ demand for formal recognition of their performance of duties assigned to brakemen and flagmen.

African American railroad workers had been earnest in making an effort to keep USRA officials abreast of the skills they contributed to the railroads over the years before World War I. The situation in which many of them had been confident to openly articulate their own valuation of the labour they contributed to the railroads was quickly overturned in the post war years as private railroad managements began to reverse some of the achievements African American workers had made in gaining access to positions on the railroads that demanded a fair amount of skill and responsibility. The trend was set even before a rank-and-file committee of white switchmen demanded in January 1919 that the Illinois Central, “immediately discharge its black switchmen and yardmen.”

T.E. Woods, member of Division 755 of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, writing War Labor Board chair, W.S. Carter in July 1918, gave an account of the experience of African American firemen on the Louisiana and Navigation Company that shows the stiff resistance railroad managers were prepared to put up in order to prevent any significant improvement in the wages and working conditions for African American railroaders. In 1915, these firemen received an award that raised their wages to $85 per month. The company immediately dishonoured the increase and reduced their pay to $60 per month. According to Wood, the company’s reason for this was “that the award would give the men overtime and other concessions which had not been in existence.” The firemen were given an additional five dollars a month, which brought their pay up to $65. They were eventually cheated out of the additional five dollars as well, soon after the company was directed “to pay the firemen all back time under

81 Arnesen, 65.
the rulings of Director McAdoo.” The back time was estimated on the basis of the reduced rate of $60 instead of $65 or the $85 which was due to them under the original award.82

African American workers’ claim to a fair recognition for their loyalty as railroad employees, as patriots contributing to the war effort, and as workers wanting just compensation for their skills, came into direct conflict with railroad employers’ plain estimation of their worth – cheap labour. Soon after the railroads passed out of state control and back into private hands, throughout the Mississippi Delta and the wider Deep South railroad region, employers moved to place a final stamp on the controversial issue of the mismatch between the work African American workers actually performed and their formal job classifications. On 1 May 1919, the management on the Morgan’s Louisiana and Texas Railroad that ran between Lafayette and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, issued an order classifying African American porters as “restricted porters.” Besides injuring the workers’ sense of self-worth, this reclassification had immediate material implications for them as their pay was reduced by a substantial amount, from $114 to $55 per month. Petitioners Allan Handy, Alex B. Bracket, Henry Williams, William Jones, and M. Henderson explained that “prior to the issuance of this order, the porters on these runs were receiving pay as flagmen and performing duties incident at that employment.”83 African American workers at Meridian, Mississippi experienced a similar loss in pay and status after the management of Southern Railroad based at Hattiesburg, Mississippi, issued a bulletin on 23 September 1919 which read:

All concerned – effective at once, the duties of passenger train porters will consist of calling stations, keeping the coaches clean, assisting passengers on and off trains, and help load and unload baggage and mail whenever necessary. They will discontinue such

83 Train Porter Alan Handy and others to the Director of Labor, October 1919, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2.
J.A. Edson, manager on the Missouri North Arkansas Railroad, writing J.A. Franklin, the assistant director, Division of Labor of the USRA, in response to a complaint from African American porters at Eureka Springs, Arkansas, made no excuses for depriving them of just compensation for work usually performed by employees designated as brakemen. “We relieved train porters on the M&N of duties that would classify them as brakemen,” he stated brazenly, “and have continued to pay them the porters’ rate … We have not paid back time to any of our train porters who were relieved of the duties [of brakemen] although they did perform these duties up to about May 1 1919.”

In some cases railroad employers had tacitly recognized African American workers performing work above their station. For instance, porter A.W. Sanders and several of his colleagues at New Albany, Mississippi, claimed that they had been trained and examined in the duties of passenger brakemen including the opening and closing of switches, coupling and uncoupling cars, as well as the use of hand and lamp signals for the protection and movement of trains. Against management claims that they had performed these duties without formal consent, the New Albany porters argued that they had received switch keys and lanterns for which they had been charged a deposit of one dollar and fifty cents.

CARE lawyer L.C. Going informed the USRA that railroads such as the Illinois Central issued instructions on 7 April 1919 directing train porters to cease doing work beyond their

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84 Homer Dunn, Tom Page, Bill Buffkin and others before F. K. Ethridge, Public notary, Meridian, Mississippi, 23 February 1920, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2.
jurisdiction with the intention of avoiding improper claims for compensation as either flagmen or brakemen. To ensure that parties were in compliance with this command, they were told to hand in “their switch keys and lamps in order that the railroad company might avoid paying the wages set forth in … General Order No. 27.” 87 These moves against African American switchmen and brakemen were a small part of a wider offensive against the wage gains of African American railroad workers during the war. By 1920, under pressure of a strengthened Republican Congress, the government established a Railroad Labor Board which, despite the equal representation of unions and carriers on its board, proved weak in dealing with union-smashing practices among railroads that led to a strike of 400,000 shopmen in 1922. 88

The tide began to turn against some African American railroad workers soon after General Order 27. African American firemen on the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad appealed to management to apply the “standard rates to them in the same manner as they were applied to the white firemen.” As management did not comply with their request, the firemen went on strike in demand that the railroad pay the “amount they contended was due them, which was the difference between what they had received and what they would have received had they been compensated on the same basis as white firemen.” The immediate response of the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad management was to replace the strikers with 48 less skilled African American firemen. Their longer term response was to begin substantially reducing the overall number of African American firemen employed on that railroad. 89

87 L. Clyde Going to J.A Franklin, 11 August 1919; L. Clyde Going to W.S. Carter, 18 July 1919, USRA, “Colored Rates of Pay”, RG 14, Microfilm Roll 2.
89 National Railroad Adjustment Board First Division, “Award 6288, Docket 13033, Parties to Dispute, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Gulf and Ship Island Railroad,” Selected Documents of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, RG 228, Microfilm Roll 10, 5662, Kheel Center.
By the early 1920s, the tendency to reduce the number of African American railroaders employed was becoming a significant trend on the railroads; after the 1922 shopmen’s strike it accelerated markedly. According to a dossier presented to the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in the 1940s, on the Tennessee Division of Gulf Mobile and Ohio Railroad, the seniority roster showed that the last African American fireman hired was in 1923. George Sams, a fireman employed on the Mobile and Meridian district of this railroad, “testified that since 1923 the Company has refused to hire Negroes in that district.”90 Similar testimony was made against the Illinois Central Railroad at the FEPC. A switchman on the Memphis Terminal Division of the Illinois Central, R.H. Russell, informed the FEPC that “the last Negro switchman was hired in 1923.” Felix Terrell, a black brakeman on the Company’s Birmingham district, testified that he was employed in 1919 but that “the last Negro brakemen or trainman was hired in this district in 1920.” Terrell’s statement was supported by the evidence of the company’s seniority roster.91

In response to the principle of equal pay for equal work and the wage gains that African American workers had made under wartime administration, railroad employers in the Deep South such as the Illinois Central and the Southern Railway systems went on the offensive, depriving African American workers of the wartime wage gains they had made as soon as federal control over the railroads ended. Cuts in the wages earned by African American trainmen were enforced by restricting their employment to positions on the railroads (such as train

porters), which obviated the need to pay them at the same rate that white workers employed as firemen, brakemen or flagmen were paid.

During the 1920s, increases in the real weekly earnings of railroad workers in the train service employed as firemen and brakemen ranged between 13.9 and 15.7 per cent. This was impressive at a time when real weakly earnings for unskilled railroad workers declined by 2.5 per cent, shop wages increased by just 7 per cent and, outside the railroads, manufacturing wages increased by a mere 4.7 per cent. As both employers and white workers, who coveted any well paying jobs on the railroads, strove to push African American workers out of the key positions which they held, most African American trainmen would not share in the real wage earnings that brakemen and firemen would enjoy in the 1920s. However, African American workers still employed as brakemen and firemen did not submit to moves to deprive them of employment in these positions or at the appropriate wages without a determined and sometimes successful fight, a history that is explored in detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The years leading up to World War I were a volatile time for labour relations in the United States. The consensus struck between the Wilson administration and the AFL resulted in a climate of state reform and interventionist industrial relations that gave workers greater freedoms in the workplace than they had before. By the time the US became involved in World War I, this consensus between the labour movement and the government did not produce the climate of peace the administration had hoped for in its efforts to maximize resources in the war effort. Rising costs that directly impacted workers living standards, as well as employers’

attempts to undermine the strength of the labour movement in the workplace, resulted in an
upsurge in strike activity, much of which occurred without official trade union sanction.
Although this wartime militancy and the improvements gained from it revolved mostly around
organized workers, African American railroad workers, who were generally excluded from the
key railroad organizations, were not untouched by this militant mood.

Prior and during US intervention in the war, African American railroad workers in the Deep
South began organizing themselves both formally and informally to take advantage of labour-
friendly reforms being introduced by the Wilson government. Many of these workers, especially
in the shops, used the existing organizational leverage they had as members of AFL-affiliated
federal labour unions to petition the government collectively. Alongside the demand for
improved wages and working conditions, African American railroaders petitioned the USRA to
gain recognition for the skills which they contributed to the railroads and to be remunerated
accordingly.

Their quiet but assertive approach to officials of the USRA in Washington over their
undervalued labour was a direct challenge to the old pattern in which railroad employers in the
Deep South used them as a cheaper source of labour than white railroad workers. Through
Supplement 12 of General Order No. 27, the USRA began to re-evaluate African American skills
and the fair remuneration for African American railroad workers, occupying posts that often
were reserved for white workers. Ultimately, once the railroads were handed back to their private
owners in 1919, there was backlash from employers that soon involved a return to the pre-war
status quo on railroads and the gradual cutting back of black employment opportunities in posts
that these workers had securely held onto before the war.
By showing that the move among Deep South railroad employers to restructure the racial hierarchy on the railroads began in the early 1920s, this chapter brings into question Arnesen’s periodizing of the successful onslaught on black seniority rights to the New Deal era when, he suggests, “revisions in railway labour in the mid-30s placed new and powerful weapons in the hands of white workers who were determined to eliminate their black competitors.”\(^{93}\) Indeed, the 1934 amendment to the Railway Labor Act allowed for the creation of the National Mediation Board (NMB), a body which effectively consolidated the strength and bargaining position of the white railroad brotherhoods sanctioning the right of a majority union “to bargain on behalf of all workers in that craft or class.”\(^{94}\) Given this leverage by the NMB, the white brotherhoods made exclusive deals with their employers and traded lower wages for eliminating black workers from lucrative semi-skilled positions such as firemen and switchmen.

However, with railroads (Illinois Central being one of the earliest) beginning to scale down on employment of black trainmen and fireman shortly after General Order 27 imposed the principal of equal pay, the role of the white brotherhoods in pushing black workers from posts they traditionally held on the railroads can be overstated at the expense of seeing the role of railroad employers’ economic interests as the key catalyst for the wider racial onslaught on African American positions on the railroads that occurred all through the twenties, thirties and forties.

In contrast with Arnesen, whose analysis places more weight on the organized (and sometimes violent) force of white labour in shaping the racial hierarchy of railroad labour, the objective in this study has been to take a close look at the activities and consciousness of African American workers on Deep South railroad lines in the lead up to World War I and document

\(^{93}\) Eric Arnesen, 126.
\(^{94}\) Arnesen, 127.
their attempts to deepen the gains they had made within the racial hierarchy in the years before the war. The purpose of this has been to demonstrate that the imperatives of employers and their relationship to African American had a more significant impact than the power of white labour in shaping the racial hierarchy on the roads.

Before the 1920s, beyond the niche of semi-skilled service positions such as porters and firemen, Southern railroad employers intervened in shaping the racial hierarchy to such an extent that they were, unofficially at least, employing African American workers in skilled and semi-skilled positions that white workers expected to be their preserve. Throughout the decades before the 1920s, white workers constantly challenged the liberties railroad employers took in shaping the racial hierarchy to their advantage. However, it was only in the context of the Wilson administration’s attempt to improve the level at which the lowest paid workers on the railroads were remunerated that railroad employers began to move in a direction that was meant to undermine the previous status of African American workers on railroads throughout the South.
African American railroad trainmen enjoyed a brief moment of fairly substantial improvement in their pay and working conditions during wartime federal control over the railroads. These workers took full advantage of the Wilson government’s favourable policies toward the labour movement as a whole. They intensified their efforts at organizing themselves. They used both formal trade union and informal social networks within their ranks on various railroad lines in the Deep South to make their voices heard by the highest officials in the United States Railroad Administration (USRA). They flooded the desks of officials such as Walker D. Hines and W.S Carter with letters and petitions. They protested against attempts by local railroad officials to deprive them of the wages and equal working conditions that they claimed as a right under General Order No. 27. They expressed the widespread frustration that their skills and experience were being undervalued by railroad managers, who persisted in paying white workers more for the same labour. African American railroad workers’ letters to officials of the USRA assertively rejected the racist perception that they were capable only of the meanest and least satisfying work.

However, as soon as the government transferred control over the railroads back into private hands, employers quickly moved to eliminate the opportunity General Order 27 had given African American trainmen employed as brakemen or firemen to earn wages on an even scale with those received by similarly employed white workers. Railroad officials on the Illinois Central and the Southern Railway systems in the Deep South took aggressive steps to deprive African American brakemen of their lanterns and switch keys in order to uphold the transparent
fiction that these workers were employed solely as porters (at a lower wage) and never in the position of brakemen.

The central theme addressed in the present chapter is African American trainmen’s ongoing resistance throughout the 1920s against attempts by railroad employers to deprive them of the wage increases and opportunities for employment on equal terms with white trainmen that the federal government had sanctioned during World War I. This resistance did not, on the whole, take the form of strikes or militant labour protest. This is understandable given the status of African American trainmen as a minority within the train service on Deep South railroads. The trainmen took up ostensibly non-confrontational approaches such as petitions to the Railroad Labor Board, and law suits challenging employers’ attempts to undermine the gains they had made under federal control. They also saw the need to call on the Board’s support in defending their seniority rights and continued employment on the railroads against organized white workers’ aggressive encroachments.

Their evasion of direct challenges to their employers such as strikes or public protest does not necessarily suggest that they were acting from a position of weakness. Various legal suits, including a vigorous Mississippi court appearance of trainman Charles Sideboard against the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, show that workers’ preparation for a successful presence in court involved careful organization. Trainmen such as Sideboard, chosen as representatives of their fellow workers, demonstrated determination and boldness when they approached their employers or went before the courts once they had exhausted their efforts in trying to persuade their employers to address their grievances.

When railroad officials on the Illinois Central and the Southern Railway systems in the Deep South went on an offensive in the early 1920s against the wage gains African American trainmen
had achieved during World War I, they were participating in the wider trend in which railroads across the nation pushed for cuts in the wage increases that railroad workers had gained under the wartime administration. In late 1919 already, tensions over wage rates were beginning to emerge between railroad employers and shop workers across the North and South. In August that year, some 94,000 Railroad shopmen (including white and black shopmen at Southern points such as Atlanta, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; and Meridian, Mississippi) went on strike in order to force increases ranging from 60 cents per hour for helpers (up from 45 cents) and 85 cents (up from 68 cents) for skilled craftsmen such as machinists and boilermakers.¹ This would have brought shopmen’s earnings, shortly before the railroads were to be handed back to their private operators, up to the standard of wages earned by workers in shipyards, the navy, arsenals, and in private metal works.

This wildcat strike, although achieving a slight increase in shopmen’s wages and a ground-breaking national agreement, only fuelled the determination of employers (and the Republican and Democratic Congressmen who backed them) to overturn the excessive influence that they believed railroad labour had exercised over state agencies such as the Board of Wages and Working Conditions established under President Wilson.² With the Transportation Act of February 1920 and the new Railroad Labor Board weighted in favour of employers by the addition (over the equivalent number for employers and labour) of three board members representing the “public,” the railroads now had a body that would tend to make decisions favouring employers over workers.

¹ Walker D. Hines to President Woodrow Wilson, 23 August 1919; Reports on Railroads affected by the strike, 8 and 9 1919, in RG 14 Records of the United States Railroad Administration, Director-General of Railroads, 1918-1927, E38-18/4 Part2 to E38-18/4 Entry 1, Box 142, National Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Washington.
A significant expression of the Board’s bias in favour of employers was a series of attacks on labour. These included the decision on 1 June 1921 to reduce wages on the railroads by 12.5 per cent on average, the decision on 11 August undermining union overtime rules, and the removal of union prohibitions on piecework on 8 October 1921. This was matched by hostile moves on the part of employers such as contracting-out shop work and lay-offs designed to undermine the collective strength of shop crafts. All of this culminated in a further Board-sanctioned wage cut on 6 June 1922, which was the immediate cause of the nationwide shopmen’s strike of 1922.³

Starting on 1 July 1922 and involving shopmen of every stripe from machinists to helpers and shop labourers, the strike had little effect on the Board’s bias in favour of employers. In another significant move that year, against a request from maintenance-of-way employees, the Board decided to establish wages on a “just and reasonable” basis rather than on the principle of a minimum wage. The suggested minimum wage for unskilled railroad workers of 40 cents per hour, the Board deemed, was based on an over-estimation of the average size of families in the United States, a miscalculation the Board believed, which would mean an increase in wages of 50.46 per cent that would effectively compel railroads to endure a staggering deficit of about $378,000,000.⁴ During the six years of the Board’s existence (16 April 1920 to 12 May 1926), wages for the lowest paid railroad workers fell by between 3.4 and 16.2 per cent below their earnings in 1920, though wages for more skilled categories increased on a range from 10 to 20 per cent.⁵

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³ Davis, 54-63.
⁵ Wolf, 392.
With a substantial drop in the cost of living, according to social scientist H.D. Wolf writing during the 1920s, the real wages of railroad workers overall, was said to have increased from 111 in 1920 to 118 per cent in 1924.\textsuperscript{6} This cannot be attributed to the activities of the Board, which (between 1923 and 1925) granted slight increases to “a relatively small number of employees”, but to the activities of white and black railroad workers themselves, notably the 1922 Shopmen’s strike.\textsuperscript{7} Since 1922, most wage disputes were settled by conferences between employers and organized labour without the matter being brought before the Board, which would eventually be replaced by a labour-sanctioned board of mediation under the Railway Labor Act of 1926.\textsuperscript{8} For railroad shopmen, the Board’s performance with respect to their wages was a fundamental failure measured against the fact that by the end of the Board’s tenure, workers in the metal industry outside of the railroads were still receiving significantly higher wages than railroad shopmen.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{Down in the Shops}

As the 1922 shopmen’s strike was a defining moment in relations between railroads and their employees, it is necessary to take a slight detour from this chapter’s main focus on the activities of railroad trainmen and reflect on the situation from the distinct angle of the railroad shops. In doing so, it is possible to make the fruitful observation that African American railroad workers, depending on their situation and the degree to which white railroad workers sought to impose strict organizational barriers against them, often pursued contrasting paths in the particular strategies they chose in engaging with their white counterparts. One can affirm, for

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{6} Wolf, 392.
\item\textsuperscript{7} Wolf, 391.
\item\textsuperscript{8} Davis, 391.
\item\textsuperscript{9} Wolf, 393.
\end{itemize}
instance, that African American railroad shopmen had a long history of standing up for their wages. Without independent organizations in the shops, they marched behind white shopmen whose craft organizations set the agenda either for negotiations or confrontation with employers. They participated in craft-led strikes, even if this meant that they were acting with less autonomy than African American trainmen exercised through independent organizations such as the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen. Contrary to the notion first mooted by Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell in their classic sociological study intimating that African American helpers in the Deep South who had joined the shopmen’s strike in 1922 (and on occasions before) did so largely in fear of white reprisal, there is evidence to suggest that a more developed sense of partisanship motivated many African Americans to join in the strike of white shopmen.10

Addressing the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions, for instance, General Chair of the Colored Association of Railroad Employees, S.A. Padget, told of the years he had worked as a machinist helper on the Louisville & Nashville and the resistance (during strikes) he had put up to overtures from management to act as a strike breaker on the principle never to take another man’s job “when he is trying to better his condition.” Padget, in his appeal for increased wages for African American trainmen, declared insistently that “if it comes down to it I would rather get out in the street than to be a scab.” “I will tell you right now,” he continued “if things keep on as they are, there is no doubt that some of us people are going to die in the poor house” rather than become involved in trying to displace their fellow trainmen.11 During the 1922

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shopmen’s strike, according to the strike’s historian Colin J. Davis, “In Algiers, Louisiana, where blacks made up the majority of the shopcrafts, all came out led by a ‘negro president of the Algiers Blacksmith Helpers Auxiliary,’ who was described as an organizer of merit and a forceful speaker.” 12

When they joined the nationwide strike of shopmen on 1 July 1922, shopmen on the Illinois Central and other lines in the Deep South such as the Mobile and Ohio Railroad were indeed so well organized locally that it is hardly surprising that white and African American shopmen came out together in a fairly sustained joint action against their employers. On 3 July, the Brother of Railway Carmen’s A.G. Osborne, General Chair of the Joint Protective Board on the Illinois Central, reported that among the twenty five locations reporting to the AFL’s Railway Employees’ Department (RED), “practically every point has established federated headquarters and are holding daily meetings as per instructions from the Department, appointing pickets and committees to look after and protect any possibility of men going into the shops without being advised that the men of the shop are on strike to protect their rights and future welfare.” 13 At Jackson, Tennessee, for instance, seven days into the strike, the RED reported that “general mass meetings are held each morning at nine o’clock.” Strike publicity and the morale of men were taken more seriously than had been the case in the shopmen’s strike of 1911. At Jackson, pickets were put on “duty day and night” while “the Executive Committee composed of three members of each craft meets each afternoon, in order, that all matters that arise may be taken care of without delay.”14

12 Davis, 69.
The local organization at Memphis, Tennessee, was especially impressive. A.G. Osborne, General Chairman of the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen of America on the Illinois Central, reported that the “picket lines are doing great work with the assistance of the public.” Like the Seaboard Airline shop workers in the southeast who used effective local strategies for gaining wider community support and the involvement of women, Osborne applauded Memphis shop workers for a mass meeting he attended which included “the wives and daughters of the strikers.”\textsuperscript{15} The organizing successes in Memphis and at Jackson, Tennessee, resonated further down line. Strikers at Water Valley, Mississippi who had initially struggled to gain sufficient support among their ranks were said to have held a public meeting in late July at the Court House, “filled with women and men from all classes, there being a representative crowd of business and public men in attendance.”\textsuperscript{16}

Though there was the usual watchfulness over strike-breakers, inside observers on the strike front rarely took the occasion to vent their opposition to the presence of African American strike-breakers in the Delta. In his rough tabulations of the strike reports from 39 points along the Illinois Central line, for instance, boilermaker J.C. Eubanks made it a business of repeatedly mentioning “only negroes working here” when referring to the strike situation at Paducah, Kentucky and Centralia, Illinois. He found it difficult, however, to uphold a similar impression of the strike in the Mississippi Delta, where he found no more than one or two African American strike-breakers worth mentioning.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] General Vice President, Brotherhood of Railway Carmen of America, 26 July 1922, RED, AFL-CIO Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25, Illinois Central Railroad, 27 June 1922 to 7 February 1949, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
\end{footnotes}
Race sensitivities during the strike seemed to vary among the crafts. Boilermaker J.C. Eubanks made nitpicking attempts to find “negro would be mechanics” or boilermakers to fuel the indignation of his readers against the prospect of African Americans standing in for skilled men. By contrast, A.G. Osborne, who reported on behalf of the carmen, simply recorded the specific craft out on strike and the percentage of men involved. He took particular care to observe in his tabulations that the “Colored” local of the Brotherhood Railway Carmen at New Orleans were 96 per cent out.18

Strike breaking on the Illinois Central and Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad was not confined to African Americans. Thus, the strike reporter on the situation at Jackson noted that two suspended engineers, Albert Merriwether and George Cundiff, were “working in the shops doing work that comes up, mostly scabbing on the negro firemen, boiler washers and flue blowers.”19 The few African American labourers who continued to work through the strike were dispassionately observed and recorded by Shop Federation reporters, but the sight of the same workers being put to work in more skilled positions as carmen or machinists could either raise the ire of white strikers or evoke overconfident aspersions on black workers’ skills. The few African American strike breakers were dismissed as “only good for the Bull pen”, whose work, it was often gleefully reported, only resulted in a rapid decline in railroad motive power. 20

Pullman District Superintendent in Memphis, W.H. Bucher, like other managers on the Illinois Central knew better about the skills of the African American men they employed during the strike. Bucher made every effort to give cover to three men he employed, fearing violence most especially because these were African American replacements who had acquired technical

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18 A. G. Osborne, 3, 10 July 1922, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25.
20 J. C. Eubanks, 3 August 1922, RED, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25.
skill sufficient to perform an invaluable service in “applying belts, assisting in renewing armatures” as well as in making various mechanical and electrical repairs on Pullman cars. In a resounding tribute to the skills of these men, Bucher informed Pullman general manager, L.S. Hungerford, that “we have not had a single light failure or any material mechanical defect” as a result of their work. The men were among others of their race employed at 54 cents an hour by various railroads in the region “for doing mechanical and electrical work.”

In his study of the strike, Colin Davis mentions that in addition to Railroad Labor Board sanctioned wage cuts and the “reduction of the hated piece work system” a “major source of friction facing the shop crafts during the early months of 1922 was the growing menace of the system of contracting out, which diluted the collective strength of the shop crafts.” According to the shop craft strike committee, at Jackson, Tennessee, contracting out could result in unregulated working conditions. However, an undeclared reason for shop crafts to take up subcontracting as a strike grievance was the need to prevent the railroads from deploying lower paid non-union men in contract shops to undercut the organized and more costly workers. With the call for an end to contracting out as a key demand on the Illinois Central and other railroads, it can only be assumed that the vast majority of African American workers in the Deep South who went out on strike on 1 July, did so in response to cuts in wages and overtime pay rather than concerns over contracting out and the threat to craft exclusiveness.

Beyond the shop crafts on the Illinois Central, neither railroad clerks nor railroad trainmen under the leadership of the big four railway brotherhoods came out on strike. A strike ballot taken among Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way and Shop Laborers’ voted in favour of the

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21 W. H. Bucher, District Superintendent, to Hungerford, L. S, Vice President and General Manager, Memphis, Tennessee, 14 July 1922, Pullman Company Records, Call no. 06/01/01, Box 7 File 122 G, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.  
22 Davis, 56-57.
strike. International president of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way and Shop Laborers, Grable, refused to sanction the ballot. The effect of this, chair of the strikers’ executive committee at Memphis E. Shelley wrote to the president of RED B.M. Jewel, was that members of this organization were infringing “on the rights of the Federated Shop craft, by doing the work that belongs to the various crafts, and are thus prolonging the strike on the railroads.”23 In this case, the full force of African American shop labourers and helpers that came out on strike at railroad points including Memphis and Jackson, Tennessee, Vicksburg, Jackson and Water Valley, Mississippi as well as Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where labourers were reported to have come out 92 per cent, best can be explained by the independent initiative of these workers. Some of them were organized into separate locals of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Shop Laborers and used their locals as an organized base for entering the strike without the blessing of the grand lodge of the Brotherhood.

Six of these workers at Tchula, Mississippi, petitioned Grand Lodge President Grable for financial support. They made the appeal on the grounds that such support was their right as contributing members to the Brotherhood. Signing off clearly with their names and the titles of their trades, which included blacksmith helper, mechanist helper, oiler, car repairer, fire knocker and stationary fireman, the petitioners were expressly defiant of the Brotherhood’s betrayal of the strike vote, protesting that: “We feel and know that we are now fighting for conditions that will affect every railroad worker.” Holding a firm line on the side of the strikers led by organizations with racial barriers that denied African American workers access to strike relief,

the petitioners assured president Grable that they would repay the Brotherhood for the financial relief by “getting the rest of the men to come along to pay up their dues.”

Faced with an insufficient supply of strike-breakers, Illinois Central management issued an ultimatum threatening the seniority rights of men on strike. The ultimatum, especially targeted against African American and other non-union men, was seen to be a “vicious attempt to break our solid front.” To counter this, A.G. Osborne, general chair of the Brotherhood Railway Carmen appealed to members to inform “non-members who are out with us” that “they will have the same protection of their seniority.” Osborne’s circulars to the striking men, given his familiarity with the fragility of the temporary bond between white and black men out on strike, appealed less to the idea of class solidarity and more to the idea of a common American citizenship as the means to “retain their co-operative sentiment.” Scabs, he wrote, unlike “decent responsible men” are “undesirable citizens to any community, state or country.” Despite the racially neutral language in which this appeal to a sense of common citizenship was addressed, the message was clearly directed at African American men on strike. To feel at “home in America”, Osborne said, was to reject “starvation under the peonage system.” He was proud, he stated in emphatic capitals, “of all who here rose up to shake off the shackles and demand the recognition of American sons which are entitled to live as free born Americans.”

The railroad executives were industrial despots Osborne declared, trying to drive men into peonage and slavery for generations to come. Nearly two months into the strike, with just a trickle of African American men strikebreaking at some points on the Illinois Central system,

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24 W.S. Meehan, Secretary, Illinois Central System Federation, 15 July 1922, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25; Petition from Lodge No. 2323 Tchula, Mississippi to Grand Lodge President Grable, 11 August 1922, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection 5478, Reels 21-25.
25 A. G. Osborne, 8, 9, 10 July and 25 August 1922, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25.
26 Osborne, 8, 9, 10 July and 25 August 1922.
27 Osborne, 10 July and 25 August 1922.
Osborne sent a message that was ostensibly directed at the heart of African American aspirations. Thus, he wrote: “Think it over brothers. Weigh up in your mind and thoughts what freedom and American democracy is worth to you and your loved ones. Ask yourself this question, “should I sacrifice my God-given American rights for freedom and turn traitor to myself, my loved ones and my country, or should I resent this challenge and protect my rights to an equal share of American democracy and freedom.” Osborne framed his words in a nativist language that addressed African American workers as if they were outsiders needing to prove that they were deserving of the freedoms of American citizenship. He nevertheless avoided using racially derisive terms such as “nigger scabs” that directly associated African American workers with strike-breaking.

Osborne’s cautious choice of words, appealing to African American workers’ social and political desires rather than openly invoking the stereotypical notion of their inclination to strikebreaking, is suggestive of the double consciousness among working class whites in the South that often led them to seek practical class solidarity with their African American co-workers although they still held onto the idea of white racial superiority. Osborne’s cautiousness is also an indication that African American shopmen participated in the strike as agents with autonomous goals, who could not simply be coerced into activity.

By late September, the strike on the Illinois Central was heading into crisis. Peter Nielsen, Chairman of the strike committee at McComb, Mississippi, wrote the Secretary Treasurer of the RED that all Illinois Central men at Jackson and Gwin, Mississippi, had returned to work and “scabbed on themselves.” Six days later he declared that the men at several points in the region

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28 Osborne, 8, 9, 10 July, 25 August 1922.
were “going back in droves and many more were going back on 1 October.” A.G. Osborne, though offering a more optimistic impression of the situation after a tour of “the large points on the south end,” put a positive spin on a bad situation claiming that “all the weak ones, or rather the ‘roosters’ have been sieved out of the ranks and those now on strike are real union men out to stay.” A week later, he made a more a realistic assessment of the situation. At northern points such as Centralia and Carbondale, Illinois, the strike was effectively broken with up to 75 per cent of the men back at work. Strikers at Memphis, Tennessee and Jackson, Mississippi, stood firm with up to 92 per cent out, while at places such as Water Valley and Durant, Mississippi, the strike was about over.

The strike lingered into October and November in a few larger centres. Jackson, Tennessee was said to be “about the best of these strike points south of the River.” In the end, as it appears from RED files on the Illinois Central side of the strike, the swift demoralization among the men had little to do with the effect of strikebreaking. The national leadership, faced with financial constraints on a national strike geared toward achieving a unified settlement for the federated shops, finally opted for separate agreements in September 1922. Countrywide, strikers inundated the RED with protests over what many saw as a betrayal. Strike leader Peter Nielson at McComb spelled out the momentous consequence of the agreement for strikers in the Delta. “We see no prospects of a settlement for the men now on strike on this road,” he wrote, “owing to the fact that we have only about 50 per cent or less of the men now out on strike. The morale of the men on this road was fine until the separate peace plan was inaugurated, since that time they have been slipping backward and if the strike is continued for any great length of time we will

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30 Peter Nielson to John Scott, 20, 26 September 1922, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25.
31 A. G. Osborne, 29 September, 5 October 1922, RED, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25.
33 Davis, 137-140.
lose our entire membership and the organizations on this road will be gone for many years to come.”

If the situation was bad at McComb, men were going back to work for 60 cents per hour at Bogalusa. This bleak turn in events notwithstanding, by 25 October, when there was little hope to be had for the strike on the Illinois Central system as whole, A.G. Osborne could still declare quite boldly that at New Orleans “the colored local of Carmen all who have responded to the strike call and enrolled 110 on the striker’s register of 1 July” are standing firm with 103 still out, “most of them having obtained employment at outside industries.” Machinist F. E. Whelan ended his briefing on the situation of the strike in Mississippi and Louisiana with an observation that was possibly distressing for him as a Southern white union man. “The Negro seems to have more decency,” he wrote, “or else he respects an obligation more than the whites, as the desertions are less from his side, comparatively speaking.”

In 1909, a member of United Mine Workers Union, J.D. Kennamer had made a similarly inflated tribute to the resilience of striking African American coal miners in Alabama, stating that, “There are no better strikers in the history of the United Mine Workers in any district than the colored men of Alabama.” Without a record from African American workers themselves as to why they may have drifted back to work so reluctantly, one might assume that many of these men meant to demonstrate their firm commitment to the strike in order to offset potential criticism from white strikers quick to dismiss them as scabs or as men undeserving of an equal

34 Peter Nielson, 4 October 1922, AFL-CIO, RED Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25, Illinois Central Railroad, 27 June 1922 to 7 February 1949, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
35 F.E. Whelan to J.W. Kline, 18 October 1922, RED, AFL-CIO Records, Collection No. 5478, Reels 21-25.
37 Whelan to Kline, J.W, 18 October 1922.
share of “American freedom and democracy.” It is certain, of course, that they sensed that they had a greater material stake in the success of the strike, as by the mid-1920s wages for helpers and shop labourers faired far worse than wages for more skilled categories of labour.

The active participation of African American workers in the 1922 shopmen’s strike suggests that a more fluid relationship existed between black and white workers in the shops than in the transport service. This was facilitated by the policy of AFL-affiliated craft unions to incorporate African American helpers as members of subordinate locals or federal labour unions under the jurisdiction of particular crafts. However, when they saw the need, African American trainmen did not hesitate to co-operate with the organizations of white trainmen. Thus, in one situation, in which African American trainmen demanded an increase from about $2.40 to $3.00 per day on the Illinois Central, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen received the co-operation of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen in placing their demand before the company. The company’s refusal to submit to the demand resulted in a six-hour strike among African American trainmen in the Illinois Central yard at Memphis, after which, the increase was granted.

Although the self-activity and independent organization of African American railroad trainmen during the 1920s is the main focus of this chapter, the discussion of the participation of African American shopmen in the 1922 strike and their firm stand behind the white dominated shop crafts unions, serves to emphasize the close but shifting relationship between the race and class aspirations that spurred the activities of African American railroad workers on railroads in

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40 Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees and Shop Laborers Proceedings, 36-37.
the Deep South. In contrast with the experience of African American workers in the railroad shops where AFL affiliates had an ambiguous approach to the question of race, the rigid racial barriers that African American trainmen had to endure under the big four white railroad brotherhoods compelled them to uphold an ongoing battle to defend their seniority rights against moves from white trainmen to undermine these rights. However, the need to maintain a defensive position against white workers’ encroachment on their employment in specific positions in the train service did not necessarily cause African American trainmen to compromise on their class demands against continual moves from railroad employers to impose a wage cut based on the racial wage differential that had had been left untouched before federal control.

The Violent Outrage on Trains in the Delta

The double-sided offensive -- from white workers pushing against African American workers’ opportunities for employment in the train service, and employers’ persistent drive to push their wages to levels predating federal control -- took a violent turn on the Illinois Central system in the Mississippi Delta and Louisiana in 1921. No evidence exists to suggest that Illinois Central management encouraged or participated in the violence. However, the company’s lackadaisical approach to ensuring the arrest of those behind the violence reveals a disturbing convergence between the interests of the railroad, as an employer bent on undermining African American labour organization and wage demands, and white workers’ quest to eliminate African American trainmen from posts in the train service such as brakemen and firemen that appeared most enticing to them in a year of post war recession.
When twenty-seven-year-old Illinois Central brakeman Horace Herod was shot and killed with buckshot at Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, on 3 March 1921, his ravaged body was sent home to his wife with a chilling note in his pocket: “Let this be a lesson to all nigger brakemen.”

Shortly before this killing, African American firemen at Water Valley, Grenada, and Aberdeen, Mississippi, had received similarly threatening messages in the railroad mail. “The letters were scattered around promiscuously,” recalled an Illinois Central employee in the early 1930s. One mailed to fireman John Woodard warned that “time has arrived when Negroes will not be used in transportation department. Do not make another trip as locomotive fireman.” “Zooloo, [Zulu],” the senders signed off, and closed with a deadly reminder of the constricted status African Americans were expected to endure in the South: “Choice – Mule or plow or coffin.”

In the aftermath of Horace Herod’s murder, another fifteen African American employees on the Illinois Central lines in the Mississippi Delta and Tennessee were either injured or killed in attacks that went on into the summer 1922. Violence and intimidation against African American trainmen had a long history. Witnesses to a report on violence against African American trainmen gave evidence to the effect that, south of Vicksburg, Mississippi, African American brakemen had been subjected to a campaign of intimidation since 1916. Those (mostly unidentified) who had murdered or injured African American brakemen were never arrested, although “several of the colored brakemen” deserted the railroad service in response to the

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42 Chicago Defender, 4 March 1922.
44 Chicago Defender, 6 August 1921.
violence. Although no arrests were made, this spell of violence shortly before the United States entered World War I was brought swiftly to an end by the intervention of Illinois Central officials in southern Mississippi who were concerned about the potentially disruptive effect of the violence on the movement of trains as the attackers had used various forms of sabotage such as placing fuses on the tracks, “setting the air at isolated points” to stop the trains “and seizing and shooting the men while at work about their trains in terminals during the night hours.”

In 1921, the white Southerners among the lower ranks of management on the Illinois Central system were prone to be involved in intimidating African American trainmen. Memphis resident William Glover was a prime target, given his activity as a leading African American trade unionist who claimed that he had “joined the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen in 1918 here in Memphis and after being a member for two months was elected chairman of grievances over the Mississippi Division, which I held until I left the employ of the Illinois Central in 1921.” Glover lost his job on the Illinois Central after a train master named Botterman called him into the office sometime in January 1921 and enquired whether he knew a certain railroad rule. In response to Glover’s answer in the affirmative, Botterman brashly announced that he was discharged. After speaking with his wife who advised him “better resign while alive,” Glover signed his resignation and sent his keys and railroad passes to Mississippi Division Superintendent A.D. Caulfield, who presciently informed him that while he regretted that he was leaving the service “it may be best for your future.”

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46 Caulfield, 5.
However, the assailants who shot and killed African American trainmen did not necessarily share the goals of Illinois Central managers who, since General Order No. 27, had their own interest in snuffing out any organized agitation from African American trainmen over pay, working conditions and equal treatment on the railroad. Perceiving railroad officials as a barrier to their campaign to remove African American workers, the “Zulus” (the fictive name by which unidentified white trainmen involved in the violence announced their menacing presence in the threatening letters they posted on railroad property) warned superintendent A.D. Caulfield in June 1921 against his all too active endeavours at “keeping colored men at work.” White antagonism against Illinois Central officials employing African American trainmen involved local community and business interests as much as the unemployed who jealously coveted African American trainmen’s positions on the railroads since black and white wage rates were officially equalized under Supplement 12 to General Order No. 27. According to Illinois Central Mississippi Division superintendent Caulfield, at the time of the violent attacks on African American trainmen in 1921, the owner of a restaurant in Ackerman, Mississippi, confronted a train master taking a meal there and told him that the restaurant did not serve “Illinois Central high officials” who were encouraging the working of Negroes on that railroad.” The restaurateur frankly assured the unfortunate train master that the supply of bullets in Mississippi had not been exhausted and might well be used against “Illinois Central high officials” that opposed “what was being done with Negroes in Mississippi.”

While the managers of the Illinois Central demonstrated their opposition to the shootings by placing posters on railroad telegraph and telephone poles, “offering a reward for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of any of these parties shooting colored

49 Caulfield, “Narrative Statement”, 8 June 1934, 5
50 Caulfield, “Narrative Statement”, 8 June 1934, 5.
employees,” it appears that there was widespread support for the perpetrators among white trainmen.\footnote{Caulfield, “Narrative Statement”, 8 June 1934, 5.} The would be killers of yet another African American brakeman near Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, in 1921, were obviously old railroad hands who knew how to apply the air brakes in order to catch the attention of the brakeman, take him aside and inform him that “he might live if he would not come out again.”\footnote{Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Acc, 5295, Box 8, Folder 9, Mistreatment of Coloured Employees, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.} According to a report in the Chicago Defender, an investigation at Clarksdale, Mississippi, had shown that in many cases there was sympathy for the murderers among entire crews.\footnote{Chicago Defender, 10 September 1921.} Locals accused superintendent Caulfield and train master W.A. Perry as either being lukewarm or too half-hearted in their efforts to bring the perpetrators to book.\footnote{Chicago Defender, 10 September 1921.} If Illinois Central officials indeed showed no vigour in their efforts to have the attackers arrested, there was a sinister aspect of convenience to their inaction. Some of the African American workers targeted for attack were active organizers among their fellow workers. This comes through clearly in a Ku Klux Klan letter addressed to Burton Blangs, West Point, Mississippi, which read:

This is to advise you that we will give you until the first of September to hunt you another job. We have organized for the purpose of removing the nigger from the railroad jobs, and we expect to do it if we have to get on your train at some water tank or another place and shoot you down like rabbits. We understand that you are the leader of the nigger firemen, so we want you to tell the rest of the nigger firemen and porters that we intend to kill everyone that goes out on a train after September 1 and we expect to kill you and Dee Allen and Porter Silas first.\footnote{Chicago Defender, 4 March 1922.}

Mississippi Division superintendent Caulfield, in his unpublished memorandum on the 1921 killing spree, provided an explanation for the violence meant to absolve the Illinois Central of responsibility for the attacks on African American trainmen that resurged in the early 1930s.
Caulfield explained that for more than forty years the company had employed African American trainmen as brakemen and firemen without trouble, these jobs being of a manual and “arduous nature” which most white men shunned in favour of less strenuous positions on the railroad. According to Caulfield, after General Order No. 27 proclaimed that effective from 1 June 1918 African American trainmen working in the same capacities as white trainmen would be paid at an equal rate, white trainmen began to agitate for the elimination of African Americans from the service.

The company did not yield to the pressure from white trainmen, Caulfield claimed. After meeting with Brotherhood of Trainmen Vice President, Val Fitzpatrick, who had demanded open access to the front end positions usually held by African American brakemen generally barred from taking posts on the rear of the train, Illinois Central assistant general manager, Z.A. Downs, issued instructions indicating the company’s commitment to a colour-blind policy which reaffirmed the spirit and intent of Supplement 12 to General Order No. 27. The six point instructions Downs sent to Fitzpatrick opened with a straightforward commitment to a policy that did not discriminate on the basis of colour. However, the directive permitting one seniority list “in which all men will be treated uniformly” plainly undermined the protection that the separate seniority lists of the past had given African American trainmen. Nevertheless, this by no means gave free reign to aggressive moves on the part of white trainmen against African American seniority rights. The instructions stated clearly that in the event of a business slowdown compelling cutbacks in employment, “the men involved [should] be displaced in order of their seniority regardless of color.”

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The Association of Colored Railway Employees, which would lead an ongoing fight during the 1920s to protect African American seniority rights, was nevertheless fully aware that white trainmen could interpret the notion of a colour-blind seniority list in a way that suited their own continued employment during an economic downturn at the disadvantage of the seniority status that African American trainmen had gained. However, the provision in the instructions requiring that “all men entering the service” in the positions of brakemen, flagmen, baggagemen and switchmen, “be required to pass uniform examinations” without respect to race, opened the possibility that African Americans could have prior claim to contested posts on the basis of their skill in addition to their seniority. This gave organized African American trainmen confidence that the experience and skills they had acquired over the years was good grounds for successfully petitioning the Railroad Labor Board or the courts in order to gain rulings interpreting similarly worded agreements on Deep South railroads, in a way that favoured their claims to seniority rules that were genuinely practiced in a manner that was fair.

In bringing attention to the colour-blind provisions in the instructions agreed upon between the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and Illinois Central management early in 1920, Caulfield was at pains in his memorandum to demonstrate that the company had always acted reasonably, making strenuous efforts to enforce compliance with the provisions of Supplement 12 in defiance of an intolerant Southern culture in which “the rank and file of the inhabitants have always been sympathetic in a measure toward the colored man but only to the extent that he occupy minor positions in the number of lines of endeavour.”58

However, if the company had publicized Caulfield’s assessment of the situation in 1921, it is unlikely to have convinced African Americans that the company could be completely absolved of negligence in the situation of violence occurring in 1921. The Chicago Defender

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had reported, for instance, that men who had carefully investigated the situation believed that “white train officials are conversant with the inner workings of the death gang” and it was known that the train master at Durant, Mississippi, possessed information about the gang behind the violence, secrets he did not share with the company office in Chicago.\(^{59}\) Sometime in 1922, the eighteen year old daughter of a brakeman, Alius Clark, murdered on 8 November 1921, made a claim for $35,000 against Illinois Central for the death of her father. Mississippi Division superintendent Caulfield had a private chat with the presiding judge T. L. Lamb in which he convinced him of the company’s efforts to “ferret out the shooting and killing of those colored train employees”, a consultation that resulted in the company receiving peremptory instructions and dismissal of the suit.\(^{60}\)

The ineffectiveness of Illinois Central management’s response to the violent attacks on African American trainmen during 1921 brings into sharp light the shifting scenarios in which the inter-relationship between race and class occurred on the railroads in the Deep South during the early 1920s. In particular, the violence did not necessarily prompt beleaguered African American trainmen to make a choice of either siding with hostile white trainmen or supposedly indifferent employers who “did not take lightly restrictions on the right to choose their employees” irrespective of Southern racial norms.\(^{61}\) In common with African American shopmen that walked out on the side of white shop men in 1922, trainmen on the Illinois Central system were dealing with an employer determined to eliminate the wage increases they were entitled to receive under a federal order. With the drive to cut costs in the train service married to a sustained racial wage differential, Illinois Central officials made no attempt to uncover the men

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\(^{59}\) *Chicago Defender*, 6 August 1921.

\(^{60}\) Caulfield, “Narrative Statement”, 4.

responsible for sponsoring the violence. Company officials turned a blind eye to white encroachments on African American workers’ seniority rights in order to weaken their capacity to make an organized response to the cut in wages.

**Working against Servility**

Caulfield’s claim that Illinois Central’s position on the violence in 1921 was at best impartial and mostly concerned with maintaining the status quo in which African American firemen and brakemen held “one half or 50 per cent” of all available posts, is belied by the fact that the workers targeted for attack were designated “firemen” and “brakemen” and not “train porters, who were never disturbed.”\(^6^2\) Although white assailants may have had little interest in taking over the especially servile position of train porters, the effect they had of practically eliminating African American firemen and trainmen from their posts in the Aberdeen District, Mississippi, was unlikely to have been too unnerving for Illinois Central officials whose immediate response to Supplement 12 had been to make moves to draw a firm distinction between the work brakemen and porters performed in order to evade paying “porters” at the brakemen’s rate officially sanctioned by the USRA.

The Vicksburg District of the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad went to the ridiculous extreme of requiring African American trainmen to wear caps inscribed with the word “porter” even when they were doing the work usually assigned to brakemen.\(^6^3\) African American trainmen in the Deep South did not necessarily object to the distinction that railroad officials

\(^{62}\) Arnesen, 2; Chicago Defender, 6 August 1921.

\(^{63}\) R.B. Cooper, former conductor, under cross examination, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, Transcript, Proceedings and Judgment in the Circuit Court, Warren County, Mississippi, beginning January 1930, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Supreme Court, Series 6, SC0000028855, Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. versus Charles E. Sideboard, 1930, B2-R81-S4 Box 16142.
made. There was a certain pride and indeed greater remuneration to be had from working as brakemen rather than as porters. The “porter,” narrowly defined, was solely expected to perform the most menial tasks on passenger trains on the orders of the conductor.

The porter could be called be upon to fetch a bucket of water, polish the conductor’s shoes, and in the segregated South he was often restricted to performing tasks such as assisting “colored passengers on and off the trains, seeing that they have tickets, keeping the coaches clean and any other duties the conductor might designate such as cleaning up the trains.”64 African American trainmen, said one railroad official in quite condescending words, liked “to do these little jobs” associated with tasks of brakemen as it “gives them a sense of importance.”65 Some who performed brakemen duties shunned the name “porter” which they believed was meant to “keep the travelling public thinking we are domestic porters” dependent on travellers for tips of a few nickels or dimes. Brakemen were a cut above Pullman porters, general chair of the Colored Association Railroad Employees, S.A. Padget said in a statement before the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions, because Pullman porters, unlike the train porters in the South, had no responsibility with respect to the operation and movement of the trains.66

Pullman porters, in comparison with the Southern brakemen, Padgett proudly declared, “don’t do any flagging or unloading express or any work of that character – all they get to do is brush off the seats and look after the passengers.”67 A Pullman porter, according to Padgett, “is not allowed outside of his car” as the African American trainman in South was called on to do.

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64 R.V. Walls, white flagman and brakeman and W.W. Cunningham, Train master, Baton Rouge and Hammond, under cross examination, Ibid., 246, 266.
65 Randolph Parker, Division Council Seaboard Airline Railroad to Director General of Railroads, USRA, 3 May 1920, RG14 US Railroad Administration Records of the Law Division, Atlanta, Georgia, Records of Regional Council, 1920-21, File 260, Box 4, NARA, Southern Region, Morrow, Georgia.
67 S. A. Padget before the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions, 15 July 1918, 3 June 1918-1 April 1920, Box 2, 7.
African American brakemen, on passenger trains had indeed their fair share of porter’s duties, and as long as the pay was good, they took on brakemen duties as well. This often included the satisfying benefit of performing work that allowed them room to exercise initiative and autonomy. Under cross examination in his suit against the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad in the Mississippi Supreme Court in 1930, former brakeman Charles E. Sideboard was defiantly firm in expressing the autonomy he had exercised in his work:

Question: You did all the work on that train, everything with reference to picking up cars and inspecting cars?
Answer: Yes sir, I did it all.
Question: The conductor did nothing, the fireman and engineer did nothing, you were the whole cheese?
Answer: Yes, sir, I was the whole cheese.\(^\text{68}\)

African American trainmen had to be swift in adapting from the role of porter to that of brakemen. In order to couple and uncouple the air hose, a rubber connection between the engine and cars that conveyed air to set the brakes, the African American trainman had to slip out of his neat porter’s uniform, put on overalls and a jumper and go underneath the train.\(^\text{69}\) With respect to his front end flagging and switching duties, the brakeman had to exercise quick and careful judgment in assisting with regulating the movement of the train. His work was indispensable to the safety of railroad traffic. African American trade unionist, S.A. Padget gave a clear account of the foresight and initiative the brakeman was required to exercise:

You take for instance where there is a double track and we have to cross from one track to another and when something occurs, then I have to go out and do the flagging to protect everything on that line, or, if we break down between stations, the porter has to go ahead of the train and flag all trains, and if we are not making the proper schedule the

\(^{68}\) Charles Sideboard under cross examination, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, 198.
\(^{69}\) Statement of Sherman Sanders, Train Porter on the Atlantic Coastline Railroad, Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions in re: Colored Association of Railway Employees, 21 August 1918, 5: R.B Cooper, former conductor under cross examination, Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, 216.
instructions are that the engineer should stop and let the porter off, so that he may flag ahead, and the train has to keep a certain distance behind the flagman.\textsuperscript{70}

The brakeman had to learn and was tested on whistle signals and flagging rules in order to be in a position to accurately judge the distance before “calling in the flag.”\textsuperscript{71} He had to be alert and ready to step off and go ahead of his train, before meeting and passing the same class of train going in the opposite direction, in order to open a switch for his train to move into a siding.\textsuperscript{72}

Railroads operating in the Deep South could not easily dispense with the skill and training of African American trainmen. Railroad officials in the South made vigorous attempts to avoid implementing Supplement 12 and the wage increases sanctioned thereby. Representatives of organized African American trainmen, T. A. Keith, W.A. Bannaker and William C. Turner informed USRA director of labour, W. S. Carter that there was an apparent understanding among the federal managers of all the Southern railroads that Supplement 12 to General Order No. 27 would not be observed.\textsuperscript{73} However, if there was a deliberate move on the part of the railroads to ignore Supplement 12, it did not succeed on all railroads to the same degree. African American trainman, T. A. Keith, informed director of labour Carter that he believed that the Illinois Central and the St. Louis-South-western Railroad had implemented Supplement 12 in contrast with the Southern Railway Company, which would not pay African American brakemen wages that were outstanding for the year 1 June 1918 to 9 June 1919.\textsuperscript{74} However, the Southern was not in a position to impose a uniform policy on the pay and status of its African American trainmen. The

\textsuperscript{70} S.A. Padget before the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions, 15 July 1918.
\textsuperscript{71} Statement of Sherman Sanders, Train Porter on the Atlantic Coastline Railroad, Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions, 21 August 1918, 3.
\textsuperscript{72} R.B. Cooper, former conductor, under cross examination, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, 217
\textsuperscript{73} W.S. Carter for the Director General, USRA, 21 June 1919, RG 14 Records of the USRA Division of Labor, Subject Classification: General file of the Director of Labor, E-38-11-D1 to E-38-11-A-10, Box 68, Entry 83, NARA, College Park, Washington.
\textsuperscript{74} T. A. Keith to Walker D. Hines, Director General of Railroads, 16 June 1919, RG 14 Records of the USRA Division of Labor, 2.
company’s reluctance to implement Supplement 12 was attached specifically to the wages of African American passenger brakemen rather than the wages of African American firemen and freight brakemen, who received a rate of pay on par with white firemen and brakemen.\footnote{Keith to Hines, 5.}

The Southern Railway Company’s failure to impose restrictions on wage increases for its entire body of African American trainmen reflects on the wider situation in which these trainmen did not passively accept the continuing attempts by railroad officials to deny them the wage increments they were expecting to receive on the authority of General Order No. 27.

Historian Eric Arnesen’s argument that “by the early 1920s, the larger political, social, and economic environment had turned increasingly inhospitable to black demands, shifting the balance of power toward employers and white labor,” does not fully capture the resistance put up by African American railroad workers as a determined and sometimes successful challenge.\footnote{Arnesen, 83.}

It is indeed a misjudgement to argue that African American workers had no “extensive network of labor solidarity to bolster their claims.”\footnote{Arnesen, 73.} To argue such is to ignore the fact that even in the restrictive Delta, African American railroad workers operated in a wider environment of social and political resistance to Jim Crow.\footnote{Paul Ortiz, Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920 (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2005), 142-228; also Peter Rachleff, Black Labour in Richmond, 1865-1890 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).} African Americans in coastal Louisiana, rural Georgia, Mississippi, and parts of the Arkansas Delta, for instance, enthusiastically embraced the militant nationalism of Marcus Garvey. Historian Mary G. Rolinson has shown, in her impressive study of the widespread influence and organizational spread of Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association in the rural South, that the growth of this movement in the early 1920s was facilitated by such factors as separate locals of labourers in the International
Longshoremen’s Association in cities such as New Orleans, by sympathetic African American
church leaders and by networks of kinship and friendship linking locals in the Deep South to
each other and to migrants in cities of the North such as Chicago, Detroit, New York and
Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{79}

More pointedly, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen did not operate in
isolation. During their agitation against the January 1920 agreement between the Brotherhood of
Railway Trainmen and the Illinois Central, leaders of the Association appealed to wider
community and political support. They had backing from local African American figureheads
such as the successful banker, Robert R. Church at Memphis, who through his contact with the
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), secured the trainmen a
meeting with USRA officials in Washington to protest the discriminatory impact they believed
the 1920 agreement would have on their employment on the railroads.\textsuperscript{80}

In the face of reluctance on the part of C.S. Lake, assistant director, Division of
Operations in the USRA, to push for abrogation of the agreement, the Association momentarily
set aside their grievance against the agreement and pushed instead for wage increases that in the
instance of trainmen on the Southern Railway system involved an increase totalling $12,525 in
monthly wages and an overall increase of $125,000 in back pay owed to the trainmen.\textsuperscript{81} Some
members of the trainmen’s Association were also members of the NAACP, and in situations
where leaders of the NAACP could not intervene, they played the role of conduits for contact

\textsuperscript{79} Mary G. Rolinson, Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South,
\textsuperscript{80} Robert R. Church to James W. Johnson, 17 January 1919; Walter F White to Archibald Grimke, Archibald, 3
January 1920; Walter White, Memorandum Re. Railroad Trainmen’s case, 4 & 5 January 1920, in the Papers of the
NAACP, Reel 22, Part 10: Peonage, Labor and the New Deal, 1913-1939, University Publications of America,
Bethesda, Maryland.
\textsuperscript{81} NAACP Press Release, 10 April 1920, Papers of The NAACP, Reel 22: Part 22.
between leaders of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen and unorganized trainmen seeking redress for their grievances.82

Labour solidarity among African American trainmen is evident in the large number of claims for back pay, including law suits, which railroads across the Deep South had to contend with in the early 1920s. The Southern Railway Company, for instance, faced about 25 suits with claims amounting to about $35,685 in the summer of 1920. Rather than put up an antagonistic fight, the Southern settled for an out-of-court compromise of 25 per cent of the total amount the trainmen claimed.83 Likewise, in a suit against the Seaboard Airline Railroad, legal counsel for the defence pressed on the company to provide a slight concession (41 per cent of the increase provided for in General Order No. 27) rather than continue to fight it out in court where there was a good chance that the verdict would award claimants the full payment they were entitled to under General Order 27.84

Some workers persisted in pursuing their claims for the full amount against the equally firm resolve of railroad companies to resist to the end all claims of this kind from African American train porters.85 Despite setbacks such as a jury ruling in favour of the Seaboard Airline Railway Company in a case led by the Train Porters’ Association on behalf trainman O.E. Crump of Richmond, Virginia, railroad officials were continually confronted with claims, which some believed had no merit but which “spread over the country like a prairie fire.”86 A case that

82 Walter White to E. S. Campbell, 11 January 1921; Walter White to F.G. Antione, 12 January 1921; White to Clarence Banks, 8 March 1921, Papers of the NAACP, Reel 22: Part 22.
84 Randolph Parker to Victor L. Smith, Regional Counsel USRA, Atlanta Georgia, 10 July 1920, RG 14 USRA, Records of the Law Division, Atlanta, GA.
85 Alexander W. Smith to Director General of Railroads, USRA, 30 March 1921, RG 14 USRA, Records of the Law Division, Atlanta, GA.
86 James F. Wright, General Counsel to Alex W Smith, Special Counsel, 25 March 1921, RG 14 USRA, Records of the Law Division, Atlanta, GA, Regional Counsel to Edmond Colston, 2 April 1921, RG 14 USRA, Records of the Law Division, Atlanta, GA.
is especially revealing of the confident persistence among African American trainmen was that led by Thomas E. Dudley, chair of the Wage Committee of the AFL-affiliated Train Porters’ Union (locals 17454, 17483 and 17492) against the Southern Railway Company. The Southern Railway, in dispute against the Train Porters’ Union’s claims for compensation in terms of Supplement 12 took the hard line position that porters were no more than “helpers”, with none of the initiative required of brakemen or flagmen with respect to the operation of the train.

In so far as these porters performed work designated as brakemen’s duties, Southern Railway officials held, they never did so without the authority and close supervision of the conductor. According to vice president of the Southern Railway System, H.W. Miller, the porter’s primary duties on the Southern Railway System involved no more than custodial duties such as “calling stations, opening and closing the doors of toilets and coaches, cleaning and dusting the aisles and seats of coaches at certain designated points … issuing drinking cups to passengers, helping passengers on and off and assisting with grips.”87 They were to keep aisles clear of baggage and be concerned particularly with looking after African American passengers and assist in the handling of baggage.88

African American trainmen on the Southern Railway took up the challenge against such demeaning categorization of their work as soon as Supplement 12 had been issued in December 1918. The New Year had barely turned around before these trainmen “perfected their organization and presented claims for pay under the wage awards of the Railroad Administration.”89 Management’s immediate response was to issue a bulletin with the false

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87 H.W. Miller, Vice President Southern Railway System to C.P. Carrithers, Secretary, United States Railroad Labor Board, 4 October 1921, RG 13 Records of the National Mediation Board, Case Files 1920-20, Docket 835, Entry 56, Box 433, 1, NARA, College Park, Washington.
88 Miller to Carrithers, 4 October 1921.
89 Contentions of Employees, Train Porters, Southern Railway, 14 March 1921, RG 13 Records of the National Mediation Board, Case Files 1920-20.
assertion that porters were not required to “throw switches, couple or uncouple cars and various other things that had always been required.”90 The Southern was compelled however, to make a compromise under a decision of the Railroad Labor Board increasing train porters’ wages by $20.40 a month in addition to the standard $85 a month for porters prior to Supplement 12.91

The increase of $20.40 was not granted without the effort of African American trainmen, a point emphasized by trade unionist Thomas E. Dudley in a sharp letter to Railroad Labor Board secretary, C.P. Carrithers, directing his attention to the fact that it was “only through organization that we received the $20.40 increase in wages.”92 The Train Porters’ Union was initially a Washington-based local federal labour union, chartered under the AFL. The union’s campaign to gain for its members recognition as brakemen and for them to be paid accordingly, put the union in a position in which it could confidently claim to “represent a majority” on the extensive Southern Railway System, which branched out from Washington, D.C and crisscrossed the South, from various points on the Atlantic coast and moved westward along a straight line through Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; West Point and Greenwood, Mississippi, down through Meridian, Mississippi, and New Orleans, Louisiana and back up toward Memphis and other points in Tennessee.93

After granting the $20.40 increase the Board ignored subsequent petitions from Thomas E. Dudley on the Train Porters’ Union’s demands for a further correction in the amount to bring porters’ wages on a level with white flagmen and brakemen who had been awarded an additional $30 in terms of Supplement 12. Dudley and eighteen members of the Train Porters’ Union took the case up in a Washington, D.C court in a major challenge that would include litigation against

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90 Miller to Carrithers, 4 October 1921.
91 Miller to Carrithers, 4 October 1921.
92 Thomas E. Dudley, Chair Wage Committee to C.P Carrithers, 2 December 1920, RG 13 Records of the National Mediation Board, Case Files 1920-20.
93 Miller to Carrithers, C.P, 4 October 1921.
the Southern Railway as well as railroads such as the Atlantic Coastline and Seaboard Airline. In a court ruling in April 1923, the porters were granted the full back pay due to them in terms of Supplement 12. This amounted to about $30,600, with each of the eighteen trainmen involved receiving $1,700 of the total. Trainmen who had not kept pace with Dudley’s persistence had settled separately for compromise deals in which they were deprived of three fourths of the amount they would have received had they pressed on with the case.94

Such challenges from African American trainmen demanding increased wages are significant, given an environment in the twenties generally hostile to railroad workers’ demands for wage increases. In addition, the sometimes violent encroachment of white over black trainmen’s seniority rights, caused some African American trade unionists to take a defensive position focused on protecting African American trainmen’s right to hold onto their jobs rather than take the offensive position of resisting wage cuts introduced by the Railroad Labor Board or to challenge employers for defaulting on increases African American trainmen were entitled to under Supplement 12 of General Order No. 27.95 However, the large number of legal suits brought against the Southern and other Railroads suggests that most trainmen were not prepared to settle for a line of least resistance and would persist in demand for a fair wage.

The Persistent Presence of African American Trainmen

Historian Eric Arnesen has suggested that “railway employment in general unquestionably fell sharply from the early 1920s to the late 1930s, black railroaders, particularly those in the operating trades, bore a disproportionate brunt of the reduction in employment. In 1917, roughly half of the locomotive firemen in the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad

94 Chicago Defender, 14 April 1923.
95 Chicago Defender, 4 June 1921.
terminal were black; by 1943, they constituted only 30 per cent.”96 Two decades later, evidence read before the Fair Employment Practices Committee suggested there had been a persistent encroachment by white trainmen on positions black trainmen held relatively undisturbed before World War I. According to the same source, “Illinois Central has hired no Negro brakemen since 1920, no Negro switchmen since 1923 and no Negro firemen since the late twenties.” 97 Although reflecting the reality of a long term decline in African American employment as trainmen on railroads in the Deep South, this comment overstated the case. An Illinois Central seniority roster from the early 1930s shows numerous African American trainmen, in the Memphis Division, the Greenville Seniority District, and in Shreveport, Louisiana, whose seniority started on various dates in the twenties ranging from 1922 to 1929.98

Although there was undoubtedly a significant and steady decline in the employment of African American trainmen on the railroads in the Deep South, from about 30 per cent to 15 per cent of all trainmen employed in the South between 1910 and 1940, it is important to note that the organized and persistent efforts of African American trainmen to hold onto their positions helped them retain a strong and visible presence despite the ongoing decline on Southern railroads during the 1920s. Records from the Illinois Central and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad show that between 1920 and 1929, there was a loss of 41 trainmen positions held by African Americans, down from 180 to 139 (a 23 per cent drop) in the wide region covering the Memphis Division, Greenville, Vicksburg and New Orleans Divisions of that railroad.99 In the South as a whole positions held by African American trainmen declined by 26 per cent over the

96 Arnesen, 118.
97 Memorandum from Leslie Perry to Maceo W. Hubbard, 28 July 1945, Selected Documents of the Committee on Fair Practices, Microfilm, Reel 10, Accession N. 5662, Kheel Centre, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 2.
98 Seniority Tables contained in Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, “Discrimination – Negro Brakemen”, Box 8, Folder 6, Accession No. 5295, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
1920s (from 5,083 to 3,745), compared with the 1930s in which the decline was by almost 45 per cent. These numbers are likely to be exaggerations of the situation African American trainmen faced, however, as the declining numbers may merely reflect the tendency among railroad employers to reclassify positions in which African American trainmen worked. Thus, since porters were not categorized as trainmen, a change in the designation of a brakeman to that of porter would, in effect, conceal the fact that the porter was really continuing to work as a brakeman.

Before 1920, African American switchmen at the Memphis Terminal, though restricted to working on the front end of the switching engine, held a range of positions such as head brakemen and liners (i.e. teams of men posted at intervals in the switching yard ahead of an engine). After an agreement between the Illinois Central and the white Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen on 18 November 1920, African Americans were guaranteed seniority rights on the head end of the switch engine. In terms of the agreement however, white yard men whose seniority rights were usually confined to positions on the rear end alone, were allowed to take over positions on the head end of the engine as well, which gave them increased leverage to eliminate African Americans from employment in the yards at the Memphis Terminal.

According to a memorandum from R.M. Barton, legal counsel for the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, addressed to the Railroad Labor Board in February 1925, and concerning case docket 4092 (Association of Colored Railway Trainmen versus Illinois Central Railroad Company), at the Memphis Terminal in the summer of 1919, “no switch engine operated that did not have at least one colored helper” while in the early summer of 1924 there

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100 Memorandum from Leslie Perry to Maceo W. Hubbard, 28 July 1945, Selected Documents of the Committee on Fair Practices, Reel 10, 2, 5662, ILR Kheel Center.
were 21 switch engines that had no African American workers on the team altogether.\textsuperscript{101} It is significant to observe, however, that when the Association took up its case in the Railroad Labor Board over infringements on the seniority rights of African American switchmen at the Memphis terminal, the Association did not direct its arguments against the 1920 agreement between the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and the railroad company. Although that agreement eliminated the separate seniority lists that had previously given protection to positions in which African American yard men predominated, it was nevertheless written in language that sanctioned the idea (established under General Order 27) that black and white trainmen had to be treated as equals in terms of their rights. On this, the second article of the agreement had been explicit: “Rights contained in this agreement shall be understood to apply for both white and colored employees alike, and this plainly and necessarily involves only one seniority list in which all men will be treated uniformly regardless of race or color.”\textsuperscript{102}

This article of the agreement was clearly intended to establish a single seniority list in order to eliminate any protection that African American trainmen gained from a separate list. However, in setting out that “all men will be treated uniformly regardless of race or color”, the agreement was open to an interpretation that could favour the interests of African American trainmen over their white competitors for railroad jobs. From the perspective of African American trainmen, regardless of the actual practice, the agreement could very well be understood in the colour-blind and equitable spirit of Supplement 12 to General Order 27.

\textsuperscript{101} R.M. Barton, Attorney and Counsel for petitioners, Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, to M.L. Parker, Secretary, United States Railroad Labor Board re. Association of Colored Railway Trainmen versus Illinois Central and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, Docket 4092, RG13 Records of the National Mediation Board, Docket Case Files, 1920-26, Entry 56, Box 1027.

\textsuperscript{102} Decision No. 3534, Association of Colored Railway Trainmen versus Illinois Central Railroad Company and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, Docket 4092, RG 13, Records of the National Mediation Board, Docket Case Files.
For the Association of Colored Railway Employees, when it first challenged the 1920 agreement between Illinois Central and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, the bias was clear: white trainmen were being allowed a free hand to oust African Americans from their positions by a racially integrated seniority list that was fair only on paper. In principle, the second article of the 1920 agreement, enforcing a single seniority list, entitled an African American trainman, who had seniority over a white employee “to claim the position held by the white man” in the event that the railroad decided to reduce the labour force on its trains. As African American trainmen were forbidden in terms of the rule to hold positions such as conductors, baggagemen or flagmen, the effect was that white men holding senior positions such as conductors or baggagemen could displace junior African American trainmen on the front end of the train, while junior white men, flagging on the rear end, would be left untouched. In theory, an African American trainman so affected could call on his seniority to encroach on the man at the rear end, although he knew “full well” that he could not “invoke the rule on his behalf against the white man” for fear of a violent riposte.

The Association of Colored Railway Employees had brought suit against the rule before the Railroad Labor Board in 1920 on the ground that it was in “direct conflict with Supplement 12 to General Order 27” and that its effect would be “of irreparable injury to the colored man because conditions where colored men are employed will not admit of the enforcement of any such rule and it will enable the white man to take advantage of the colored man under the guise of the law.” Over the months between February 1920 and November

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1921 when the Board finally made a decision on the case, the Association produced 42 instances from Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky in which white trainmen violated the seniority rights of African American trainmen and switchmen. On top of this, there had been an insurgent move on the part of white railroad workers, which included the spontaneous race strike of white switchmen in January 1921 against the employment of African American switchmen at the Memphis Terminal and the wave of violent attacks, starting in March 1921, targeting African American brakemen. Despite the evident racial tension and violence, as well as the carefully prepared documentation of encroachments on the seniority rights of African American trainmen put forward by the Association of Colored Railway Employees, the Board ruled against the Association’s petition calling for abrogation of the agreement between Illinois Central and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen.

The Board dismissed the Association’s case, although acknowledging that the agreement was a violation of the intent of Supplement 12, as in some instances, the Board’s decision read, “senior white flagmen have, in accordance with the provisions of the schedule bid in positions as head brakemen for the purpose of displacing colored head brakemen with less service age, leaving vacant positions of flagmen, for which position colored men are not eligible, which is then bid in by junior white men.” There is no evidence of any immediate Association response to the Board decision, although the Board’s ambiguous wording of the dismissal was likely to have given Association representatives occasion to reflect on improving their strategies for approaching the Board.

The vigorous challenge posed by an organization of African American trainmen against a racially discriminatory agreement was not in vain. Despite the backdrop of violence against which that challenge occurred and the adverse Railroad Labor Board decision they received at United States Railroad Labor Board, 4 November 1921, Decision 307, Docket Case Files, 1920-26, Docket 138.
the end of a turbulent year, African American trainmen on the Illinois Central and Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad did not experience a clean sweep of the positions which they held above that of porter. Moreover, for the Association of Colored Railway Employees, there was a pertinent lesson to be learned about the language in which it posed claims of unfair labour practices before the Railroad Labor Board or the courts. Thus, the successful suit it brought before the Board in 1924-25, rather than call for abrogation of the 1920 agreement, claimed that the Illinois Central in cahoots with Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen had, in fact, violated the letter of the 1920 agreement in a way that prejudiced the seniority rights of African American switchmen at the Memphis Terminal yards.

The opening to this chapter suggested that the Railroad Labor Board tended to favour the interests of employers over labour. However, this should be taken as valid only in a general sense, for despite the Board’s poor record on improvements in railroad wages and working conditions, the use of the board for African American trainmen lay in the fact that the Board was a continuation of the legacy of federal control in which African American railroad workers were allowed to organize independently of the white-dominated brotherhoods and to have independent representation in hearings of state-established bodies such as the Board of Railroad Wages and Working Conditions.107 A decision of the Railroad Labor Board made an explicit overture to African American railroad workers’ right to independent representation on board hearings, in these words: “No discrimination shall be practiced by management as between members and

non-members of organizations, nor shall members of organizations discriminate against non-
members or use other than lawful persuasion to secure their membership.”\textsuperscript{108}

In the wake of the 1922 shopmen’s strike, caused directly by a Railroad Labor Board
decision to cut wages in the railroad shops, AFL shop craft unions and the big four brotherhoods
agitated for an end to the Board and its replacement with legislated adjustment boards that would
settle disputes on the basis of voluntary arbitration rather than impose decisions in a unilateral
fashion as the Board had done in the case of the railroad shopmen. The case for scrapping the
Board (set out in the so-called Howel-Barkley Bill first publicized in February 1924) was
strengthened by the fact that the Board had become effectively impotent in the wake of the 1922
strike. The big four railroad brotherhoods, for instance, led successful wage drives on behalf
firemen and engineers in the West that had simply by-passed the Board.\textsuperscript{109}

Despite the promise of the proposed legislation to improve the bargaining position of
labour on a national level, African American trainmen under the leadership of Association of
Colored Railway Employees and the Chicago-based Railway Men’s Industrial Benevolent
Association opposed the move to abolish the Railroad Labor Board. As Kentucky-based
representative of the Association Thomas Redd informed Walter White of the National
Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the proposed law meant to gain
representation on adjustment boards for standard railroad labour organizations to the exclusion of
the public and representatives of independent organizations such as the Association.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{108} L.W. Fairchild, J.H. Eiland and Arthur Hill, “Protest Against the Adoption of Howel-Barkley Bill, S. 2646, 68\textsuperscript{th}
Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 28 February 1924 in the Senate of the United States, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10: Peonage,
Labor and the New Deal, 1913-1939, University Publications of America, Bethesda, Maryland, Reel 4.
\textsuperscript{109} Elwin Wilbur Sigmund, “Federal Laws Concerning Railroad Labor Disputes: A Legislative and Legal History,
1877-1934”, PhD, History, University of Illinois, 1961, 175.
\textsuperscript{110} Thomas D. Redd to Walter White, 8 September 1924, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 4.
African American trainmen posed a well organized opposition to the Howel-Barkley Bill. The Association of Colored Railway Employees, the Association of Train Porters, Brakemen and Switchmen and the Protective Order of Railroad Trainmen submitted a joint petition to a senate subcommittee on interstate commerce opposing the elimination of the Board in order to protect the right “to maintain undisturbed membership in their organizations composed of colored train service employees”, who “should not be prohibited from functioning as recognized organisations in the future representation of their members.”

The trainmen’s quest to defend the weak Railroad Labor Board was not an idle one. Whatever token representation they had gained on the Board had been the result of their independent political efforts including successful lobbying by the Railway Men’s Industrial Benevolent Association, with the support of Republican Congressman, Martin Madden, for an amendment to the Transportation Act of 1920 giving African American organizations equal representation on the Board. Although African American railroad labour organizations have been criticized for their dependence on the moribund Board rather than grassroots mobilization, the concerted effort organizations such as the Association of Colored Railway Employees put into their petitions before the Board (as well as the courts) with respect to wages and attempts to undermine their seniority rights, shows their determination and tactical creativity rather than weakness.

Association of Colored Railway Employees’ President J.H. Eiland’s concern in May 1921 that his “appeals to the Labor Board created more hostility towards us from the men of the other race”, was not the utterance of a paranoid as the shootings that occurred on railroads in the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the Deep South in 1921 attest. African American attempts to save the Railroad Labor Board did not succeed in stopping the Howel-Barkley Bill becoming law.

111 Fairchild, Eiland and Hill, 28 February 1924.
in the form of the Railroad Labor Act of 1926. However, their protest did help in preventing the Act from becoming a means to stifle their right to bargain collectively, since it made no specific provision upholding the “majority of a craft or class of workers” as the sole bargaining agent for all workers holding particular positions of labour on the railroads.112

According to the petition Association president J.H. Eiland read before the Railroad Labor Board on 18 June 1924, it appears that soon after the conference in which the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and company officials met to ratify their 1920 agreement, these officials conceded to representatives of the Association that the 1920 agreement was not “being properly enforced” with respect to the seniority rights of African American switchmen.113 Company officials admitted, but would not state in writing that discriminatory practices at the Memphis Terminal was the result of an unwritten “gentlemen’s agreement” between white supervisors and white yardmen.114

This arrangement benefited white workers at the yard as they were given freedom to displace African American yardmen from positions they held at the head end as well barring them from positions on the rear end, customarily held by white yard men. For company officials, the advantage of such an unwritten practice was that it absolved them of the burden of paying African American trainmen the same as white trainmen as had been required of them under Supplement 12. They had been compelled under Supplement 12 to classify all workers according to the actual duties they performed, rather than persist with a practice they had previously used, of employing African American workers in positions both on the front and rear

112 Northrup, 251.
end of switching engines without properly classifying them in accord with the positions they held and thereby paying them less.\textsuperscript{115}

In the final analysis, if white yard men at the Memphis Terminal could gain from a “gentlemen’s agreement” which involved a practical interpretation of the second article of the agreement of 18 November 1920 granting them primary rights over positions on both the rear and head end of a switch engine, likewise African American switchmen could make similarly unwritten arrangements interpreting the second article as an equitable rule in their favour. Indeed, despite the situation they faced at the Memphis Terminal, the representatives of African American switchmen, in their Labor Board hearing, indicated repeatedly that the situation at the Memphis Terminal was unusual within the wider Memphis District. Association President J.H. Eiland frankly declared “that in all other yards in Memphis using white and colored switchmen, this discriminatory practice does not exist. Everyone is given just what his seniority calls for, regardless of color.”\textsuperscript{116} Memphis yards were not an isolated island of equality, Eiland suggested, as “there are some points upon the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad where this discrimination does not exist, namely, Greenwood, Parkside and Cleveland, Mississippi, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In these yards colored switchmen are allowed to do work behind [i.e. the rear end]”\textsuperscript{117}

Within a context sometimes involving a convergence between the interests of railroad employers and white trainmen geared at further limiting African American trainmen’s prospects on the railroads, the fact that there were numerous yards belonging to the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad where African American switchmen could hold their own with respect to their seniority, is suggestive of the resilience (rather than weakness) of their organization and the

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\textsuperscript{115} R.M. Barton to M.L. Parker, 16 February 1925, Docket 4092, Docket Case Files, 1920-26, 2.
\textsuperscript{116} Barton to Parker, 16 February 1925, 24.
\textsuperscript{117} Barton to Parker, 16 February 1925, 24.
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vigour of the cases they took before the Railroad Labor Board and the courts. The potency of organization among African American trainmen would shine through decisively, once again, in securing victory for trainman Charles E. Sideboard in his case against Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad in the Mississippi Supreme Court in early 1930.

Ostensibly, the case was concerned with overturning an effective wage cut imposed in March 1925 on African American brakemen working for the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad. This wage cut reduced their wages from a substantial $188 (on a 31 day month), which brakemen and flagmen were entitled to under General Order 27, down to somewhere between $85 and $90 a month, which was the rate fixed for porters. By expressing an elevated idea of the work African American trainmen performed, Sideboard was going beyond the simple brief of arguing against the wage cut toward challenging Southern notions of African American inferiority and inborn incapacity to perform any role requiring foresight and judgment.

The case is discussed in some detail below because of the light it sheds on the courage African American trainmen could often show in organizing and vocalizing their rejection of a white supremacist culture that meant to suppress their aspirations to work in positions involving, not only increased pay but also greater meaning and a sense of self-fulfilment.

**Sideboard versus Y&MV**

Lawyers for the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, Hirsh, Dent and Landau of Vicksburg, Mississippi, attempted to demolish Sideboard’s claim for the compensation he alleged the company owed to him, by putting (as they believed) a clear light on the ambiguities

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118 Brief of T. G. Ewing, W. W Ramsey, Thames and Thames and Brunini and Hirsch for Appellee, 15 October 1930, Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. V. Charles E. Sideboard, 1930, Court Cases - Supreme Court, Series 6, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
involved in determining whether Sideboard had served the railroad as a brakeman rather than as a porter on a line that ran between Vicksburg and New Orleans. With an eye to persuading a jury of white citizens of Warren County, Mississippi, Hirsh, Dent and Landau, opened their assault on Sideboard’s case with a precise notion of the way in which passenger trains were supposedly operated. Citing the State of Mississippi full crew law, they stated that “the head of the train is under the protection of the engineer, a white man; the rear of the train is under the protection of the flagman, a white man, and the whole train is under the protection of a conductor, a white man.”

Hirsh, Dent and Landau tried to drive home the point that this racial order of management and responsibility on the passenger trains was almost a natural law implicit in the very mechanics of railroad motion. “The protection” they insisted, “of the head of train, the rear of the train and the whole train are matters requiring judgment, tact, the ability to meet emergencies and ability to command and control. The reasons for American railroads confiding these duties solely to white men are obvious and needs not be discussed.”

Jurors, if they had experience of railroad travel (and occasionally seen an African American flagman though never an engineer or conductor), may have been wary of the defendant’s all too neat construction of the racial division of labour on passenger trains. Their scepticism indeed would have been aroused by the anomaly of the slight distinction the defence attorneys made between the order of things on passenger and freight trains. “On a freight train,” lawyers for the defence claimed, “the crew consists of an engineer, who is always a white man, a fireman, who may be white or colored, a conductor, who is always a white man, a brakeman, who is located on the head of the train and who may be white or colored, and a flagman, who is

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119 Brief of Appellant, The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, in response to questions submitted by the court in the Supreme Court of Mississippi, 9 July 1930, Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. V. Charles E. Sideboard, 1930, Court Cases - Supreme Court, Series 6, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 5.
120 Brief of Appellant, 9 July 1930, 5.
located in the caboose of the train and who protects the rear of the train and who is always a white man.” The understated assumption was that African American trainmen were employed on passenger trains solely as porters, although the Mississippi full crew law required that the crew of both passenger and freight trains included a brakeman and a porter.

The vehemence with which Hirsh, Dent and Landau spelled out for the jury the absolute control which the white crew supposedly exercised over the movement of the passenger train was a direct rebuttal of Sideboard’s assertions to the effect (beyond his proclaimed designation as a brakeman) that he had often taken charge of giving the signal (or more controversially, the instruction) for a journey to get going. It was an assertion that attributed to the African American trainman the powers of command, attention to detail and keen familiarity with the delicate operations involved in preparing a train for the journey. Under cross examination, for instance, Sideboard described the close attention he had to pay to overseeing technical operations assigned to him as a brakeman, and the sense of foreknowledge he was thereby in a position to relay to the conductor:

Question: Inspecting cars?
Answer: In picking up a car we backed in the sidetrack, I would go out and put it on the train and couple up, look in the dope boxes to see if it is properly packed, then I would pull the signal cord four times to apply the air, then I would tell the conductor, “We are ready”
Question: Testing of signals. What was that?
Answer: To see if everything was in order, brakes were not sticking, working all right.

Against such testimony, the defence impressed upon the jury that Sideboard was an “uppity Negro”, who “had such a high opinion of his own qualifications that he told the Division Superintendent that the train would never have gotten over the road but for his efforts and

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121 Brief of Appellant, 9 July 1930, 5.
122 Brief of Appellant, 9 July 1930, 5.
123 Charles Sideboard under cross examination, Charles E. Sideboard vs. Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, Court Cases - Supreme Court, Series 6, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 43.
activities, as the train crew, including the conductor, would stand off and talk and not pay
attention to their duties.”

The contention was that Sideboard indeed had made an affront to Southern norms by the
claim that he had exercised judgment superior to his white overseers in giving a signal (without
prior authority) that could involve “serious bodily injury or death to those getting on and off
trains, and to those loading and unloading mail and baggage.” Sideboard’s testimony was
indeed no “hidden transcript” in the sense used by historical sociologist James C. Scott to refer to
discourse among subordinate groups “that takes place, “offstage”, beyond direct observation by
powerholders.” Sideboard was expressing himself openly, using the relative safety of a public
court appearance to undermine the hegemonic norm in the Deep South of what relations between
African Americans and their “superiors” ought to have been.

For its part, the defence attempted to turn a case over wages into a broader dispute over
the prerogatives of white employers over black subordinates. In order to establish for the jury
that white trainmen always exercised vigilance and unshakable authority over their trains,
defence lawyer Dent taunted former conductor C. Davis, who had been called as a witness on
Sideboard’s behalf, with a deliberately exaggerated account of Sideboard’s claim that his white
seniors had often been neglectful in their duties. This quickly aroused Davis’ sensibilities as a
white trainman, leading him to dispel with contempt any notion that he and other white trainmen
had acted carelessly while Sideboard took on their authority and responsibilities:

Q: He has testified he was the whole cheese about running that train. What about that?
A: I don’t think he was.
Q: He has testified that you and the engineer and fireman and flagman would permit that
train to go off without any warning. What about the train being run that way?

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124 Brief of Appellant, 9 July 1930, 13.
125 Brief of Appellant, 9 July 1930, 13.
126 James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1990), 4.
A: No, sir, there was always somebody on the ground to direct and give instructions
Q: He has testified in making these stops there, for instance at Centerville, that you would
go up and talk to the boys and would have stayed there indefinitely unless he gave
instructions for the train to move?
A: I deny that. That is not so.
Q: And he was not the whole cheese?
A: No sir, not when it comes to that. 127

With such unequivocal disavowal of Sideboard’s claim to have taken initiative while white men
were in derelict of duty, the defence called on the jury to establish as an immutable law that it
was in the competency solely of the “master” rather than the “servant” to determine whether the
servant was qualified for a particular job. It was a “universal practice of mankind”, the defence
declared, that the “master and not the servant determines whether the servant has the necessary
qualifications to entitle the servant to additional pay.”128 The argument of the defence meant to
stimulate the racial sentiments of a Southern jury proved to have no effect on the court. The jury
ruled in favour of Sideboard to the tune of $4,478 plus interest, far less than the $7,500 that
Sideboard originally claimed, but a victory nevertheless, which may partly be attributed to the
Association of Colored Railway Employees’ three years of careful preparation and organization
for a test case that was meant to benefit African American trainmen throughout the Mississippi
region.

A significant aspect of the success of Sideboard’s case, as with the approach the
Association had taken in its Labor Board hearing (Docket 4092) on behalf of African American
switchmen at the Memphis Terminal, was that it was based on a reading of agreements between
the company and railroad trainmen that included African American brakemen as parties to these
agreements. A revision of the 1920 agreement, the Schedule of Wages and Rules for Trainmen,

127 G. Davis, former passenger conductor, under cross examination, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi
Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, 252.
128 Brief of the Appellant, 9 July 1930, 10-11.
that took effect from 28 April 1924, incorporated the provision of Supplement 12 proscribing seniority rules that discriminated on the basis of race. The defence had taken the unsubstantiated position that the revised Schedule of Wages and Rules was concerned solely with the crew on passenger trains in which African Americans served exclusively as porters (and never as brakemen) and therefore acquire “no seniority rights, as seniority rights, so far as promotion to the position of conductor is concerned, are reserved for white trainmen alone.”

On freight trains however, the defence raised the evidently contradictory argument that African American brakemen could be in a position of seniority over white brakemen, which in the event of retrenchments in the freight service would have meant that white brakemen would be first in line for dismissal.

Sideboard’s counsel, Brunini and Hirsch, did not respond by trying to make capital of the fact that no representatives of African American trainmen had been signatories to the revised agreement between the company and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen. They adopted the careful approach of demonstrating that the agreement, by incorporating (without modification) Supplement 12 to General Order No. 27 both in 1920 and 1924, had (contrary to a defence interpretation of the rule) practically included African American trainmen as de facto parties to the agreement. They argued that the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad had likewise practically acceded to the idea that African American trainmen were parties to the agreement by paying them for duties they performed as “brakemen or flagmen” on passenger trains. The railroad continued to pay African American trainmen at the higher rate of flagmen until March

131 Brief of the Appellant, 21 March 1931, 21-22.
1925 when, without notice, the company reduced African American trainmen’s pay to the rate at which porters were being paid.

Although some African American trainmen such as Kentucky-based representative of the Association of Colored Railway Employees, Thomas Redd, pursued a defensive position in which they appealed for wage adjustments below that paid to white trainmen in order to protect their positions on the railroads, cases such as Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company as well as Train Porters’ Union versus the Southern Railroad Company (discussed above) and the case of Dick versus Davis, a failed suit brought by an African American “porter” against the Southern Railway Company, suggests that most African American trainmen did not necessarily trade the equal pay they were entitled to receive in terms of Supplement 12 in favour of protecting their seniority rights against the aggressive encroachment on these rights from white trainmen.133

The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, as defendant in the Sideboard suit, cited Dick versus Davis as one among many authorities in its favour. One which the company hoped would make the salient point that a porter remained a porter as long as he performed the duties of a passenger brakeman “only as the occasion for performing such work arose.”134 Indeed the notice which the company filed with the Circuit Court in Warren County in October 1929 set out explicitly to show that Sideboard had always been employed as a train porter and had been required to perform a train porter’s duties exclusively, a position for which he had been paid accordingly.135

133 Arnesen, 133.
135 Hirsch, Dent and Landau, Notice to Plaintiff or his Attorney of Record, 26 October 1929, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, 16.
However, fifty five year old Charles Sideboard, who had been with the company since 1910, was no pushover. He was an experienced trade unionist who had fought off an earlier attempt by the company to deny African American trainmen the pay increases the United States Railroad Administration had introduced. Thus, in their summation of the case late in 1930, Sideboard’s attorneys noted, without specifying the nature of the protest, that “Sideboard and others had … in the latter part of 1919 taken up with Mr. Egan, the General Superintendent at the time, a threatened reduction in pay and this resulted in the Railroad leaving the rate of pay as it was without reduction.” 136 In effect, the company had maintained this retreat for another six years. This shows that African American trainmen, in the face of a potentially violent situation and a climate in which wage cuts were the predominant trend, were capable of using the weapon of their organized presence to hold off management’s push against the fairly high wages they were receiving.

Concern over the unequal wages that African American trainmen often received was no less of a priority for the Association of Colored Railway Employees than the equally pressing question of seniority rights. Thus, the Association, following on its petition with the Railroad Labor Board concerning encroachment on African American trainmen’s seniority rights in February 1920, submitted a second petition on 14 August that year, naming the Illinois Central, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, the Southern Railway Company, among others, as companies that were refusing to increase trainmen’s pay as they had been required to do under General Order 27. 137 The Association’s August 1920 petition notwithstanding, Charles

137 Before the US Railroad Labor Board, the Association of Colored Railway Employees versus Illinois Central, Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, the Southern Railway Company, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company, the Nashville Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway Company, the Gulf & Ship Island Railway Company, the Georgia Central Railway Company, 14 August 1920, RG, Records of the National Mediation Board, Docket Case Files, Docket 138.
Sideboard’s testimony in court during 1930 suggests that the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company did not have a consistently negative attitude toward increasing the pay of train “porters” and putting them on an equal footing with the wages paid to flagmen and brakemen.

In his case against Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, Sideboard’s claim was that he had been paid at the brakeman’s rate of 3.13 cents a mile until he was told toward the end of March 1924 that his pay (among others) would immediately be cut to $85 a month and raised to $90 a month on 1 April 1925.138 Although he received and cashed 47 cheques, which the company deceitfully stamped “In Full for Services Rendered” with the view to avoiding litigation, Sideboard with Floyd Daniels and Frank Shepherd, making up the grievance committee for African American brakemen, wrote several letters to various senior officers of the Railroad calling for a correction of the wages they were being paid.

Sideboard and his committee did not rest with persistent letters alone. They boldly approached Illinois Central officials and defiantly insisted on being given the opportunity to address their grievance in meetings with senior company officials. After receiving no response to several letters addressed to Illinois Central Senior Vice President, A.E. Clift, in which they requested an audience at the earliest convenience, Sideboard and other committee members went to the Illinois Central head office in Chicago and imposed a meeting on Clift. During the meeting, which Clift conceded under the pressure of seeing his unwelcome guests hovering about the office corridors, the committee conducted themselves in a manner that showed their steadfastness and the strength of their case. In court, Sideboard’s account of the meeting gives the impression that his was a committee of trade union leaders with a constituency of African

American trainmen in the Delta, who would bow to neither intimidation nor deceit, in taking up the issue of the wage cuts they had endured. For the fearlessness it communicates, Sideboard’s account of his exchange with Clift is worth retelling at some length:

So he told us to go ahead … and said, “We will let you know about this; that superintendent there must not be doing his duty”, and I said, “I don’t know if they are or not; they are forcing us to do brakemen’s work and receive porter pay”, and he said, “I will write you some kind of a letter,” and I said, “We don’t want some kind of a letter, that is all we are getting, some kind of alibi letter all the time; we want some certified letter about what we are to do; if we are to do porter’s work we are satisfied, but if we have to couple and uncouple cars, put out signals, etc. we want contract wages for railroad trainmen,” and he said, “That is for white people; you all are not under this contract.” I said, “As long as we hold brakemen’s keys we want brakemen’s pay; you can bear that in mind. We are not going to drop this case; we will carry it as far as we can.”

For about two years before he was dismissed on the grounds of insubordination, Sideboard had ceased to accept and cash the cheques that he received from the company. Apparently Sideboard did not take up alternative employment after he was dismissed from the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad in 1928. In view of this, it may reasonably be surmised that he received sustenance out of the coffers of the Association of Colored Railway Employees or through a collection made on his behalf among Association members. If indeed that were the case, it demonstrates the patient preparation and organization African American railroad workers in the Deep South were willing to pursue in order to make their presence felt in court. The seriousness by which Sideboard managed his approach to the case is further evident in the documents he produced for exhibition before the jury. Thus, even though company attorney, Dent, pushed him under cross examination to concede that he was at the bottom of a hierarchy under the conductor’s control, or that he had always dressed in the symbolic cap and uniform of a porter, Sideboard soundly overcame the defence with clear evidence of his official designation as brakeman. This evidence included rail passes, simply marked brakeman or sometimes

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139 Charles Sideboard under cross examination, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, January 1930, 127.
coloured brakeman, for each year between 1922 and 1927. Most damaging for the defence were his certificates of 12 May 1923 and 3 December 1926, stating clearly that he had been examined and qualified as a brakeman and that he possessed satisfactory working knowledge of air brake and steam heat rules. 140

The case of Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company is a salient representation of the cool-headed determination of organized African American trainmen to stand up to the pressure on them to relinquish positions on the railroads that white trainmen wished to monopolize, and which employers would no longer entrust to them, in the years succeeding a federal order enforcing equal pay between African American and white trainmen performing the same duties. Against white trainmen who turned to violence and intimidation, and railroad employers who used subterfuge, African American trainmen used petitions, Railroad Labor Board appearances and law suits to hold onto positions in the train service, such as firemen and brakemen, whose real wages showed an impressive increase in the 1920s. African American trainmen did not succeed in stopping encroachments on their seniority rights and future employment within lucrative positions in the train service, but they put up a spirited fight in which they boldly took on the stereotypes of white domination in the South.

140 Transcript, Proceedings and Judgment in the Circuit Court, Warren County, Mississippi, January 1930, Charles Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company, 84-86, Court Cases - Supreme Court, Series 6, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 196.
Conclusion

For the brief time in which the railroads were under government control during and immediately after World War I, workers enjoyed unprecedented state-sanctioned improvements in their wages and working conditions. As soon as the government returned control of the railroads to their private owners, legislation (the Transportation Act of 1920) was passed that was suited to an environment in which wages and working conditions could be set by a state established body (the U.S Railroad Labor Board), which engaged organisations of railroad workers and employers in reaching consensus on issues in dispute. Since the Board, in addition to the six members evenly representing employers and labour, included three members representing the “public”, most Board decisions tended to favour the interests of railroad employers over those of labour.

Railroad labour organizations, especially the shop crafts, did not quietly submit to moves on the part of the Board to undermine both the wage increases and the bargaining power their organizations had attained under Wilson’s wartime authority. By the summer 1922, railroad shopmen embarked on a nationally coordinated strike that had the effect of bringing the Board into such disrepute that it was soon abolished and replaced by a more even-handed form of mediation. The 1922 strike is significant to themes addressed in this study to the extent that African American shopmen on the Illinois Central system in the Deep South proved to be steadfast participants in the strike, even though some of the strike leaders observed their participation through the blinkered perspective of white self-interest rather than an open sense of class solidarity.

The course of the strike, all the way from Jackson, Tennessee to New Orleans, Louisiana, has been discussed at some length in order to highlight the varying ways in which
African American railroad workers positioned themselves in relation to white workers on the railroads. The common thread in the behaviour of African American workers, whether in the train service or the shops, was the need to face down the tendency among railroad employers to push for cuts in wages in order to restore the profitability of railroad traffic during the brief recession that was an immediate aftermath of armistice. Both African American shopmen and trainmen took up an essentially class position in opposing such wage cuts. Yet the distinctive feature in the experience of the trainmen was the need to maintain a rear-guard fight against their white co-workers competing for the same positions they held in the train service.

Despite the Railroad Labor Board’s poor track record with respect to fair play between the competing interests of railroad management and workers, for one group of workers, African American railroad trainmen, the Board had offered an opportunity for the airing of grievances through a state-created body that partially substituted for the strength that black organizations lacked in comparison with the white railroad brotherhoods, which often exercised their bargaining power in attempts to encroach on African American trainmen’s seniority rights.

In addition to their pursuit of outstanding wage claims owed to them by several defaulting railroad employers, the persistence with which African American trainmen petitioned the Board against white violations of their seniority rights, had an impact sufficient to cause white railroad trainmen to launch a desperate campaign of violence and intimidation in the wider Mississippi Delta region and other parts of the Deep South. The outburst of racial violence in early 1921 was especially targeted at African American railroad trainmen in positions over which Supplement 12 to General Order 27 had imposed the principle of equal payment for equal work among white and black trainmen who performed the same duties.
In the Mississippi Delta, the tendency for the violent attacks to target a category of African American workers whom railroad employers were often reluctant to pay on the higher scale paid to white trainmen, suggests the existence of a sinister convergence (though no evidence exists of a deliberately planned conspiracy) between the interests of railroad employers, concerned to dispel African American trainmen’s claims for compensation above the station of porters, and white employees, concerned to reserve to their race all better-paying positions on the railroads. In this situation, it is perhaps understandable that a historian such as Eric Arnesen would suggest that African American trainmen tended to act from a position of weakness and a lack of wider organizational solidarity. Arnesen suggests that this was a position of weakness that oriented these workers toward a defensive strategy focused on protecting their seniority rights above their wage demands, as well pushing them to rely on the interventions of the Railroad Labor Board or the courts rather than grassroots self organization.

However, this argument ignores the fact that African American trainmen, in order to make a strong presence before the Railroad Labor Board or before the courts, required careful preparation, organization, and tactical flexibility. Careful organization and strategic approaches to institutions dealing in labour disputes, would allow African American trainmen an effective means to challenge the narrow and self-interested interpretations that white trainmen and employers gave to ambiguously worded documents such as Supplement 12 to General Order 27. By sound preparation for their Labor Board petitions and court appearances, organized African American trainmen effectively challenged agreements between white trainmen and railroad employers that incorporated the non-discriminatory provisions of Supplement 12 with the purpose of practicing an interpretation of these provisions in ways that favoured the exclusive interests of white trainmen. Thus, it would take tactful thinking on the part of the Association of
Colored Railway Employees to succeed, where they had failed a few years before, in gaining a Railroad Labor Board interpretation in 1925 of an agreement between the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and the Illinois Central Railroad, which challenged a distorted notion of fair play meant to favour the interests of white trainmen over their black counterparts.

Beyond their careful preparations for Board hearings, as this study has suggested with respect to the resilience of African Americans employed in the switching yards of the Illinois Central Railroad Company over various points in Mississippi and Louisiana, African American trainmen were able to use their organized presence to reach (much in the same way that white trainmen were believed to have done) unwritten “gentlemen’s agreements” that gave them protection from white encroachments on their seniority rights. Thus, the evidence produced by the Association of Colored Railway Employees before the Railroad Labor Board in 1924-25 suggests that there were numerous yards in the Mississippi Delta region, in which African American switchmen enjoyed a fairly comfortable status by contrast with the experience of switchmen at the Memphis Terminal yards, were encroachments on African American seniority rights had been especially aggressive.

Significantly, as the closing discussion on the case of Charles E. Sideboard versus Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad shows, African American trainmen, who had clearly learned from previous cases, used patient organization, careful planning, and retention of crucial supporting evidence, in addition to confident and persistent approaches to their employers, before taking further steps such as civil action in the courts. In the case of Sideboard, the fact that a Mississippi-based jury should rule on the side of an African American claimant suggests that demonstrations of courage and determination on the part of African Americans could just as much infuriate or impress white Southerners. From the platform of a Deep South court room, an
African American plaintiff, Charles E. Sideboard, had forthrightly challenged the norms of Southern racial culture, which prescribed that black men submit silently to a servile status at work and in everyday encounters. Behind Charles Sideboard’s courageous court appearance, there was evident organization, solidarity and determination to win, among members of the Association of Colored Railway Employees in the Mississippi Delta.
Chapter Five: The Dark Years of Depression on the Railroads

The jubilation that African American brakeman in the Mississippi Delta expressed at the successful outcome of the law suit Charles Sideboard took up against the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad in early 1930 quickly soured as the Great Depression bit deeper and railroads across the South moved to survive the downturn by both wage cuts and retrenchments among railroad workers. If the case of Sideboard enjoyed “unusual interest” among employers, as the Chicago Defender briefly reported in March that year, whatever interest railroad employers had in the case likely encouraged them to look at ways of undermining the effect that organization among African American workers had on the profitability of the railroad business in the Deep South.\(^1\) With a critical decline in traffic since the late 1920s, caused both by recession and competition from the expansion of newer forms of transportation such as the motor car and intercity busses, the railroads were dealing with a serious crisis of profitability.

In this situation, railroad employers were less respectful of contracts they had established with labour organizations before. Many of these employers were inclined to use the downtown in business to make vigorous attempts to put pressure on labour organizations to accept wage cuts. Moreover they were even less open to African American trade unionists lobbying for recognition and collective bargaining rights that were given protection under Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA) of 1933 and the amended Railroad Labor Act of 1934. Historian Eric Arnesen is correct to suggest that these New Deal legislative reforms strengthened the position of organized white railroad labour while disadvantaging black workers striving for the right to have independent representation in collective bargaining. Indeed, a 1936 National Mediation Board interpretation of the Railroad Labor Act, which ruled “that a craft or class of

\(^1\) The Chicago Defender, 1 March 1930.
employees may not be divided into two or more on the basis of race or color for the purpose of choosing representatives” dealt a severe blow to African American workers’ demand for representatives independent of the majority white railroad unions that claimed to bargain on their behalf.²

For the purposes of this study however, which is firmly focused on the organizing activities of African American railroad workers in the Deep South, the matter cannot simply be left at that. The general policy (contained in both Section 7a of the NRA and the National Labor Relations Act that succeeded it in 1935), “protecting the exercise by workers of full freedom of association, self-organization, and designation of representatives of their own choosing,” was taken seriously enough by African American members of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen that they continually demanded these rights from their employers in the Deep South.³

In one case, discussed in the first part of this chapter, this attitude had a meaningful outcome for a group of African American railroad workers on the Louisiana & Arkansas railroad system. African American trainmen working on that system eventually won a concession from management allowing their representatives to appear in negotiations as an independently organized body. This occurred after years of striving against the consortium headed by Harvey C. Couch and his brother and underling C.P. Couch, who had neither respect nor patience for collective bargaining with workers of any colour. It is worth drawing attention to the labour bashing activities of Harvey C. Couch, head of the Louisiana & Arkansas system to the extent that it further underscores a key argument of this study —namely that the economic imperatives of railroad employers was a decisive factor in shaping the ongoing interplay of race and class

among workers, and between workers and their employers, on railroads operating in the Deep South. Likewise, to the extent that employers were active class agents in shaping class and race relationships on the railroads, African American workers were active and resilient agents as well, constantly trying to ensure that they had at least minimal room to organize in order to counter the excessive influence that both their employers and their white co-workers exercised over their working lives.

Although the second part of this chapter discusses the ongoing (and sometimes tragic) struggles of railroad trainmen on the Illinois Central system in the Deep South, the opening section picks up on the situation of the same category of workers (among others) on the Louisiana & Arkansas system, a railroad employer which aggressively pursued a policy of suppressing union activity among both white and black workers. The significance of this case is not so much that it is unusual, but that it shows that the labour repressive policies among employers and local authorities in the Deep South could be so extreme that even white dominated labour organizations were vulnerable in the face of employers determined to gain maximum benefit from the lower wages prevailing in the South.

Historian Michael K. Honey has made a similar observation in his study of African American workers in the labour and civil rights history of Memphis, Tennessee. Although the police at the service of the local “social and class hierarchy” had a “particularly visceral dislike for black trade unionists,” their brutality and the wider atmosphere of repression in the city “undermined civil liberties for everyone”, including African American workers, radical industrial union organizers and middle class white too.\(^4\) Historian Eric Arnesen has argued that African

American railroad workers, in contrast with the industrial workers who rallied to the thriving unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), “found no salvation in New Deal labor legislation, which for them represented not labor’s Magna Carta but rather a major setback to their organizational aspirations and even their livelihoods.”\(^5\) This may be correct in a formal sense in that the legislation compelled African American railroad workers to submit to representation by trade unions dominated by a racial majority that was more inclined to harm than to advance African American workers’ interests. However, the argument does not capture the confidence that New Deal labour reforms inspired in African American railroad workers to push for the right to organize and chose their own spokespersons in collective bargaining.

The New Deal and the spread of the industrial unionism of the CIO in the Deep South had a greater impact on the confidence of workers to challenge the status quo, as Honey argues: “Like the black civil rights movement of later years, in the 1930s the union movement provided a wedge to open up the South to new influences and a hammer to break down the repressive social system inherited from slavery and enforced by segregation. In the circumstances of the thirties, unionism took on the aura of a more general struggle for democratic rights.”\(^6\) Thus, African American brakemen on the Louisiana & Arkansas system, in spite of the burden of dealing with an employer determined to continually harass union members, firmly stood by the principle of gaining a committee elected from their own ranks as their sole representative. The will of these brakemen to gain representation was of such strength that they would even co-operate with white trainmen in demand for collective bargaining rights in 1936. Likewise, African American trainmen on the Illinois Central system, subjected both to violent assaults from their white co-workers and management’s constant refusal to give their organizations formal

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\(^5\) Arnesen, 116.

\(^6\) Honey, 68.
recognition, kept up a spirited fight to defend their seniority rights as well as to gain formal recognition for the independent organizations they had built on the Illinois Central system in the Deep South.

**The L & A. System and the Union-Bashing Years of Harvey C. Couch**

The most direct evidence available from the Deep South of an employer focused on breaking the back of any kind of labour organization on its southern lines during the Great Depression comes not from officials of the Illinois Central system, but from a lesser known consortium of railroads that operated between the states of Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas under two unceremoniously identical titles: the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad Company, and the Louisiana, Arkansas & Texas Railroad Company. Between 1930 and 1932, Harvey C. Couch, head of the new syndicate of owners of the Louisiana and Arkansas system, initiated a series of wage cuts and attacks on trade union organizations on the system.

Couch’s drive against the unions did not discriminate between organizations of black and white workers. Even organized conductors fell foul of Couch’s determination to break the unions. However, Couch did not shy away from manipulating divisions of race and craft to achieve his goal of maximizing management power to determine wages and working conditions without dealing with independent organizations of railroad workers. Taking over the Louisiana & Arkansas system at the onset of the decline in railroad traffic in 1929, Harvey Couch was firmly set on sustaining his newly acquired business assets by squashing labour organization wherever it emerged on his roads. Railroad unions’ attempts to gain redress by strike threats, approaches to the National Mediation Board, President Roosevelt and the Department of Justice, which instituted an investigation meant to determine whether there were grounds for prosecuting
Couch for violation of workers’ rights established under the Railroad Labor Act of 1934, had little effect on the defiant Couch.

Couch was known to have stated repeatedly that “he would deal with his own employees but would not recognize as their representatives union men from off the line.” Many workers on the roads owned by Couch and his associates had been members of organizations under the fold of various AFL shop crafts, the big four white railroad brotherhoods, the Brotherhood of Way Maintenance, and the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, each of which had contracts on wages and working conditions. The Association had a more established position on the Louisiana & Arkansas system than it had on the Illinois Central system. African American trainmen on the former system had a union contract since 1921, a gain that they never achieved on any lines of the Illinois Central system throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In September 1930 Couch brusquely abrogated the contract, without authorization from the recognized representatives of the Association, with a notice to the “Colored brakemen on the Louisiana and Arkansas Railway” of a new contract, effective 15 October, imposing a ten per cent wage cut.

Some of Couch’s admirers and associates would have been surprised had they been aware of his obstinate position on the rights of labour. Couch was an ambitious Southern industrial booster, whose personal advice for success was the quaint prescription to “make friends and be true to them” and to value people’s good will above the entirety of all the capital one could own. Harvey C. Couch was known to be a tall, broad shouldered and soft-spoken Southerner, whose sprawling summer homestead named Couchwood near Pine Bluff, Arkansas, was always open to guests. Harvey Couch was a descendent of a rich slaveholder Quincy Couch,

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7 Morris R. Clark, Special Assistant to the Attorney General, Memorandum, 13 February 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 24-73-1 to 124-77-1, Box 15345, RG. 60, National Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Washington D.C, 32.
8 Clark, 13 February 1936, 16.
who first settled in Arkansas in 1853 and had fought for slavery and the Confederacy. He was born in a log cabin in August 1877 however, to a humble Methodist minister and small-holding cotton farmer, Thomas G. Harvey. In business, Couch rose from small beginnings as a railway mail clerk, who cut his teeth as an entrepreneur buying eggs in the countryside between Memphis, Tennessee and Texarkana, Texas, and selling them at a profit to commission merchants in Memphis.\textsuperscript{10} The hardworking mail clerk would soon turn his mind to the more challenging venture of setting up a small telephone company with an investment capital of just $156 made up of savings and loans.\textsuperscript{11}

He eventually sold that company to the Bell Telephone Company for $1,500,000 and used this capital in yet another venture, the Arkansas Light and Power Company, which eventually afforded him the ten million dollars he needed to purchase the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad Company in the late 1920s. Despite his ambition and business success, Couch had a compassionate side that he expressed through his service as chair of the Red Cross during the 1927 Mississippi River flood and through his membership of various clubs and fraternal organizations. President Hoover appointed him to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) in 1932, and he is credited for his enthusiasm in organizing a public works component of the RFC.

Couch did not put on airs of greatness.\textsuperscript{12} His six children went to public school and did not expect deference from their peers. His home, built of logs and cedar lining, was picture of plain pioneer living.\textsuperscript{13} Couchwood estate was known to welcome U.S. Presidents (both Hoover and Roosevelt were personal friends), politicians and industrialists along with down-to-earth people.

\textsuperscript{10} Wilson, 27.
\textsuperscript{11} The Hartford Courant, 2 July 1939; Wall Street Journal, 31 July 1941.
\textsuperscript{13}Wilson, 123.
cotton farmers that Couch had played with on the farm when he was a boy.\textsuperscript{14} However, despite his reputation as an amiable host and a man of elegant dress, in the early 1930s Couch had been investigated for questionable business practices during his tenure on the RFC. The books and records of the Arkansas Power Light Company were also subjected to posthumous official scrutiny within a year of Couch’s death in 1941.\textsuperscript{15} Although the question of what contemporaries may have thought of Couch’s reputation as a businessman is not within the scope of this study, it suffices to observe that his shady record with respect to labour relations was so clear to the Interstate Commerce Commission that it set out unusual protections for labour when it authorized a merger between the Louisiana & Arkansas system and the Chicago, Rock Island and Gulf and the Chicago, Rock & Pacific in late 1938.\textsuperscript{16}

Soon after Couch and his syndicate took control they moved swiftly to undermine various existing agreements, “and known membership in a labor union meant either loss of a job or open discrimination.”\textsuperscript{17} Couch was prepared to behave as an outlaw in his attitude toward labour. His determination to undermine labour organizations and reduce costs went beyond wage cuts. He gave railroad managers leeway to adopt corrupt measures, dangerous both to the public and railroad traffic. A revealing instance of this was reported by the Department of Justice:

\begin{quote}
C.D Thorpe, general foreman, fired W.H. Winko and C.N Smith for negligent inspection of Engine No. 106. Winko and Smith maintained this inspection was made in accordance with Thorpe’s previous instruction to overlook certain defects and that they had not reported these defects for fear of losing their jobs. … Smith subsequently examined Engine No. 106 and noticed that the same defect for which he and Winko had been fired was still present in this locomotive. He called the matter to the attention of Inspector
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[17] John Dickinson, Assistant Attorney General, Memorandum: Possible Criminal Proceedings Against the Louisiana Arkansas and Texas Railway Company for Violations of the Railway Labor Act as amended, 15 May 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 1.
\end{footnotes}
Pendleton who severely reprimanded E.L. Lukas, the machinist who made the subsequent repairs, but Lukas was not fired. Lukas is generally known to be a “company man.”

One Department of Justice investigator reported that Couch once had defiantly declared “that he is not going to let anybody run his railroad, and that he is going to run it like he wants to, regardless of the law.” Couch used unscrupulous methods to undermine labour organizations such as the Order of Railroad Conductors among high ranking employees. He tried to bribe General Chair of the Order of Railroad Conductors, C.P. Meyers, with the promise that if Meyers would break with the Order he would offer him the position of train master on the Louisiana & Arkansas Railway. Meyers did not accept the bribe, and over five years Couch continually tried to create tensions between Myers and a committee of the Order on the Louisiana & Arkansas. At one point Couch met with the committee members in a bid to persuade them to replace Myers as general chairman, with an employee of the Louisiana & Arkansas. Couch declined to have any further dealings with the committee when it refused to comply with his request for Myers’ removal.

In the railroad shops, one of Couch’s strategies was to intensify racial tensions by displacing white union men with unorganized African American workers. During the Depression, according to contemporary sociologists Horace Cayton and George Mitchell, African American shop workers on the Illinois Central system “had lost an unfairly high proportion of jobs.” In his drive against trade unionism at the Minden, Louisiana, shops of the

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18 Morris R. Clark, Special Assistant to the Attorney General, Memorandum, 13 February 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 35.
19 Investigation by National Mediation Board of Dispute Involving Maintenance of Way Employees and Train and Engine and Shop and Craft Employees on the Louisiana & Arkansas and Louisiana and Arkansas and Texas Railways, “Abstract of Testimony relating to Violations of Railway Labor Act, n.d, Ibid, 124-50-1 to 124-73-1, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence Box 15344, 4.
20 Morris R. Clark, Special Assistant to the Attorney General, Memorandum, 13 February 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 27-28.
Louisiana & Arkansas system, Couch was prepared to buck this trend. He did not hesitate to replace white union men with non-unionized African American shop men.

According to a Department of Justice investigation, “Negro helpers were given truck and spring work formerly done by machinists; seniority rights were disregarded; helpers did the work of mechanics.” It was indeed a world turned up side down for formerly privileged men on the Louisiana & Arkansas lines, since there were “cases of men now working as helpers under men who served their apprenticeship under said helpers, and the helpers are still compelled to perform mechanic’s work.” Despite his reputation as the “country boy” whose heart was home in Arkansas and whose closest associates were mostly men who shared his humble beginnings and local commitments, Harvey Couch had no respect for customary Southern hierarchies in the shops under his control, so long as these were a barrier to his drive to overcome the power of organized labour. Despite this, black shopmen on the Louisiana & Arkansas system did not escape the climate of fear and intimidation that white workers faced under Harvey Couch. An anonymous statement from a white shop committee representative is revealing of this: “A man will come to my house, and mostly in the night, and he will want to make a grievance out of his case. I will tell him there is no use. I just can’t handle it; he will have to go individually at the present time. … But when that man leaves the front door, I will go and sit down and a ‘nigger’ will come to the back door and he will want me to do something for him.”

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22 Investigation by National Mediation Board of Dispute Involving Maintenance of Way Employees and Train and Engine and Shop and Craft Employees on the Louisiana & Arkansas and Louisiana and Arkansas and Texas Railways, “Abstract of Testimony relating to Violations of Railway Labor Act”, n.d, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 5-6.

23 The Washington Post, 2 July 1939.

24 Investigation by National Mediation Board of Dispute Involving Maintenance of Way Employees and Train and Engine and Shop and Craft Employees on the Louisiana & Arkansas and Louisiana and Arkansas and Texas Railways, “Abstract of Testimony relating to Violations of Railway Labor Act”, n.d, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 5.
Couch also attempted to impose his will by taking advantage of divisions among African American brakeman on the Louisiana & Arkansas system, some of whom were active members of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen. These trade unionists were subject to both manipulation and intimidation by Couch and other company officials attempting to force them to take wage cuts. E.G. Elliot, member of the Brakemen’s Committee of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen at Shreveport, Louisiana, informed Federal Bureau of Investigation agent, L.I. Bowman that Couch had “fired certain union men for breaches of rules which would have been overlooked in the past.” In particular, he fired Tom Kennon, a leading member of the Colored Association of Railway Trainmen, for an accident that had been the responsibility of another brakeman, Ed Wilson, who had not been active as a member in the union.25

Couch used threats of violence against African American trade unionists that he was unlikely to have deployed against white railroaders without consequence. Sometime in December 1932, Couch informed brakeman Alex Patterson that “he was going to throw him out of the window” for protesting a fifteen per cent wage cut that he wished him to sign. He had expected Patterson to concede to the cut as a company-appointed committee man. However, as it turned out, Patterson had never been the trusted “stool pigeon” that Couch had believed him to be. In rage, Couch told Patterson that he possessed “all the particulars of his activities” and that he knew that Patterson “had been very active in 1931 in endeavouring to get the colored firemen of the L & A Seniority District to go on a strike with the white employees of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway Company.”26 Couch was infuriated with his supposedly trusted agent, Patterson, less because Patterson had refused to make a deal unauthorized by organized

25 Statement of E. G Elliot, Brakeman, Shreveport, La, 26 November 1935, Report of Special Agent Bowman, L. I. New Orleans, 31 July – 29 November 1935, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 124-73-1 to 124-77-1, Box 1534, 6.
26 Statement of Gabe Wood, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 2-3.
brakemen, but more because Couch had become aware that Patterson had really been a committed union man all along.

Since September 1930, the management on the Louisiana & Arkansas system took unusual measures to pressure African American brakemen to accept a wage cut of ten per cent. Superintendent Johnson and a train master named Willis cornered two committee members of Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, Tom Howard and W.B. Kennedy, and pushed them, on the pain of losing their jobs, to sign an agreement authorizing the wage cut without consulting the broader membership of the Association. They pulled a third member of the committee, Mack Johnson, off a passenger train at Stamps, Arkansas, and took him on a journey to Hope, Arkansas, in which they forced him to sign the agreement. The superintendent Johnson, unsatisfied with the illegitimate authority he had received from the three committee members, boldly approached trainmen holding a regular meeting of the Association and informed the gathering that their opposition would have no effect in stopping the wage reduction to be imposed in early October. 27

Despite superintendent Johnson’s appearance at a meeting of the Association, management was still unable to persuade African American brakemen to accept a reduction in pay. Two other committee members, E. G. Elliot and Lawson Dennard had also signed the agreement for a reduction, which they claimed to have done in duress. According to Lawson Dennard’s account of events to FBI agent L.I. Bowman, it appears that Couch personally urged him and other committee members to get approval for the agreement by holding a second meeting of the wider membership. At this meeting, the committee received a clear instruction from the men to refuse the wage cut. Soon afterwards, committee president Jim Edwards persuaded his colleagues on

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27 Morris R. Clark, Special Assistant to the Attorney General, Memorandum, 13 February 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence 15.
the committee to “go ahead and sign as Mr. Couch was going to cut us anyway.” The workers however, would not submit without a fight. It is significant to observe that despite the prospect of losing their jobs, the majority of Association members would neither put up with weak leadership nor submit to management attempts to browbeat them into accepting a wage reduction. Association members who had not given their committee the mandate to accept an agreement on their behalf, showed their determination to resist the imposition of a wage cut by replacing Mack Johnson and other committee members with a more trustworthy and resolute leadership.

Under their new leadership, the rank-and-file members of the Association persisted in resisting the imposition of the ten per cent cut, and through the office of Baton Rouge attorney, R. F. Walker, they sent the company a statement of protest that clearly conveys both the indomitable spirit and the awareness of these brakemen of their labour rights. Their wire read:

We, the Colored brakemen on the L & A seniority district and members of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen hereby serve notice on the L & A Railway that we object to the reduction in wages proposed by the L & A Railway effective October 15, 1930. We need employment and go to work under protest as the contract between the L & A Railway and Colored brakemen on the L & A Seniority district has been ignored by the carrier, and we hereby reserve all our contractual rights under said contract entered into on September 21, 1921. We wire this protest as we have not been given time to prepare formal action which will follow this protest.

This protest was taken before the Board of Mediation that had been established under the Railway Labor Act. The Board showed no interest in pursuing the matter. Nevertheless, one may presume that the brakemen’s resistance had compelled Couch to back off on implementing the wage cut for another year. Shortly before Christmas 1931 Couch would reintroduce the proposed

28 Statement of Lawson Dennard, Shreveport, La, 25 November 1935, Report of Special Agent L.I. Bowman, 31 July 1935, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 5.
30 Clark, 13 February 1936, 15.
wage cut to committee members of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen based in Minden, Louisiana. The committee again refused to accept the wage cut. Couch responded with an even more severe fifteen per cent reduction. Couch would try to get his way with this fresh wage cut by ignoring the recognized committee of brakemen. He called on the old committee members, whom the trainmen had ousted as their representatives, and forced them to sign the contract containing the reduced wage rates. In this situation, the brakemen did not back down and worked vigorously to strengthen their organization. Thus, the one lodge that the Association had at Minden was augmented by a second one, based in New Orleans.\(^3\)

In 1934, despite the passage of the amended Railway Labor Act and the criminal sanctions imposed on employers by the legislation for violations of workers’ rights to have representatives of their own choice, Couch was less interested in doggedly imposing wage cuts on workers and rather more keen on undermining trade union organization on his railway lines as far as possible. Thus, Louisiana & Arkansas management threats against workers for membership in trade unions increased that year, although they also made efforts to convince workers of a paternalistic turn in management’s attitude toward them. In line with a wider trend among employers, Couch promoted co-operation between management and labour as an alternative to trade unionism. Department of Justice Agent, Morris Clark, provided a vivid description of his brother, C.P. Couch’s rather opportunistic approach to fostering this climate of co-operation in September that year:

\[\text{C. P. Couch arranged a Labor Day excursion for his employees to New Orleans. As soon as they arrived in New Orleans, Couch told Marcus Hurley that as a loyal company man he could do some good on the trip for the company by boosting a company union. Couch also asked Hurley to find out and to report to him who were “company men” and who were union men. On this trip Couch gave Hurley $10 to spend “on the boys” with}\]

\(^{31}\) Clark, 16-17.
instructions to boost a company union. On the return trip from New Orleans, Couch had Hurley come into his private car and stated he had “this union thing about licked.”

Clark also had observed that despite management efforts to stamp out trade unionism, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen was making a great effort to increase its membership on the Louisiana & Arkansas lines. In order to stop the Association’s organizing drive, company officials made threats to end African American employment on the railroad. C.P. Couch told brakeman John Blanchard that those African American workers who recently had testified against the company before the Mediation Board “might as well give their souls to God as he was going to get them and make them join the bird gang” (bird gang is railroad slang for firing employees). Likewise, the company’s Vice President, Paul Sippel, called African American brakeman and trade union organizer, Dan Hogan, into his office and told him that he had better leave organized labour alone if he was to avoid replacement by white men competing for the jobs which African American trainmen held. African American brakemen did not yield to this new round of intimidation, and by April 1935, the company attempted to break their resolve to stay the course of trade unionism by offering a five per cent increase. Company officials again tried their old ruse of calling upon the ousted committee of brakemen to sign the offer.

In a move that clearly demonstrates the authoritative presence of an independent organization among brakemen, the hand picked committee refused to endorse the five per cent increase on the grounds that they were not the chosen representatives of Association members. According to the testimony of African American fireman Will Bowman of New Orleans, superintendent Johnson, unflustered by the rebuff he received from the old committee, called a meeting of all the men and promised that the company would make arrangements to conduct

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32 Clark, 32.
33 Clark, 33-34.
34 Clark, 37.
negotiations with the newly elected committee on a permanent basis. He consented to negotiating with workers’ chosen representatives as a trade off with his request that workers give the old committee authority to sign off on the five per cent offer. According to Bowman, the gathered men refused to allow this, knowing full well that if “they permitted the old committee to sign for this increase they would be condoning the previous unauthorized acts of that company-chosen committee.”

The situation for organized labour on the Louisiana & Arkansas system was not unusual in the context of an economic crisis that by 1933 saw a significant fourteen Class I railroads under receivership and five in the hands of trustees appointed under federal bankruptcy legislation. In such adverse business conditions, railroad employers did not necessarily cave into white workers’ interests above their own. Expedience was a key motivation for railroad employers, as Eric Arnesen puts it:

Rail carriers … could use ‘the Negro as a pawn for trading purposes with white labor’, in the words of attorneys Charles Hamilton Houston and Joseph Waddy. In some cases, management ‘has sacrificed the interests of its Negro workers to obtain concessions in demands by white workers. In others it has used the Negro as a threat to white workers in an effort to lower wages and working conditions.’ Agreeing to give white workers preference in employment, to limit further blacks’ percentage in the workforce, and to adopt secret rules that deprived blacks of jobs cost the railroads virtually nothing and strengthened their bargaining positions with white railroaders.

However, in the situation of deep economic crisis, employers were not prepared to make comprises with white labour to the extent of giving into the wage demands from white workers.

In these circumstances, there was a widespread tendency among railroad employers to violate the protections trade unions initially had been granted under the Railroad Labor Act of

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37 Arnesen, 120.
1926 which, according to an authoritative judicial ruling in 1928, guaranteed railroad employees “that wages, rules, and working conditions were not to be fixed without conferences with the workers’ freely chosen representatives.” By 1931, railroad employers nationwide were determined to push through a wage cut of ten per cent. To force this through, they tabled an even harsher fifteen per cent reduction with the Mediation Board. However, during negotiations held in Chicago, they settled with the most powerful railroad labour organizations (organized as the Railroad Labor Executives Association), for a short term ten per cent wage “deduction” (rather than reduction) which was to last a year until February 1932. The ten per cent deduction was effectively a back down for employers and temporary respite for railroad labour. In the fall 1932, the railroad executives returned with a demand for a twenty per cent cut in wage rates meant to pressure the railroad brotherhoods to extend the ten per cent deduction into the fall 1933. Intervention from President Roosevelt saved the day for union leaders, and on 30 June 1934, an agreement struck in Washington pegged deductions at 7.5 per cent for six months, after which it was to be brought down to five per cent for the first quarter 1933, and to cease thereafter.

There was nothing unique about management on the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad system with respect to a prevailing inclination among railroad employers to work at undermining workers’ trade union rights or constantly pushing for wage cuts. Most remarkable was the relentlessness with which the officials of the Louisiana & Arkansas worked to break any organized trade union presence on the system. As Edwin Sigmund, the author of an unpublished study has put it, “the Louisiana and Arkansas railroad provided an outstanding example of some employers’ efforts, under the guise of depression-born necessity, to break the brotherhoods,

38 Sigmund, 223, 227-228.
39 Sigmund, 209.
40 Sigmund, 210.
cheat workers and evade compliance with the Railway Labor Act." To push through wage reductions and arbitrarily revised contracts with shop and other labour organizations, the company defied mediation, strike threats, as well as intervention by two succeeding presidents, Hoover and Roosevelt, who had appointed four emergency boards between April 1930 and August 1933 to fill in for efforts at mediation that the company had derailed.

Workers’ response to the company’s infringement on their rights gave rise to a rare show of co-operation between organizations of black and white railroad trainmen. In response to failed mediation in early 1932 and an illegally imposed wage cut, the “big four” railroad brotherhoods, the AFL-affiliated shop craft unions and the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen together called for a strike vote – a move that prompted President Hoover to establish an emergency board. In the wake of the amended 1934 Railway Labor Act, all organizations of workers on the Louisiana & Arkansas approached President Roosevelt for support. Section two of this legislation not only provided for workers’ choice of their representatives “without interference, influence or coercion” but also allowed criminal penalties (including a fine of up to $20,000 or imprisonment) against employers refusing to comply. Apparently, neither the firm legislation nor the President’s dismissive response of passing the matter on to the National Mediation Board for investigation was sufficient to break the company’s aggressive stance toward labour. Thus, while labour organizations agreed to the investigation, company officials dismissed the Board on the grounds of its supposed lack of jurisdiction.

The company’s contempt for labour organization and federal intervention on behalf of railroad workers reached alarming extremes. Not only did company officials discharge two

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41 Sigmund, 207.  
42 Clark, 13 February 1936, 6-7.  
43 Sigmund, 212.  
44 Sigmund, 251; Clark, 13.
machinists after they testified against the company at the National Mediation Board in February 1935, they also refused to allow the Board to inspect company books. The employers on the Louisiana & Arkansas system would not yield to pressure, even while the Department of Justice, which had at its disposal the records of emergency boards, the National Mediation Board and accounts from Federal Bureau of Investigation, prepared papers in early 1936 to take penal action against the railroad for violations of the amended Railroad Labor Act. In the end, the Department was not confident of its case against the company. In June 1936, after meeting H.O. Gair, Chair of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, the special assistant to the Attorney General at Shreveport, Louisiana wrote his superior John Dickinson indicating despondently “that the agreements covering rates of pay and working conditions that have from time to time existed between the carrier and this class of employees [i.e. brakemen and firemen], have been changed so often and there has been such confusion as to the authorized representatives of this group that it would be impossible to sustain a charge of violation of Section 2, Paragraph 7, which we had been led to believe might be possible.” This was perhaps the result of shoddy evidence gathering on the part of FBI agents who were more enthusiastic about investigating the activities of Communists and other radicals than in dealing with employers’ infractions of labour and civil rights.

In the meantime, Harvey Couch and officials under his authority on the Louisiana & Arkansas continued to discharge brakemen, firemen, and other employees for their involvement in trade unionism. From the few available Department of Justice files, it is not possible to

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45 John Dickinson, Assistant Attorney General, Memorandum: Possible Criminal Proceedings Against the Louisiana Arkansas and Texas Railway Company for Violations of the Railway Labor Act as amended, 15 May 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 124-73-1 to 124-77-1, Box 15345, 3.
46 Special Assistant to the Attorney General to John Dickinson, 4 June 1936, Department of Justice Central Files Classified Subject Files Correspondence, 1-2.
determine whether a law suit was ever brought against the railroad. By September 1936, a strike on the Louisiana & Arkansas system at Minden, Louisiana, involving the big four white brotherhoods and the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen proved to be a fairly lengthy three month standoff over the issue of wages and workers’ collective bargaining rights. Although there is no direct evidence of joint co-ordination of the strike between the white brotherhoods and the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, presumably the decision to act involved close co-operation between the leaders of white and black trainmen as African Americans joined whites on strike on the same date (19 September 1936) even though they reached an agreement with the company, just three days before the white brotherhoods settled on 22 November that year. 48

The key achievement of the strike concerned collective bargaining rather than an immediately favourable adjustment of wages. The agreement carefully spelled out that “both white and colored” strikers were to be taken back with all their seniority rights and privileges restored, while for the first time, “the colored brakemen and firemen secured an agreement to meet with the railroad management within ten days to work out a schedule, and failure to do so, all matters pertaining to colored employees would be referred to an arbitration board consisting of one member appointed by the railroad management, one by the colored employees, and the Governor of Louisiana to act as a third member.”49 The outcome of the strike for African American trainmen on the Louisiana & Arkansas was no immediate breakthrough for their pay and working conditions, but at a time when their fellows on larger corporate railroads such as the

48 Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, Circular of Instructions, 100-102, October-December 1936, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen Records, Accession 5149, Kheel Centre, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
49 E.I. McKinley, Commissioner of Labor, State of Arkansas to J.R. Steelman for Secretary of Labor, 23 November 1936, RG 174, General Records of the Department of Labor, Office of the Secretary Frances Perkins, General Subject file, 1933-1941 (Conciliation – Strikes), Box 42; Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, Circular of Instructions, 100-102, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen Records, Accession 5149, Kheel Center.
Illinois Central faced an ongoing onslaught on their jobs from white workers, the agreement reached with one of the most obstinately anti-labour railroad employers in the Deep South was a significant triumph of their organized resiliency.

In the context of the Great Depression and its effects on railroad traffic, railroad employers were not hesitant to impose wage cuts and to undermine railroad labour organizations, regardless of whether these were organizations of white or black workers. In the Deep South, Harvey Couch, his brother C.P. Couch, and their associates at the head of the Louisiana & Arkansas Railroad system, unlike the managers of the Illinois Central system, showed no respect for the racial hierarchy in labour relations dominated by the “big four” white railroad brotherhoods. In shops of the Louisiana & Arkansas system, management did not pander to the dominating presence of the white shop crafts. They were quite at ease about replacing unionized white shopmen with unorganized African American shopmen in order to weaken the shop craft unions on their lines. They went on a broad offensive against organized labour that hit at organizations among African American as well as white trainmen.

In this situation, African American workers, especially trainmen organized by the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, not only engaged in a defensive fight to protect their right to organize but also made a steadfast effort to maintain the integrity of the committee they had chosen to represent them in collective bargaining. They successfully resisted management attempts to co-opt committee members into signing a wage deal that the majority of Association members did not accept. In its quest for wage gains and formal recognition from management as the organization representing African American trainmen on the Louisiana & Arkansas system, the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen showed tactical flexibility when it joined white trainmen at Minden, Louisiana, in a strike that went on through most of the fall 1936.
Intense Depression-era Battles on the Illinois Central System

In order to gain a vivid sense of the contrast between the small respite African American trainmen achieved on the Louisiana & Arkansas system after years of confrontation with a recalcitrant employer, it is useful to begin this section with the story of George E. Washington, the Memphis-based chair of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen, who seems to have suffered a mental breakdown under the stresses of the Great Depression on the railroads. It is interesting to observe that in the midst of his rather paranoid notion that Illinois Central officers at the head office in Chicago were part of a conspiracy to kidnap and to kill him, Washington was expressing in a confused fashion the sentiment, widely shared by African American trainmen, that they faced hostile enemies on all sides of railroading work. On the one side, they had to contend with white workers putting pressure on them to vacate their positions in the service, on the other, they had to deal with an employer, the Illinois Central system, that was ruthless in using layoffs and wage cuts to bring its railroad business back into a profitable position.

Despite the dire situation they faced on the Illinois Central system in Deep South, these workers would have been aware of significant political shifts occurring at the national level, and the promise of reform involved in the New Deal policies introduced by the Democratic Party under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The concentration of capital and land in the hands of land owners and the devastating effect of government programmes such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration on the fortunes of sharecroppers is a negative aspect of the New Deal well addressed in the work of scholars such as Pete Daniel. Historian Patricia Sullivan has

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directed attention to the more positive effects of the New Deal in the South. Although conservative Democrats still dominated the Party in the South, Sullivan has argued that Roosevelt’s Washington “became the focus of groups long on the margins of national politics – industrial workers, sharecroppers, and African Americans of all classes – who found sympathetic allies among the young recruits of the New Deal.”

Southern opposition to the New Deal, especially with regard to labour reforms that threatened to disrupt the order on which the cheap labour system of South was founded, encouraged Roosevelt to court African American support. This created a stir of enthusiastic political activism among African American citizens across the Deep South, further augmented by the emergence of the enlightened and egalitarian trade unionism of the CIO in 1935. The CIO became deeply involved in Roosevelt’s 1936 election campaign through Labor’s Non-Partisan League, which organized local “get-the-vote out” campaigns in nearly every state among both white and black workers. Such enthusiasm for reform among grassroots supporters of the New Deal certainly would have inspired African American railroad workers in the Deep South. They most certainly believed that reforms in labour relations legislation opened new opportunities for them to gain formal recognition for the independent organizations they had created on the railroads since the early 1920s. Thus, in one of his more lucid states, trainmen George E. Washington vented this wider sense of confidence in the political changes taking place on the national level when he characterized the mid-1930s as a “period marking the beginning of the end of peonage and miserable labor oppression inflicted upon Negroes of the South.”

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52 Sullivan, 92.
53 George E. Washington to Harold M. Stephens, 1 May 1935, Washington to Stephens, 29 December 1935, RG 60, Department of Justice Central Files, Classifies Subject Files, 124-50 to 24-73-1, Box 15344, RG. 60, NARA, College Park, Washington, DC.
Indeed, when he was not writing delusional ravings to the Department of Justice, Washington persisted in representing the grievances of his fellow trainmen before reluctant Illinois Central officials throughout the 1930s. By 1939, he had succeeded in getting an African American traffic agent appointed to the Missouri Pacific Railroad in a bid to divert African American patronage (such as Baptist delegates travelling through Memphis to a convention in Philadelphia) from the Illinois Central. There is no evidence that this had any effect on Illinois Central business, though it does represent the ongoing striving of African American trainmen to organize and to resist white encroachments on their jobs and to prevent their complete elimination from railroad employment.

It was the murders and the disproportionate loss of jobs that African American trainmen experienced on the Illinois Central system since the early 1930s that drove George E. Washington, tireless chair of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen into a state of mental breakdown. By the end of a trying year (1935), the disturbed Washington was writing outrageous letters to the Department of Justice claiming that the Illinois Central and the National Board of Mediation were in a conspiracy to have him assassinated. He sent an abusive letter to Illinois Central personnel manager, C.R. Young, charging that the company had been directly involved in “these heinous, bastardly, beastly crimes in which scores of Negroes have been killed”.

Prior to the onset of the delusional state of mind that overtook him, Washington had led a vigorous campaign to challenge the unfair practice in which African American trainmen had been excluded from reemployment with full seniority rights as business on the Illinois Central system slowly revitalized. Early in 1935 Washington, with twenty other trainmen who had been laid off, filed a suit against the Illinois Central system in a Shelby County, Tennessee, court.

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54 Washington to Stephens, 29 December 1935, Department of Justice Central Files, Classifies Subject Files.
55 Washington to C. R Young, 26 December 1935, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession No. 5295, Box 8, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
house on the grounds that their seniority rights established by a long standing agreement between
the company and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen had been violated.56 The jury dismissed
the suit, not because the argument brought by the plaintiffs was unsound, but simply because the
company had carefully side-stepped the issue of existing rules by implementing in its place an
agreement with the Order of Railway Conductors and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen that
had been dormant since 1914. This agreement had stipulated that men laid off as a result of a
slack in business could be recalled to work and would be regarded as having been in continuous
service (i.e. with their seniority rights intact) as long as they had not been out of service for more
than six months.57

In response to the case, filed under the name of W.O. Johnson versus Illinois Central and
Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad, management impressed the jury with questionable
evidence from the Memphis Terminal showing that there had been no racial discrimination. They
claimed on the basis of this evidence that far more African Americans than former white
employees had been recalled to service between 1930 and 1932.58 Under Washington’s lead, the
Memphis-based grievance committee of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen
conducted a separate investigation over the wider Memphis Division, which indeed showed that
African American trainmen experienced a steep decline in their employment opportunities on the
Illinois Central system in the short period between 1927 and 1932.59

56 George E. Washington, Obed Parker and John Smith, “Grievance of Colored Employees of Illinois Central and
Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroads, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession No. 5295.
57 T. S. Jackson, General Chairman Grievance Committee, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen to David Hanover
and J.C. Strickland, Jr., 27 September 1933, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession No.
5295.
58 J.A. Downs to Joseph Eastman, Federal Coordinator of Transportation, 23 June 1934, Illinois Central Gulf
Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession No. 5295, 2.
59 J. M. Quigley to W. Atwill, 2 November 1933, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession
No. 5295.
Despite management’s claim that white trainmen had suffered even more severely in the loss of seniority since the cutbacks started, the National Association of Colored Locomotive Firemen also produced independent evidence showing the disproportionate job loss that African Americans had endured. Thus, in a snap survey on 19 August 1931, the Association had found that the proportion of crews on the Mississippi, Jackson and Grenada Districts, were 69 per cent white. On 25 August on the Louisiana Division, crews were almost 60 per cent white.60 In terms of the 1914 agreement, men wanting the opportunity to return to their posts within six months since they had been laid off had to provide their address details and stay in constant contact with company recruiting agents.

This provided a convenient means to marginalize African American trainmen, as one official reported in 1933: “The last few days in May when the men were relieved by their limitation agreement it was necessary to call a number of extra men, these men were called as emergency men and at the time probably more emergency white men were called than Negroes largely due to the fact … that the white men were easier to find.” 61 From the perspective of prospective white trainmen (also straining under the impact of the Depression) such manoeuvres, meant to peaceably displace African American trainmen and yardmen in favour of white workers, were not having a sufficiently deep and quick enough effect on the continued employment of African American workers on the Illinois Central system. In addition, African American trainmen resisted these moves on their right to employment with as much vigour as was feasible in a situation where Illinois Central management was reluctant to give in to their persistent requests to have their organizations receive the right to speak on their behalf as bodies

61 Quigley to Atwill, 11 July 1933, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession No. 5295.
with formal negotiating powers. Resistance from African American workers slowed the process of their elimination from employment in fairly lucrative positions in the train service. Frustrated white firemen (with the hidden backing of brotherhood leaders) on the Illinois Central system in the Deep South, once again turned to violence to intimidate African Americans into giving up their cherished positions in the train service.

Between 1931 and 1934, sixteen African American trainmen in the Mississippi Delta were injured or murdered by white assailants with shotguns. The Depression-induced cutbacks in employment on the Illinois Central train service affected white trainmen along with their African American co-workers. The desperation involved in the job search encouraged some unemployed white trainmen to unleash their frustration in shooting down African American trainmen still employed in the service. Apart from arrested gunman Marvin Varnado, who seems to have survived doing various odd jobs and petty crimes, some of the men identified for their involvement in the conspiracy to shoot African American trainmen – Reedy Lee, Matt Lewis, C. J. Miller, Emmett Smith, and Walter Peterson – had been laid off work as a result of the downturn in railroad traffic. Some of the earliest attacks such as the shooting and wounding of a trainman named Kincade at Canton, Mississippi on 8 August 1931, occurred during the peak in the reduction in business on the Illinois Central. 62

Many of the trainmen who had been killed or wounded in the shootings were prime targets for attack. As Illinois Central personnel manager, C.R. Young explained to T.S. McFarland of the National Railroad Adjustment Board, these were men with lengthy service experience. During the worst years of the Depression, thanks to their seniority, they were contractually

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62 C. R. Young to T. S. McFarland, 6 April 1939, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Employee Files, Accession 5295, Box 12.
entitled to maintain their runs on both freight and passenger trains.63 The white men that had been encouraged by secret sponsors to become involved in the shootings were enticed to do so, with the appealing prospect that they would regain employment by eliminating African American trainmen.

Thus, thirty year old James Matt Lewis, a former white fireman at McComb, Mississippi, testified to the Memphis police on 22 August 1932 that a month before the shooting of fireman Ernest Clark at Brookhaven, “I again talked to Reedy Lee about the shootings. I told him that my wife and children were in need and I had tried everywhere for a job, Biloxi, Gulfport and Memphis, but couldn’t find a thing to do. Reatie says –’the thing for you to do is help get rid of these Negroes.’”64 However, the men involved in conspiring to have African American trainmen shot were not all unemployed or desperate for work. As Emmett Smith stated under oath: “I told Reedy after I left Goza’s – I says, ‘Reedy, I feel like we are doing the wrong thing; I know we are doing the wrong thing; Let’s don’t do it.’ He says, ‘Oh! Hell, don’t back out now, we need a job; this thing will put us to work. He says, ‘And besides the men who are working will take care of us.’”65 Likewise, Varnado gave evasive testimony to the effect that there had been a collection of funds among white firemen still in employment directed at funding the shootings.66

Clearly, the personal frustrations of the men who had actually gone on excursions to ambush African American trainmen is not a sufficient explanation for the violence. A more revealing explanation for the violence provided here, demonstrates that it was a counter response to African American trainmen’s efforts to resist ongoing attempts to reduce their employment in

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63 Young to McFarland, 6 April 1939.
66 Statement of M. F. Varnado taken at the Lincoln County Courthouse in Brookhaven, Mississippi, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 18.
posts on the train service that had became attractive to white workers faced with cutbacks in employment.

Early on during the Depression, white trainmen began to step up the pressure on Illinois Central officials to change the status quo in which they believed African American trainmen held up to 50 per cent, and sometimes even more, of posts on the railroad. From Vicksburg, Mississippi, a committee of African American firemen wrote general manager W. Atwill, that they possessed reliable information that white firemen were demanding a third of all positions.67 Senior Illinois Central officials clearly were responding positively to the demands of white trainmen. In an official memorandum it was reported for instance, that two senior officials W. Atwill and J.M. Quigley had agreed in a telephone conversation that black brakemen should not be used on the Louisiana District. Atwill had also instructed Quigley to make plans to remove African American brakemen from the local run south of Canton on the Louisiana Division and to placate them with the idea that their seniority was sufficient to allow them to assert prior claim on different runs.68

Some African American trainmen took a strategic position in order to retain their posts on the Illinois Central system. This involved making a trade off between their wages and continued employment on the railroad in the yards of the Memphis, Vicksburg and Louisiana divisions. In January 1931, leaders of the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen from various divisions stretching between Tennessee and New Orleans, proposed to company officials that “if you will help us, we shall pay you in this way: by accepting about seven and half cents less on the dollar

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67 Grant Johnson, Frank Johnson, John Taylor to W. Atwill, 6 June 1930, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.
than the present pay." The seven and a half cents proposition, which its backers claimed would save the company $75,000 a year, was insufficient attraction to railroad officials. They declined to make a deal on wages with an organization, which they did not recognize as having the right to make contractual negotiations that were seen to be the privilege of the white Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen.

Illinois Central officials were disinclined to trust that such a deal would necessarily be a lasting one. They were also aware that one of the leaders who proposed the seven and half cents cut was H.O. Gair, who had been like Charles Sideboard in the forefront of brakemen’s claims for back pay due to them since the end of World War I. Thus, C.P. Couch, president of the Louisiana & Arkansas system, informed Illinois Central vice president G.E. Patterson that, “this Negro Gair is an employee of the Y & MV and lives at Baton Rouge. The information I have is that he is a rather bad actor. He is the Negro I called a liar before the Emergency Board here at Shreveport, and the one I told you that we did not have a contract with and that we would never have one.” It was not every African American trainman however, that was willing to compromise their standard wages in order to save their jobs. Many were willing to stay the course of protest in order to secure their jobs. Thus, as Memphis attorney J.C. Strickland, Jr. informed vice president G.E. Patterson, there were persistent African American trainmen at Memphis who had been given back their posts as a result of their insistence on exercising the seniority rights that had been annulled since they had been laid off.

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69 Quigley to Atwill, 24 January 1931, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.
70 C. P. Couch to G. E Patterson, 6 July 1932, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.
71 J. C Strickland, Jr. to G. E Patterson, 7 August 1933, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.
There is no evidence to suggest that the Illinois Central officials made any specific material concessions with white labour in order to provide white trainmen privileged access to jobs on parts of the system over which African American trainmen held seniority. After the Chicago 1932 deal in which the railroad brotherhoods settled for a 10 per cent deduction from workers’ pay, the railroad brotherhoods were continually at loggerheads with railroad employers attempting to push for deeper and even more sustained cuts. Although the big four railroad brotherhoods signed an agreement early in 1932 for a temporary 10 per cent deduction, which included a commitment on the part of the roads to “do everything practicable to preserve existing employment and to increase employment”, toward the end of the year, the press reported that the big four brotherhoods had been unanimous in opposing a further 20 per cent cut in pay.\textsuperscript{72}

Nevertheless Illinois Central officials undoubtedly tended to defer to the power of white railroad labour over the overtures of organized African American trainmen. However, these officials did not always ignore protests from African American trainmen against moves to remove them from scarce jobs. Thus, in writing to his senior W. Atwill about a protest of African American switchmen at Memphis, Tennessee, Superintendent General J.M. Quigley, who had been instructed to remove African American trainmen from the Louisiana Division the previous year, alerted Atwill to positive action that had been taken to address the concerns of the switchmen. According to Quigley, in the early summer 1933, African American switchmen had been omitted from a list of laid-off men called back to work. Officials at the Memphis switching yards had excluded African American switchmen in an attempt to cause their six months out of service to lapse, and in this way deprive them of their seniority rights altogether. Quigley informed Atwill that the matter had been brought to the attention of Superintendent Holcomb,

who immediately corrected the list and allowed laid-off African American switchmen to be called back to work in their turn.\textsuperscript{73}

However, the superintendent Holcomb mentioned in Quigley’s letter had indeed been part of a conspiratorial move to replace African American switchmen. Holcomb’s action to correct the situation in which African American switchmen’s seniority rights were threatened did not occur as a voluntary change of heart. He was pressured to do so after senior officers were informed of action by African American switchmen to pursue legal action to counter threats to their employment. In an anonymous letter, some ten days before Quigley wrote Atwill, one of these switchmen had explained the situation to Illinois vice president G. E. Patterson in a protest letter that read:

\begin{quote}
Advise that there is a movement on foot to replace certain Negro switchmen and replace them with whites who have less seniority. This movement is sponsored by Mr. J. R. Burns and Put Dye. This is an open discrimination, a flagrant floutation (sic) of their agreement and the constitution of the United States. The Negroes are being urged to file injunction in each case and ask for damages what they are prepared to do. On May 30 and 31, 1933, they called whites to work and refused to call Negroes. Have never had this trouble before. It is queer that no one would ever sanction it but Mr. Burns and Holcomb. They are planning to call all whites on June 14, 1933. You will save the company money to prevent it.\textsuperscript{74}
\end{quote}

Despite the temporary retreat that African American switchmen had forced on superintendent Holcomb by calling the matter to the attention of one of the most senior officials of the Illinois Central system, toward the end of the year these switchmen again were protesting that they were being kept out of employment by aggressive action on the part of white trainmen. They informed

\textsuperscript{73} Quigley to Atwill, 19 June 1933 Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.
\textsuperscript{74} Anonymous to G. E. Patterson, 10 June 1933, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.
general superintendent general Quigley that the determination of white men was of such insistence that many of them worked double shifts just to keep African American men out.\footnote{Quigley to Atwill, 23 September 1933, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 8.}

The push to have white trainmen replace African Americans had support at the top of the big four brotherhoods. In September 1931, grand president, H.O. Gair, of the Association Colored Railway Trainmen gave Will T. Andrews of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) the alarming news that the Brotherhood of Railway Trainman at its national convention in Houston, Texas, had adopted a hostile resolution which declared plainly that men in train and yard service who did not maintain membership of the Brotherhood would lose their seniority rights. Although the resolution was written in a form addressed to white members whose membership may have lapsed as result of the layoffs they had endured, for Gair, the understated motive was contained in a separate resolution in which the Brotherhood adopted a closed shop policy that was a clear indication that membership in the Brotherhood would be the sole guarantee of a job in train and yard services.\footnote{H. O. Gair to Will T. Andrews, 15 September 1931, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10: Peonage, Labour and the New Deal, 1913-1939, Reel 22, University Publications of America, Bethesda, Maryland; H. O. Gair to L. W Baldwin, President, Missouri Pacific Lines, 28 November 1931, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.} Superficially concerned with protecting the Brotherhood from an ongoing decline in its membership, in fact the closed shop was a deliberate means to impose a union rule barring African American trainmen from continued employment on the railroads.

Against claims that it had been wilfully involved in campaigns to drive African American trainmen off their on posts on the railroads, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen was wont to claim that the intensity of layoffs had equally affected white workers. In response to lawyers, David Hanover and J. C. Strickland, Jr., representing African American trainmen in Memphis, general chair of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, T.S. Jackson, swore in September 1933
that there had been no moves to discriminate against African American trainmen as, in fact, far more white men had suffered layoffs than African American workers. Under the stress of cross examination in the Chancery Court of Shelby County in March 1940, Jackson was tricked into admitting that the Brotherhood had indeed been involved, during the early 1930s, in a drive to eliminate African American workers from the seniority list on the Illinois Central system. The reason for the drive, he stated before the court, was “that we found out long ago that the Negroes are not as competent as white men in train and yard service.”

This drive was helped by local officers of the Illinois Central system such as Holcomb at Memphis, who assisted the campaign to deprive African Americans of employment by pursuing semi-official means such as the marginalization of African Americans during call ups for additional hands. The campaign did not succeed quite as extensively and as quickly as white workers may have desired, however. The resistance and protest from African American trainmen focused on maintaining their positions on the railroads challenged white workers’ confidence that they could have things their way by aggressive deals with local railroad officials, who were often singularly sympathetic to the plight white workers faced under the conditions prevailing in the Depression. As African American trade unionist, L.R. Moloy told NAACP secretary Walter White: “It is a known fact that they, the white trade unions, have tried to drive the Negro train and engine men from the service by discriminatory working contracts, but this method is very slow.” It was also a method, Moloy explained, which had proven open to attack from the point of view of African American trainmen’s constitutional rights. For white trainmen therefore, “the

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78 T.S. Jackson, called as witness for defence, C.T. Earle versus Illinois Central Railroad Company in the Chancery Court of Shelby County, Tennessee, 12-13 March 1940, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Accession 5295, Box 18-20, 90.
79 L. R Moloy to Walter White, 29 February 1932 Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22
quickest and surest manner in which to dispose the Negro workmen would be to frighten them away and to bring about this fear they have resorted to murdering and wounding the Negro.”

Thus, the violent campaign by white trainmen in the Mississippi and Louisiana Divisions of the Illinois Central system between 1931 and 1934, starting with the shooting and wounding of a brakemen named Kincade at Canton, Mississippi in the first week of August 1931, and ending with the last known attack on 11 July 1934, near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was the act of men driven to it by a desperation for access to a livelihood they perceived African American trainmen to be actively blocking.

African American trainmen (mostly firemen) affected by the violence did not simply shrink back in fear. As a result of the attacks, they made an effort to increase the effectiveness of their various organizations on the railroads in fighting back ongoing attempts by white trainmen to remove them from the train service. African American trainmen, under the leadership of veteran trade unionists Thomas Redd and R.L. Mays, formed the so-called International Association of Railway Employees, in order to both to challenge and to make effective use of the amended Railway Labor Act of 1934 which confined the right of representation to the majority of a craft or class of workers on the railroads. Thus, one of the goals of new Association was to “consolidate all groups into a single body of protest and action by appealing to the broadest possible constituency around the goal of organizing all railway groups of the race behind the fight for justice” and the right to have representation on the National Mediation Board established under the Railway Labor Act.

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80 Moloy to White, 29 February 1932.
81 Memorandum on Assaults on Negro Trainmen, 18 July 1934, Moloy to White, 29 February 1932 Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22; T.S. Jackson, called as witness for defence, C.T. Earle vs. Illinois Central Railroad Company in the Chancery Court of Shelby County, Tennessee, 12-13 March 1940, 12-13 March 1940.
82 Arnesen 135; Chicago Defender, 16 January 1937.
Perhaps aware of the impact of nationwide demonstrations and the legal appeals led by the Communist Party and the International Labor Defense (ILD) on behalf of the Scottsboro boys, the new Association made a commitment to the “importance of mass action and collective bargaining for all race railway employees.” Beyond the militant rhetoric, the Association avoided mass action and concentrated on petitioning federal government to pass legislation (similar to the anti-lynching law proposed by the ILD) outlawing the murder of African American trainmen. Perhaps their weakest step was their approach to the NAACP rather than the ILD. The NAACP denied a request from the affected trainmen calling for legal assistance on the grounds that “We are terribly pressed for funds.” A local African American community organization, known as the Warren County Civic League with offices in Vicksburg, Mississippi, offered to make a collection to support the NAACP in taking legal action but the offer seems to have gone nowhere. The NAACP, even though it was wary that “this is the kind of action which the Communists will seize upon”, dealt with the issue in a manner that did not draw fully on the self organization among African American trainmen and communities in the Deep South affected by the violence.

The NAACP ignored an earnest request to put one of its own investigators in the field and opted to leave the matter in the hands of the Department of Justice. The Department did not rise to the occasion. NAACP secretary Walter White’s lengthy conference in Washington with Attorney General Mitchell produced nothing but a blank response from the Department of Justice, declaring the matter as one falling under the jurisdiction of state governments in which

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83 Chicago Defender, 9 May 1936.
84 Arnesen, 136.
85 Walter White to L. R. Moloy, 11 March 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
86 A.A. Casey to NAACP, 4 May 1933, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
87 White to Francis Harmon, 11 April 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
the killings had occurred.\footnote{N. Dodds, Assistant Attorney General to Walter White, 7 April 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.} Beyond its fruitless approach to the Department of Justice, the NAACP relied uncritically on officials of the Illinois Central Railroad, whom local African American trade unionist L. R. Moloy complained had refused to increase security beyond their special agent force. These special agents, in the experience of the trainmen living in the Deep South, were inadequate protection in an environment where “law enforcement officials of the cities and counties of this vicinity have refused to co-operate with the company or to take part in apprehending the guilty parties.”\footnote{Moloy to White, 29 February 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.} The NAACP later would claim credit for persuading the Illinois Central to put up a reward of $5000 which eventuated in the arrest of five men for the shootings.

Rather than make vigorous efforts to gain first hand accounts from those affected by the violence, the NAACP put its energies into arousing public outrage against the killings by drawing on the support of influential white liberals in the region. This included a Major Alexander Fitzhugh, “head of the largest wholesale concern in Vicksburg”, Bishop Theodore DuBose Bratton of the Episcopal diocese of Mississippi, Frank Willcoxon, secretary of the Vicksburg-based YMCA and a local railroad club “composed of about two hundred and fifty men and women representing railroad employees.”\footnote{Will N. Alexander to White, 4 April 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22; Alexander Fitzhugh to Will N. Alexander, 18 April 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.} Alexander Fitzhugh had occasion to address members of the club with a speech against the killings. He claimed to have received endorsement from club members for his statements against the violence. Despite the publicity involving liberal-minded white locals and the arrests of five men who had been involved in carrying out the assaults, the African American trainmen affected by the violence did not feel that the NAACP had made any significant progress in uncovering the agents behind the men with the shotguns.
Thus, after nearly five years since the first shooting in August 1931 and no new information or arrests of the men funding the assassins, Vicksburg fireman Cleve Johnson exasperatedly requested that NAACP President J. E. Springer let him know “if there is anything you are willing to do to help us in the matter. If not let me know immediately.”91 Disgruntled Memphis trade unionist George E. Washington had the NAACP in mind when he complained of “Northern Negroes” and racketeers whose sympathy for African Americans in the South was only superficial.92

Indeed, the NAACP’s liberal allies in Mississippi had created a smoke screen that identified the isolated activities of an obscure group known as the Mystic Order of United Workers as the source of the attacks, while denying that the violence had any widespread support among respectable white railroaders.93 Although the Mystic Order was suspected of involvement in the shootings, the evidence linking them to the killings on the railroads was circumstantial and vague. The Mystic Order, NAACP Secretary Walter White informed Will Alexander of the Commission on Interracial Co-operation, had been formed recently among unemployed white men (mostly likely construction workers), who had ganged up on thirteen African American workers in Jackson, Mississippi and chased them from their jobs on a building site.94 Despite his public outcry against the killings, a friend of the NAACP, Bishop Bratton was remarkably complicit in local evasiveness around the need to find and identify the sponsors of the shootings. Thus, Bratton emphatically discouraged investigator U.S. attorney B.F. Cameron from giving the murderous incidents any further federal notice on the grounds that “such a course would tend to

91 Cleve Johnson to J. E. Springer, President NAACP, 16 July 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
92 Washington to Stephens, Assistant to the U.S Attorney General, 1 May 1935, RG 60, Department of Justice Central Files, Classifies Subject Files.
93 Fitzhugh to Alexander, 18 April 1932.
94 White to Alexander, 11 April 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
relieve local authorities of their just responsibilities and would also be somewhat resented by the rank and file of our local citizens.”

Inevitably, though the NAACP and senior Illinois Central officials, in co-operation with sympathetic local business in the Mississippi Delta, had succeeded in producing arrests, the trainmen affected by the violence were not satisfied that the arrests settled their suspicions of a wider conspiracy behind the killings. Trainmen who had survived the attacks had good reason to feel that they had received no meaningful and just closure on the issue of the violence after the arrest of the five men. Significantly, as had been the case in the shooting spree against African American trainmen that occurred in 1921, a curious aspect of the violence in the early 1930s was the targeting of known African American trade union organizers.

In his statement before District Attorney J. W. Cassidy at Brookhaven, Mississippi, Marvin Fred Varnado, an unemployed white youth who had admitted to shooting African American firemen, hinted at the truth in his inconsistent answer to the question, “Did it make any difference to you as to which Negro firemen you shot?” Varnado indicated that it did not matter which African American trainmen was shot, although he casually admitted to receiving more money for shooting certain African American trainmen than he had received for shooting others. When he shot fireman, Turner Sims on 11 March 1932 at McComb, Mississippi, he had come out specifically to shoot Sims, as he had been informed by his sponsors that Sims was a “bad negro.” There was an extra reward for shooting a “bad negro” like fireman Sims. Varnado received $75 rather than the $50 he had usually received. According to cultural historian Lawrence Levine, the “bad negro” of African American folklore could be described as someone

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95 Bishop Bratton to B. F. Cameron, 20 April 1932, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
96 Statement of M. F. Varnado taken at the Lincoln County Courthouse in Brookhaven, Mississippi, 20 August 1932, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8
who “had the strength, courage, and ability to flout the limitations imposed by white society.”

As a railroad employee, it is unlikely that Sims was a “bad negro’ in the sense of the social bandit or the outlaw as described by Levine in his discussion of African American folk heroes. Sims was most likely akin to the “moral hard man” whom Levine distinguished from the social bandit. He was most likely a trade unionist, who like the moral hard man “triumphed not by breaking the laws of the larger society, but by smashing its expectations and stereotypes” and by transcending the models and roles established for African Americans by the white majority.

Seen in this light, Grant Johnson, president of the Colored Firemen’s Association shot down on Christmas Eve 1932, was clearly targeted for the model he represented of a man who transcended the Southern stereotype of African American docility. In addition to heading a trade union, Johnson was also a property holder in East Texas and New Orleans. He had survived a previous attempt on his life close to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Johnson had repeatedly, as head of a committee of fireman, written to senior officers of the Illinois Central including, general manager W. Atwill and vice president G.E. Patterson, concerning moves (including representation before the company head office in Chicago) on the part white firemen to take up the majority of available posts.

On several occasions in the early 1930s, Johnson had requested that his committee be given an audience with senior officials only to be told again and again, “that I cannot meet you and your committee to discuss matters which involve schedule agreements. However, I have no objection to discussing any matter with you as an individual employee of the Yazoo &

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98 Levine, 420.
99 The Vicksburg Herald 24 December 1932, clipping, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
Mississippi Valley Railroad." General Manager Atwill had given a similar response to L. R. Moloy, the national President of the National Association of Colored Locomotive Fireman, on the grounds that the company would only hold contractual discussions with the white Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen. Despite such rebuffs, in which management only conceded to meeting African American trainmen as individuals rather than as representative committees, black trainmen, aware of their rights under the amended Labor Relations Act of 1934, continually organized into trade union associations (including the Colored Switchmen’s Union No. 18135 chartered under the AFL) that continually pressed Illinois Central management for official recognition of their organizations.

The constant and insistent presence of African American organization on the Illinois Central system did not sit well with Illinois Central officials faced with a deep crisis in the early 1930s. These officials, especially at the senior level of managers in the Chicago head office, were unlikely to have encouraged racial violence against African American trainmen. Yet, their the lack of swiftness and resolve, which also had characterized their behaviour during the violent incidents of 1921 leaves intriguing questions about their inability to uncover those who had paid assassins to attack their African American employees.

It is even more intriguing to observe that the violence occurred at a time when Illinois Central officials were repeatedly refusing to meet African American trainmen as organized

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100 Grant Johnson, Frank Johnson and John Taylor to W. Atwill, 6 June 1930 Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8; Atwill to Grant Johnson, 29 May 1931, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8; Grant Johnson, Julius Johnson and Aaron Smith to G. E. Patterson, Atwill and F. R. Mays, 2 June 1931, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8.
102 Obed Parker, Ike Jones and Henry Tyler, committee, Switchmen’s Union 18135, to Holcomb, general superintendent, 14 October 1930, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8; Holcomb to Atwill, 19 November 1930, Ibid; Fred Williams, Secretary Switchmen’s Union, 16 November 1936, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8; Quigley to Young, 19 November 1936, Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Selected Personnel Department Files, 1901-1965, Box 8.
spokespersons for their fellow workers seeking management intervention against aggressive moves on their seniority rights from white workers. Railroads in the Deep South, as Arnesen has suggested, often had used African American workers as a “bulwark against white unionism and union power.”103 However, as African American trainmen began to organize independently and put pressure on railroad management to grant them the right to bargain collectively on an equal footing with the powerful white brotherhoods, it is likely that these railroad officials would have more readily dispensed with the services of these workers. Although the emergent unionism among African American trainmen tended to pursue legal and conciliatory means to address their grievances, the mere fact that African American workers should want to approach management with a collective voice threatened the very rationale for deploying them against the white brotherhoods whose material advantages in the South had been constrained by the presence of mostly unorganized and lower paid African American workers.

For its part, the NAACP expressed satisfaction that its effort at persuasion had prompted the Illinois Central to take action and secure the arrest of five men involved in the shootings. However, these arrests proved to be too little and too late as none of the arrested men were charged for murder. The five men were taken into custody at scattered points between Memphis, Tennessee and McComb, Mississippi, charged only for assaults that produced wounded men, even though there were eight dead among the sixteen known to have been attacked. For a successful hit, all of the accused admitted to receiving offers of money between $25 (if the victim was simply incapacitated for work) and $125 (if the victim was killed). All, however,

disclaimed any knowledge of the source of the money they had received.\textsuperscript{104} The arrests of the five men in September 1932 did not result in an immediate end to the shootings.

In fact, the shootings had been ongoing despite the arrest and eventual release early in the summer of Charles B. Coon and Vernon Campbell accused of shooting brakeman Will Harvey on a busy street in Natchez, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{105} Coon and Campbell were acquitted, despite being found with a hit list of African American firemen and regardless of the sworn statements of a white woman and her daughter that Coon claimed to have shot Will Harvey.\textsuperscript{106} Grant Johnson would be killed in December that year. No killings were reported (no public attention was given to men who continued to be shot at and survived being hit) throughout the next year, but the seeming quiet was broken with the publicized shooting of Woody Barrett in July 1934.

Grant Johnson’s niece Marie, distressed over the shooting of yet another family member (her cousin Woody Barrett), wrote to the NAACP insisting on “immediate action from this organization” as “men are being killed and nothing is being done about it.”\textsuperscript{107} In response to Marie Johnson, NAACP secretary, Walter White had little to offer except to boast about the publicity the NAACP had achieved in order to secure “cessation of these attacks” and to trumpet the futile efforts the NAACP was making to get the U.S Attorney General involved.\textsuperscript{108} Marie Johnson, in order to meet a request from White for evidence that he might place before Joseph Eastman, federal co-ordinator of railroads, wrote a fairly detailed account of events starting with the earliest killings. The particular details contained in the letter suggest that this account was not solely the result of Marie’s personal outrage over the racial violence. Her letter contained evidence of a collaborative effort among trainmen to relate their experience of events and to

\textsuperscript{104} San Francisco Spokesman, 2 September 1932, clipping, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
\textsuperscript{105} Marie S Johnson, to the NAACP, 10 September 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
\textsuperscript{106} Johnson to the NAACP, 10 September 1934.
\textsuperscript{107} Johnson to the NAACP, 13 August 1934.
\textsuperscript{108} White to Johnson, 24 August 1932.
pinpoint certain known culprits behind the assassins. Although certainly written in the unsteady prose of a grieving young woman, the letter was, in its way a manifest example of the “hidden transcripts”, or more precisely, the bonds of community and mutual support that historian Robin D. G. Kelley has suggested involved “a collectivist ethos that shaped black working class political struggle” in the Deep South.109

Behind Marie Johnson, it is clear that trainmen, who had been directly affected by the violence had co-operated with the young woman in the hope of showing that the sponsors of the killings were hidden hands in the leadership of the white railroad brotherhoods financing the assassins and not “some hoboes”, as one engineer claimed to have seen behind the shooting and wounding of Woody Barrett near Baton Rouge.110 The substance of Marie Johnson’s unofficial investigation, pulled together through the organized and interpersonal network of African American trade unionists and trainmen who had survived the shootings, was painstakingly set out. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the letter succeeded in gaining the trainmen the satisfaction of a thorough official probe at the federal level, it contained sufficient detail that the trainmen hoped would set the record straight and show the cover up that involved senior members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and white Illinois Central personnel such as railroad engineers, who had been witness to the violence. In a counter narrative to the perception that the violence could not be traced back to names and faces sponsoring the hit men who had hidden in bushes behind the tracks, the stories trainmen provided to Marie Johnson indicates they knew some of their assailants personally.

The narrative constructed by Marie Johnson, tells of a group of white firemen and enginemen claiming to be a grievance committee speaking on behalf of all firemen on the Illinois

109 Robin D. G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South” The Journal of American History 80:1 1, (June 1993), 80.
110 Johnson to the NAACP, 10 September 1934.
Central system, approaching African American firemen with papers they had wished them to sign. The top sheet, supposedly a list of names, was a petition in defence of existing seniority rights on the railroads. Behind this was a carbon sheet, and behind that a third sheet, contradicting the first with words to the effect that “any promoted man (that is a fireman who has been promoted to be an engineman) could remove a Colored railway fireman from the job who has been in service 10, 15, 20 or 25 years.” The African American firemen saw through the ruse and refused to sign the papers.

The bogus grievance committee decided to approach the African American firemen individually, and on the evening of 19 March 1932, they visited Aaron Williams at home to persuade him to sign. Williams refused and was told that he would be sorry for that. Later that evening, seated beside engineer Oscar Wilks, Williams was shot in the head. Four days later, Wilbur Anderson, another fireman whom the bogus committee had approached for a signature, was working a freight train between Baton Rouge and Vicksburg, when the train was flagged down and a gunman stepped on board. In this case, the engineer (known only as Burns) behaved in a manner that clearly demonstrated his collusion in the plot. Anderson had begged Burns to call the gunman off. Burns, possibly aware that there was a second gunman in the woods, shoved Anderson away and told him to run for his life. Anderson stepped off the train and was shot in the back of the head as soon as he started to run.

Such stories confirmed for African American trainmen that the shootings were not necessarily the work of an outside force such as the Ku Klux Klan, but an inside job with an inside sponsor. Shooting survivor Woody Barrett told Marie Johnson a story similar to Wilbur Anderson’s account, explicitly pinpointing engineer, W. H. Petty, as a passive party to the crime.

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111 Johnson to the NAACP, 10 September 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
Barrett, who was seated on the engine beside Petty when he was sprayed with buckshot, had several times called out to Petty, “I am shot. I am shot.” Petty was slow to respond, pretending he had seen no assailants. The gunman had taken aim from close range, on Petty’s side; a fact which suggested for Barrett that Petty was looking the gunman straight in the eye. As African American trainmen with experience were aware, the attackers “always shoot from the side of the engineer” in order to stay hidden from the targeted firemen. Were the gunman to take aim from the direction in which the fireman sat, as the trainmen like Barrett understood, the engineer too would have been shot “as some of the buck is likely to hit the engineer when the shots scatter.”

The veracity of these accounts is supported by the fact that Marie Johnson possessed a list of all the names and addresses of the wounded men at McComb and Durant, Mississippi, and at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who were willing to give formal testimony to events as they had witnessed them as surviving victims. She informed the NAACP that one of the survivors, O.J. Street, was acquainted with the Gunner brothers, who had shot Clarence Booker, a trade unionist, who had been one of the first to alert the NAACP of the violent outbreak. When they were arrested, the Gunner brothers were identified by a storekeeper and a group of African American brakemen and farmers who had witnessed the daylight murder. The trainmen who gave their account to Marie Johnson were aware that defence for the Gunners’ had cost thousands, a fact they believed which indicated with certainty that one of the white brotherhoods had come to the rescue and secured the Gunners’ release.

Although none of the testimony that the wounded trainmen provided Marie Johnson appears to have been tested in court or by official investigation, they provide a narrative of yet

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112 Johnson to the NAACP, 10 September 1934.
113 Johnson to the NAACP, 21 September 1924.
another horrendous episode in the history of labour on the Illinois Central system that counters the assessment of events touted by Illinois Central officials that the men behind the violence could not reasonably be identified.\textsuperscript{114} The belief of trainmen who had survived the shooting that their attackers were not simply agents of blind and random white violence is well captured in the words wounded African American trainmen in the Deep South dictated to the young Marie Johnson: “From the way things seem, the Sheriff, the [Illinois Central] special agent’s and the whole train crew or better still the brotherhoods of the I.C. and the Y&M.V Railroad are in for the shooting of the Coloured firemen. The Sheriff, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was once a Y&MV railway trainman.”\textsuperscript{115} As long as the sponsors of the shootings remained elusive, the trainmen who faced a combination of white encroachments on their seniority rights, wage cuts, cutbacks in employment and constant management refusal to allow them organized voice, could only seek to understand the violence themselves in terms that clearly pitted them as an oppressed class against their employers and organized white labour as a power elite.

During the Depression, Illinois Central officials shared with Harvey Couch and his associates on the Louisiana & Arkansas system the primary goal of ensuring that the profitability of their railroad operation was restored. By contrast with management on the Louisiana & Arkansas system, management on the Illinois Central system chose to avoid confrontation with white railroad organizations on their lines in Deep South. They focused their drive to restore profitability by working to reduce the presence of African American trainmen on their lines, many of whom increasingly turned to independent labour organization to secure their jobs on the railroads, increase their wages and to gain official recognition for their organizations in collective bargaining. Illinois Central officials, in collaboration with organizations of white

\textsuperscript{114} T. T. Keliher, Chief Special Agent, Illinois Central to Walter White, 23 March 1932; Johnson to NAACP, 10 September 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 10, Reel 22.
\textsuperscript{115} Johnson to NAACP, 10 September 1934.
trainmen, made moves to gradually reduce employment of African Americans by underhand means such as giving priority to laid-off white trainmen in call ups for emergency work or jobs that became available as business improved. By giving priority toward white trainmen in call ups for work, railroad officials and white trade unionists in the Deep South were effectively infringing on the seniority rights of African American trainmen who had prior claim to any positions that opened on the system.

African American trainmen, many of whom were organized by the Association of Colored Railway Trainmen or AFL-affiliates such as the Switchmen’s Union, resisted such encroachments on their seniority rights and prospects of employment with some effect. Faced with the assertiveness of African American trainmen in holding onto their positions on the Illinois Central system, white trainmen whose livelihoods were affected by lay-offs alongside African American trainmen, became frustrated with the slow pace with which jobs opened up for them by officials tinkering with African American seniority rights. Some of them, (often, as African American trainmen suspected, with the hidden collusion of senior officials in the big four brotherhoods) became involved in a conspiracy to shoot and intimidate African American trainmen still working in the service. Sixteen African American trainmen were either killed or wounded in the shootings. The arrest and interrogation of men who had been directly involved in the shootings yielded no evidence of those who had paid and directed them to become assassins. The fact that so-called “bad men”, i.e. outspoken African American trainmen and known trade unionists, were the prime targets for killing, hints at the possibility that railroad officials on the Illinois Central system in the Deep South had an interest in ensuring that full truth of those behind the killings did not emerge. African American workers who had survived the shootings,
certainly suspected their employers for participating in a conspiracy of silence around the top leaders within the railroad brotherhoods they believed to have been behind the shootings.

**Conclusion**

The tragic aspect of African American experience of the Depression years on railroads in the Deep South would necessarily loom large in any historical account of that experience. Evidence from Memphis, Tennessee, read before the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices in 1943, captures the enormous extent to which African American employment in prime positions on the trains had declined, while their employment in the least attractive and most servile positions swelled. Thus, according to the estimate of the Committee: “The Memphis Terminal District discloses, one, that more than 7,000 of the company’s Negro employees works as labourers, janitors, cleaners, porters and the like, two, that the seniority rosters covering the above divisions reveal a total of 2,221 firemen, trainmen and switchmen, and that of these, 218 or 9.85 per cent are Negroes.”

However, merely describing the losses African Americans suffered in terms of employment on the railroads as a result of the pressures exerted on them from both their employers and their white co-workers, overly emphasizes the agency of the victors over the defeated. In the face of the harsh situation on railroad systems such as the Illinois Central and its subsidiaries, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad and the Gulf & Ship Island Railroad, African American trainmen were admirably steadfast in resisting the offensive on their right to employment on the railroads. They were equally vigorous in the effort both to strengthen and to defend their trade union rights as they did most dramatically on the Louisiana & Arkansas system. The resilience they showed

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116 Before the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice in Public Hearings held in Washington, D.C, September 12-18, 1943, Summary and Findings and Directions in re Illinois Central system, Selected Documents of the Committee on Fair Employment Practice, Reel 11, Acc. 5662, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
in demanding their right to organize independently and with formal collective bargaining capacity, cannot be fully understood without placing their actions in the backdrop of the political shifts and labour reforms introduced during the New Deal that encouraged wide enthusiasm in the South for far reaching democratic change that would break the stranglehold of racial and class repression.

The present study has been an intervention focused on redirecting attention to the labour history of railroad workers in the Deep South beyond the obvious tensions between white and African American railroaders. The power and influence that the big four white brotherhoods – the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, the Brotherhood Locomotive Engineers, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the Order of Railway Conductors - exercised on railroads in the region is undoubtedly a significant phenomenon shaping the ways in which African American workers organized and tried to protect and advance their interests. However, the power and influence of the white brotherhoods was, in turn, constrained and shaped by the overriding interests of railroad employers who placed the profitability of their business operations above the need to appease the brotherhoods. Perhaps an extreme case of this was the owner of the Louisiana & Arkansas system Harvey C. Couch, whose determination to ensure the economic viability of his newly acquired railroad operation in the Deep South led him to try and rid his consortium of any kind of labour influence on his lines regardless as to whether the organization consisted of white or black railroad workers.

As unusual as it appears with respect to Couch’s indiscriminate and almost colour-blind attack on labour, the case of the Louisiana & Arkansas nevertheless mirrors the essence of the situation on the Illinois Central system during the 1930s. Going back to the post World War I years, Illinois Central officials had seen in the emergence of independent organizations of
African American trainmen, a threat to the very rationale of their presence in Deep South -- i.e. an abundant supply of cheap and unorganized African American labour as a counter to the strength of the white railroad brotherhoods. African American trainmen continually pressed (and even took up a successful legal challenge) for pay on an equal basis with their white co-workers which was due to them under a World War I proclamation of the federal government.

During the Depression, encouraged by reforms in labour legislation such as Section 7a of the NRA and the Railroad Labor Act, African American trainmen made insistent efforts to gain formal recognition for their independent trade union organizations. Fearing that African American trainmen could achieve formal status as organized workers with a right to bargain collectively, railroad employers in the Deep South such as the Illinois Central had less incentive to hold onto African American trainmen as a cheaper substitute for white trainmen organized by the influential railroad brotherhoods. In this context, these employers were more prepared than in the past to submit to the pressure of white railroad trainmen wanting to deprive African American trainmen of their seniority rights and to swiftly remove them from employment in positions in the train service in which they had easily found employment before.

However, railroad employers such as the Illinois Central system could not easily dispense with the services of African American workers in favour of white workers. African American railroad workers in the Deep South had built an organized presence on the Illinois Central and other railroad systems. They were resilient in their attempts to win their employers’ formal recognition of their collective bargaining rights during the 1930s. They were unrelenting in their protests and petitions against white workers’ attempts, often in collusion with local managers of the Illinois Central system in the Deep South, to undermine their seniority status and to have them replaced in the service with less experienced white trainmen desperate for
employment. As their attempts to push African American trainmen from positions in the train service tended to be slower than they had hoped to achieve, white trainmen turned to violence to intimidate African American trainmen who steadfastly held onto their jobs.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Illinois Central officials were directly involved in planning or instigating the violent attacks on African American trainmen, they either turned a blind eye to the problem or made half-hearted attempts to uncover the conspirators that sponsored the assassins. Behind the official wall of silence on the identity of the conspirators, African American trainmen used their organisation and interpersonal contacts to send a narrative of events surrounding the violence to the NAACP, putting the blame squarely on the shoulders of high officials in the big four brotherhoods such as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. It is yet unknown whether the NAACP gained any official hearing for the workers’ account of events. Still, the simple fact that the workers came together and had a young woman, Marie Johnson, record events from the point of view of trainmen wounded in the shootings, is a fitting tribute to the durability of their labour and communal fraternity, as well as their conscious awareness of their dual status as an exploited class and as racially subordinated section of the working class. 117
Conclusion: African American Railroad Workers – An Organized Presence

African American railroad workers were neither silent nor demoralised victims of the unfolding drama in which intensified racial subordination became the defining feature of society and politics in the New South. In view of the contributions of numerous social historians in recent years, including Michael Honey, Robin D.G. Kelley, Tera Hunter, Will Jones and Daniel Letwin, to name a few, this observation may seem all too elementary and hardly worth repeating.¹ However, few historians of the South have made an effort to establish the clear presence of labour organisation and the will to build such organisations as a significant aspect of African American agency and resistance within a society in which those with wealth and power fully embraced some of the trappings of modernity that characterised the industrial North, while they simultaneously deepened and further institutionalised the culture and practices of racial subordination that, as C. Van Woodward once suggested, had been seldom necessary during the antebellum era.²

Historians have insightfully established that in a society where the need to protect white racial privilege often could turn violent, African Americans often found it necessary to maintain their human integrity and the autonomy of their night life, and their community and religious institutions, by keeping a safe remove from white surveillance, interference and control. As indeed Robin D. G. Kelley has emphasized, there is no doubt that resistance in various forms of

evasion (or subtle subversion of Southern racial norms) was a common means for segregated African American communities to survive under the shadow of white racial power.³

However, as the evidence pertaining to the railroad workers explored in this study firmly indicates, for African American workers who had whites in their midst on a daily basis as co-workers or managers, such evasive forms of resistance were hardly sufficient. Railroad employers and white workers were making every day decisions (often with brazen openness) about African American workers' pay, their status on the job, and their continued employment on the railroads. African American workers identified and acted upon the need to respond in an organised fashion that would have been unsustainable on the basis of secrecy and evasion alone. Thus, since few historians have drawn attention to labour organisation among African American workers in the South before World War II, if the present study stakes a singular contribution to the historiography, it is the bringing to light of a robust tradition of labour organisation among African Americans on the railroads of the Deep South.

Before engaging in the core content of this study centred on the organised activity of African American railroad workers, the first chapter has established the social and economic backdrop upon which African American railroad workers emerged, as a segment of the broader African American working population in the Deep South, subsisting almost solely on wage labour. As with all direct producers in the industrial world whose livelihoods were nourished by wage labour rather than access to land and other natural resources, African American railroad workers in the Deep South needed to organize in order to advance their material interests as wage workers (i.e. as proletarians), while also combating the injustice and racial discrimination

they experienced in common with the emergent African American middle class and the mass of
sharecroppers on the cotton plantations and small farms of the Deep South.

African American railroad workers emerged, as a small working class segment, from a
more numerous rural population of sharecroppers often subjected to a severer form of
exploitation as croppers, tenants, and debt peons on the cotton plantations and farms of the
region. In light of this, this study opens with a reflection on changes in the political economy of
the Deep South, changes that often appeared as seemingly slight adjustments in the cotton
plantation economy. These changes, as nuanced as they may in fact have been, were stimulated
by capital investment in railroads and other sectors of the industrial economy that gave rise to a
small African American working class that was often mobile and more inclined than rural
agricultural labourers to openly resist exploitation as cheap labour on the farms, docks, forests,
and railroads of the Deep South. Against historians (such as Nan Woodruff) who have perceived
the racial injustice and the harshness of the exploitation that African Americans experienced as
signally representative of surviving traits of pre-modern social relations in the Deep South, a key
intervention of this study has been to draw attention to the incipient emergence of modern
industrialisation in the South as a countervailing phenomenon that introduced wage labour as a
less draconian form of exploitation, but a form of exploitation nonetheless.⁴ In order to see the
effects of the modern industrial economy of the Deep South in its fullest light, it has been
necessary to engage with a trend in the literature that long has been influenced by Jonathan
Wiener’s famous thesis on the “Prussian Road” to development.⁵ The “Wiener Thesis,” as it has

been called, has been fairly persuasive in its emphasis on aspects of political economy in the Deep South that include:

- The persistence of a pre-capitalist planter class;
- The comparatively slow, somewhat stifled, emergence of a modern industrial economy based on capital investment and wage labour; and
- The predominant use of coercive forms of labour exploitation and control.

These features accurately describe the core aspects of the cotton agricultural economy.

However, as I have observed, they do not provide a satisfactory basis for understanding seemingly marginal and yet influential changes in the economy of the Deep South that impacted on the ways in which African Americans were able to resist social controls imposed by a semi-feudal planter class that did not have the means, given its customary disinclination to invest in mechanised forms of production, to minimise labour costs without coercion.

Taking a hint from C. Vann Woodward’s suggestion that the modern South existed as a semi-colony of the industrial North, I have posited the idea that the embryonic emergence of an industrial economy, often stimulated by Northern investments in industries such as railroads and lumber manufacturing, had an impact on prevailing social relations in the South more decisive than often is assumed. Following historians such as William Cohen, the key impacts that I have observed include:

- The emergence of wage labour on the edges of the plantation economy;
- The embryonic emergence of non-agricultural economic sectors with competing demands for labour; and

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The emergence of modernized sectors of the economy such as lumber and the railroads that encouraged the mobility of available supplies of African American labour, and thereby gave African American workers increased leverage to make demands on their employers for improved wages and working conditions.  

On the railroads, I have had to contend with the situation in which African American workers’ prospects for employment, in particular opportunities for employment above the station of unskilled labourers, was not something their employers decided alone. White workers, through their powerful railroad brotherhoods and shop craft unions, often were able to compel employers to grant them the privileges of race, of “whiteness” as David Roediger has put it. These privileges included preferential access to jobs and the enviable opportunity for promotion into positions such as railroad engineers and conductors that involved supervisory authority and higher pay.

Organised white labour’s influence over employer’s decisions with respect to employment to certain skilled and semi-skilled positions on the railroads can and has been exaggerated. By over-emphasizing the power of white railroad labour, historian Eric Arnesen for instance, has effectively diminished the imperative pushing employers to minimise the costs of railroading rather than constantly pander to the wishes of organised white labour. Arnesen has also tended to present organisations of African American railroad workers, trainmen in particular, as being weak, overly compromising and ineffective at voicing African American workers’ aspirations.

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In an effort to get beyond the idea of an overly powerful white railroad labour movement, and thereby bring into clear relief a picture of the active agency of African American railroad workers, my initial step, addressed in the second chapter, was to explore the conditions under which white shop crafts in the AFL made a partial concession to the constant demand from African American shopmen to become organised as full or auxiliary members of AFL-affiliated shop crafts. The key observation I have made, with respect to the situation in the railroad shops, is that while auxiliary unions – most often known as federal labour unions – did not allow African American shop workers the capacity for independent collective bargaining, their very existence as organised bodies of labour in the railroad shops of the Deep South gave these workers the means to access the levers of state power (at least during federal war time control over the railroads) as well the means to engage in a semi-autonomous relationship with their white co-workers – a degree of autonomy that was decisively expressed in the overwhelming participation of African American shopmen in the great strikes of 1911 and 1922.

My second approach – covered extensively in chapters three and four - to overcoming the idea of the excessive influence of white labour has been to study the emergence and the activities of independent organisations of African American trainmen. African American trainmen initially were employed on the lowest rungs of the train service as coach cleaners or porters. Unofficially, employers increasingly deployed African American trainmen to positions such as brakemen and firemen, usually reserved for white trainmen expecting to use these posts as a stepping stone to positions of increased authority on the trains. With openings in the service (such as brakemen) that required somewhat more initiative and keen judgement than porters were expected to show, African American trainmen began to successfully organise independently of the big four
brotherhoods of white trainmen, whose exclusionary constitutions were far more rigid than most prevailing among shop craft organisations.

My central finding here is that African American trainmen developed strong organisational networks in the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the South that proved truly effective in winning federally sanctioned recognition for the work they performed on an equal footing with white trainmen. However, with the end of federal control over the railroads and the temporary downturn in railroad traffic during the early 1920s, railroad employers in the Deep South went on an offensive to deprive African American trainmen of the formal status they held as brakemen or firemen. They often moved to deny African American trainmen of formal recognition for the work they performed above the station of porters. Employers’ assault on African American trainmen’s status was not primarily motivated by racial considerations but by the need to cut wages and restore railroad operation on a profitable basis.

In the context of the temporary postwar slump, any railroad posts that African Americans occupied above the position of porters or labourers became attractive to job-seeking white workers. These workers, with the silent backing of railroad employers still bent on restoring a hierarchy on their lines that could help them contain wage increases, began to make aggressive moves to encroach on the seniority rights of African American workers. Contrary to the argument that organisations of African American trainmen in the Deep South were weak, ineffective, and overly compromising, much of the existing evidence suggests, in fact, that the organisations of African American trainmen showed, sound and strategic use of apparently unconfrontational forms of protest such as petitioning their employers and state agencies such as the Railroad Labor Board and the courts.
The archival record for the railroads in the Deep South is especially thin on documents that speak to the successes of organised African American workers in making wage and other claims against their employers. The case of trainman Charles Sideboard and the Association of Colored Railway Employees against the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company in the late 1920s is a rare surviving document available in full transcript, which shows African American workers making a successful court challenge against their employers. Discussed at some length in the fourth chapter, the Sideboard case is a decisive demonstration of the depth of organising experience and skills of tactical flexibility that these workers and their leaders had developed over the years to deal effectively with employers bent on keeping them employed at the lowest wages possible, or white workers, bent on excluding them from privileged access to certain posts within the train service.

However, as soon as the railroads felt the effects of the Great Depression almost as severely as other sectors of the economy, African American railroad labour organisations had diminished capacity to withstand the combined pressures of wage cuts, cuts in employment, and organised white workers’ drive to push them out of lucrative posts such as brakemen and firemen, in which experienced African American trainmen had gained a seniority status that gave them a fragile advantage over white workers with less experience or long term service on the trains. Nevertheless, black railroad workers showed enormous defensive resilience – particularly against employers such as Harvey C. Couch and the Louisiana & Arkansas railroad system that pushed to restore the profitability of their operations by undermining railroad labour organisation regardless of whether this was organisation of white or African American workers. Black railroaders also struggled successfully against employers (such as the Illinois Central system) and organised white workers, who made aggressive moves to reduce African American
employment and replace them with white workers. On the Illinois Central lines, organised
African American trainmen put up as much resistance as was reasonably possible in the dire
situation imposed on them by the Great Depression. This resistance, as I have suggested in the
final chapter, was of sufficient strength and determination as to reduce the speed at which white
trainmen hoped to see them removed from their posts in the train service. Tragically, the answer
to their resistance was white racial violence, and unsuccessful retention of their seniority and
access to skilled positions. Violence, perpetrated by assassins secretly sponsored by
organisations such as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, played a significant role in
driving African American trainmen from their posts, but it did not succeed in defeating the spirit
of African American defiance that labour organisers such as Memphis-based George E.
Washington would maintain throughout the devastating years of the 1930s.
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