

WHITE LABOUR ON THE RHODESIAN RAILWAY SYSTEM, 1891-1939

by

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Introduction

Most discussions of the white working class in the Rhodesias agree that it was, at least by the 1930s, decisively incorporated into the settler-colonial status quo. This incorporation was based on the relative privileges it enjoyed through the operation of the "exploitation" and "job" colour bars.¹ This paper argues that, while the racial division of labour must be the centre-piece of any analysis of co-optation, we need to look closely at the concrete, subjective experience of work in its broadest sense. Our understanding of that co-optation is impoverished if we fail to acknowledge that there were factors involved which cannot be ascribed simply to the racial division of labour. In the first section, then, I shall focus on the culture of railway work. In the second I shall look briefly at the history of white trades unionism on the railways after 1918, in particular the Rhodesian Railway workers Union (RRWU), and seek to relate it to the culture out of which it emerged.

1. The Culture of Railway Work

The overriding pre-occupation of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) during railway construction was cost minimization. Lines were initially leased out to Pauling and Co Ltd, the contractors who built virtually all of the Rhodesian railway system. It was they who were responsible for recruiting white railway workers in the early period. With working conditions appalling and life expectancy low, the response in Great Britain was not overwhelming. The wages offered had to be high.² However, many white "pioneers" were closer to hand and often in need of work while they searched out their fortune. Work at this time was unspecialized and labour turn-over high. Men worked wherever required and learnt "on the job". But, despite the chaos of the early years, out of it developed a key cultural element: the white railway worker as "pioneer".

When the BSAC, through its subaltern railway companies, took direct control of management from the early 1900s onwards, it was faced with the need to organize production and labour on a more efficient and stable basis. The railways from the first were dependent on skilled white labour, and while occasionally not averse to infiltrating "coloured" or Indian labour into "white jobs" which were relatively unskilled, such as ganger or pumper, the costs of structural change outweighed the potential benefits. Any rationalization which took place concentrated on improved co-ordination, efficiency and economy within the existing paradigm of technology and production. The aim was to intensify productivity, but this did not imply massive mechanization or deskilling. When it did occur, as in the boom periods of 1926-30 and 1936-39, the mechanization and deskilling³ occurred in specific spheres of production only, such as the engineering workshops. The informal colour bar was indispensable to the development of "white" Rhodesia.

The indispensability of their skill on the railways in the Rhodesias gave white artisans and skilled labourers a substantial degree of security in production. While resenting this, management made a virtue out of necessity, drawing on the expertise accumulated on railways in Britain. Railway management⁴ was traditionally grounded in highly authoritarian, military structures and ethics. A panoply of rules, regulations and instructions was introduced, and, although before the 1920s they were honoured in the breach rather than the observance, they quickly became

embedded in the culture of railway work. Those workers who had migrated from railway work in Britain or South Africa themselves transported much of this culture to the Rhodesias. For example, punctuality was acknowledged as an important moral principle by white workers.

Hobsbawm has shown how artisanal values and vocabulary had entrenched themselves throughout the British working class, from which most white railway workers had been drawn. It was a vocabulary which spoke of work professionally done and recognized as such, of responsibility and knowledge, which spoke of a "moral economy".⁵ All of these definitions elided into subjective notions of skill. Enginemen were said to "live only for their engines", and embraced them as their private property.⁶ Gangers referred to "their length". A ganger might have been defined by management as semi-skilled, but in his own mind he was skilled. The RRWU saw the importance of this identification and tried to harness it:

A self-respecting workman ... looks upon the parts of the railway upon which he works as his, since they are in his care: they are, so to say, his tools - the means by which he makes a living.

While there was also a strong sense of being a railwayman, the culture of railway work was primarily local in character. It was their particular job, and the pay and promotion structures covering it, with which white railway workers identified most immediately. They were divided by department, section and grade around which developed specific codes of conduct, responsibility, rights and obligations. There was no intrinsic reason why they should not define the railways as "theirs" in relation to capital, but such a definition was not always an obvious one to reach. There was one sense in which white railway workers did define themselves collectively: both management and workers referred to non-railway employment as "outside" employment.

The railways did, indeed, sometimes resemble a "state within a state". White railway workers were able to identify with the "railway state", not least because their space and power in production allowed them up to a point to define it for themselves. The railways recognized, often perforce, the desire of individuals and groups to establish a little elbow room at work. The concession of space and autonomy could be harnessed so as to compensate up to a point for the long hours and harsh discipline often involved in railway work. McKenna, writing of British railway workers, calls this space a railway "bailiwick". It is worth quoting him further:

Trapped in space and time, railway workers learned how to defend their own space. However humble his status, control of his own thinking and of the technology he operated was always in the grasp of the railway worker ... Thus was created a new form of industrial anthropology, a tribalistic grouping of men based on an elaborate division of labour, a hierarchy of groups, and a ritualistic adherence to territory, myth, symbolism and an insignia unknown outside the specified boundaries.

Such "bailiwicks" were vital to the manufacture of white worker compliance and co-optation on the Rhodesian railway system. They reflected strength in production, but were primarily nuclei of adaptation. But, bailiwicks were not just locations for the expression of identity through skill and pride in work but also for the expression of racial and gender identity.

Within their bailiwicks, white railway workers were responsible for the supervision and policing of the racial division of labour. Whites saw themselves as morally obliged to ensure that black workers did not perform work defined as skilled or semi-skilled. Delegation of such work was viewed as an act of betrayal of the white race.

Does one not see the white artisans in Rhodesia allowing their native labourer to handle the tools and appliances of skilled trades? ... Railwaymen, do you realise that you are preparing a rod for your own backs - just as the unfortunate white worker did in the Congo - by, through sloth or carelessness, training the native to take your places and therefore jeopardising the bread of your children?¹⁰

The notion of responsibility and authority over black subordinates was incorporated particularly by semi-skilled whites, such as gangers, into their definition of skill. That they drew so strongly from wider social mores made it difficult for management to undercut such definitions. The fixation with the "native" at all levels of society acted as an extremely powerful cement within the settler community. White workers were not slow to resort to ideas of "native stupidity" and "inferiority" to justify their relative privilege or their being "provoked" into violence, as this excerpt from a letter by a recent arrival in the country just starting work as a guard on the railways indicates:

Honestly, this is the easiest living country ... all the work is done by Jim-Fish, you don't even black your own shoes ... believe me a white man is lord here, and he rules with his tongue and his boot, the natives are just like cattle and they have about as much sense too ... when I see two niggers doing the work that they do and only getting about 6d a day it makes me laugh.¹¹

Communication between white and black at work was rudimentary, and conducted in "kitchen kaffir", a language of command and prohibition. Master and servant was also, of course, the primary relationship between white and black worker in the home. In defining "reasonable" levels of pay or allowances, management accepted that the cost of servants was an essential part of the household budget.

White railway workers claimed and created for themselves a place in the pantheon of pioneerism. They took pride in having promoted (white) civilization, progress and Empire. The folklore was so thoroughly imbibed that the RRWU in 1921 claimed the motto "Justice, Freedom and Commerce" for itself rather than the BSAC, whose motto it had been since the time of Rhodes. The RRWU asserted that it, rather than the BSAC, represented the authentic ideals of the founder of Rhodesia.¹² The role of the white railway worker in production formed the nub of his authentic patriotism:

Honest pride and intelligent interest in one's craft or calling are excellent things; they make for efficiency, progress and prosperity and therefore are the mainsprings of the real patriotism ... As workers, as producers we have (or should have) the greater part of the formation of Rhodesia's future ... In the hands of the railwayman, lies a large part of his country's economic health.¹³

Implicit was the assumption not simply the the "civilisers" were white but that they were British. The mix of nationalities who had made up the pioneer population was glossed over. Racism existed not just in relation to blacks, "coloured" and Indians but also, if with less passionate intensity, within the white community itself, between those of British extraction and South Europeans, Jews and Afrikaners. There was particular enmity felt against the Portuguese, with whom British workers were compelled to compete on the Umtali to Beira section. The British monopolised the ranks of the skilled, such as the artisan grades and the running staff. Discrimination against Afrikaners decreased once the question of union with South Africa or Responsible Government was resolved in 1923, but it is striking that, until that time, the relationship between the British and Afrikaner

was the only racial problem acknowledged and discussed in the Rhodesias. Such divisions within the white work-force acted as another block on any development of a coherent, sustained class perspective.

A further example of "white British" solidarity on the railways was freemasonry. The British dominated the leadership of the RRWU, and many union officials became freemasons.¹⁴ This must have been an important point of contact between union men and management. Freemasonry was, of course, not just a case of "white British" solidarity, it was also exclusively male in character. The railways were a male bailiwick, with their military and masculine ethos. The highest honour which could be bestowed on a railwayman was to call him "a man amongst men". In 1938 this accolade was bestowed on the retiring General Manager of the railways, H Chapman.

If the work-place was a male bailiwick, no less so was the family. Women were placed in a "separate sphere" of Imperialist ideology. Their duty lay in the home, in being married and in being mothers.¹⁵ The railways claimed virtually all of a white worker's life as potential working time, and wives and families were compelled to organize themselves around this in order to ensure that the breadwinner was available and ready. White railway workers, for their part, drew on the ideology of motherhood in demands for a "civilised", "white" family wage.¹⁶ Their wives were responsible for the day-to-day supervision and control of black servants, and in this sense had their own bailiwick. White women were the most zealous guardians of the morality and racial purity of the settler community in the Rhodesias. Gender relations, by virtue of their definition as "private", are often hard to uncover, but should not be assumed thereby to be marginal. Gender, race and class were expressions of different but intertwined spheres of social relations. They combined within and outside production so as to shape profoundly the lives of white railway workers.

If all the factors outlined above contributed towards the co-optation of white railway workers, they were not inimical in themselves to militancy. White railway culture contained assumptions as to what a "civilised" wage was, what decent hours of work were. White railway workers resented and resisted "violations" of the culture of work by management. Much resistance was informal and local in character, involving "working/beatng the system". During the first world war it laid the basis for formal trades union organization. Many railway workers had been involved in union activity in Britain. Two traditions of trades unionism were in competition: "closed", craft- or section-based unionism; and "open", industrial unionism. The Amalgamated Engineers Union fell into the former category, the RRWU into the latter. The RRWU attempted to portray itself as the natural extension of the culture of railway work, the means through which the control of the white worker in production might be extended and better rewarded. It had to persuade workers to view themselves as railwaymen first, and artisans, engine-drivers or pumpers second. Its efforts to establish an active and coherent corporate identity met with only partial success.

2. White Trades Unionism on the Railways

During the first world war, many white railwaymen joined the armed forces, creating a serious white labour shortage. The exploitation of those remaining intensified as management sought to increase efficiency and economy. Wages fell drastically in real terms and discipline began to collapse. With firemen and guards to the fore, the traffic staff tried to organise a union, and in October 1917, despite management intimidation, the RRWU was formed. At the same time, a branch of the South African AEU was established.¹⁷ From the start, divisions in production were reflected in trades unionism.

In a position of strength between 1917 and 1920, owing to labour shortage and the post-war boom, the unions were able to win significant wage and allowance increases and improved working conditions for white railway workers, winning the support of many on the basis of the slogan "a decent white standard of living". Strikes in 1919 and 1920 were very successful, not least thanks to solidarity action by white workers in other sectors.¹⁸ Based on his leadership of the 1920 strike,

Jack Keller, General Secretary, came to dominate the RRWU. Keller, idolized by some, execrated by others, remained General Secretary until the early 1940s.

The ascendancy of trades unions in the Rhodesias was short-lived. They remained organizationally and financially weak, and in the recession of 1922-24 management counter-attacked. On the railways, the management encouraged the AEU, so provoking a bitter struggle between it and the RRWU for supremacy.¹⁹ It forced real wages back down and attempted to enmesh the RRWU in a web of controlling conciliation and arbitration structures.²⁰ In this it had the support of the government. Union officials were victimized.

The credibility of the RRWU was severely undermined by these measures. Cracks appeared in its support. Many workers had always seen the RRWU as little more than a traffic staff union. Indeed, many engine-drivers did admit to remaining sectionalists at heart.²¹ The salaried staff, umbilically tied to management, showed no enthusiasm for the RRWU at this stage. Other railway workers objected to the involvement of the union by Keller and his allies in politics: the Labour party of the 1920s was a creature of the RRWU, dependent on it for its finances until 1924.²² Management declared that the RRWU would be given little satisfaction in relation to issues like wages while it was involved in politics. Many workers looked to the political representatives of different alliances of capital, for example the "populism" of the Reform Party under Huggins in the 1920s, which had similar policies to those of the Labour Party, not least on the issue of the colour bar.

Many unions collapsed in the mid-1920s, including the AEU, once management had finished with it. But the RRWU survived. Nevertheless, by hook or by crook, the railway management had successfully hedged the union in and persuaded many workers that co-operation with management held out better possibilities than active self-organization. The RRWU tried to mobilize support round defence of the colour bar, but it was not really under attack on the railways. So it focussed on a campaign to return to the wage levels of 1920.

When it threatened strike action in 1927, the RRWU was duped into accepting a public enquiry, which gave little back.²³ The RRWU leadership decided that a quick reply was needed if its credibility was not to be damaged fatally by this further setback; there seemed no alternative to strike action. But it gave management and the government time to prepare by telegraphing its intention to strike well in advance. The strike of 1929 drew a considerable response from white railway workers, but was decisively defeated. In the face of this and the onset of the Great Depression, the union all but folded. By 1935, its membership was measured in the low hundreds.²⁴

What, ironically, saved the RRWU and the AEU from total oblivion after 1929 was the attitude of railway management. Having spent most of the 1920s purging the unions of their militancy, it decided that the most effective consolidation would be to offer them a circumscribed role by tying the unions into a dependent relationship to management. Neither union had much choice if it wanted to survive. In the 1930s, then, the relations between the management and the white trades unions became largely domesticated. The management began to encourage workers to join the unions and clerical staff became involved in the RRWU, reinforcing the forces for moderation in the union.²⁵ The RRWU was allowed to collect subs through pay sheets on the basis of stop orders.

While the role of the company (before 1923) and settler governments (post-1923) in Southern Rhodesia in mediating employer-white labour relations on the railways was important, it was far from the main cause of the re-establishment of co-option in the 1930s. For example, the 1934 Industrial Conciliation Act, intended to give protection to white workers against black "competition" and to institutionalize structures for conciliation, was not formulated with railways in mind. The main cause was the successful reassertion of the authority of management. To achieve this, however, the management was forced to expand its repertoire of controls. It broadened the scope of its paternalist measures in health, company housing, pensions and insurance. The aim was to ensure that as little credit as

possible accrued to the unions for such developments. Once the RRWU and AEU had been tamed, however, the management came to see the value of co-ordinating such measures with them in the interests of efficiency and stability.

The railway management also embarked on strategies of "involving" and "educating" the white work-force, for example through its regular bulletin.²⁶ This became increasingly important as the numbers of white railway waged staff increased in the late 1920s. The bulletin, originally started in response to the publication of the RRWU monthly journal after 1921, called the Rhodesia Railway Review, sought to teach white workers the "realities" of railway working and business, to feed them statistics and information, and so instil in them cardinal virtues such as economy and efficiency. In doing this, the management was able to exploit the embedded culture and consciousness of white railway workers as effectively as the RRWU ever could. Indeed, by the 1930s, there were regular and minutely detailed accounts in the bulletin of duties and responsibilities of workers in specific jobs, many of which were submitted by railwaymen themselves.

Conclusion

White railway-worker bailiwicks were, in general, left unviolated and unchallenged between 1891 and 1939. The railway management was able to accommodate itself to the culture of railway work at its most parochial in a way which the RRWU found it difficult to do. The space and autonomy enjoyed in production was double-edged in character, reinforcing managerial authority as much as it limited it. The emergence of the RRWU and the AEU between 1916 and 1920 was evidence of a crisis of co-option, but the management was able to reassert its authority, albeit on modified terms. White workers on the railways acted as "ideal prefabricated collaborators", to use Phimister's phrase.²⁷ The RRWU failed to embed the basic principles of "open" trades unionism as a primary element in white railway-worker culture. The RRWU was always faced with the dilemma of how to draw white railwaymen into a broader corporate world. In the 1930s, it came increasingly to act purely as mediator between management and shop floor. This type of corporate identity management could accept. As one commentator in the Rhodesia Railway Review reflected: "Militancy, while it may make a bold showing, earns the scorn of all sensible men in the end."²⁸

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- 21 Ibid., No 177, May 1936, p 21.
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- 23 Commission appointed to enquire into and report upon certain matters in dispute between the Beira and Mashonaland and Rhodesia Railways and the employees of the said railways, Interim and Final Reports, CSR - 1928.
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27 Phimster, op. cit., p 234.

28 NAZ, Rhodesia Railway Review No 200, April 1938,. p 3.