

ARTICLES

CALTEX ESSAY PRIZE WINNER

The Prince and the railwaymen: the origins of the 1920 Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants' strike

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This paper provides an account of the events which culminated in the 1920 railways strike. Focusing on the period 1913-1920, it examines the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants' (ASRS) executive's attempts to provide for the members' needs in the face of ever increasing difficulties. It also provides some insight into the history of other labour groups and illustrates how workers in New Zealand united once their problems became too big to handle alone. Nevertheless, the policies followed by the ASRS executive were always those which were expected to yield the most benefits to ASRS members despite the feelings of other labour groups.

Introduction

On 28 April 1920, the Prince of Wales was marooned at Rotorua. Princes are not usually stranded in New Zealand towns; but with no trains, His Royal Highness, a very embarrassed Prime Minister and 8 000 visitors had no option. They were stuck.

Much of the blame for this sudden addition to Rotorua's population could be laid at the feet of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS).¹ They had done the unthinkable — chosen to strike during a Royal Tour.

Neither striking nor stranding passengers were part of the ASRS's normal agenda. However, 28 April signalled the end of 30 strike-free years — years in the ASRS had proclaimed the ballot box to be their preferred method of redress.

Explaining this sudden change in policy and its dramatic results is the object of this paper. Events did occur in 1919-1920 which irritated the railwaymen, but these happenings were not the sole cause of the 1920 strike. For years, the ASRS's list of grievances had been growing. For years, Government and the Railways Department had chosen to ignore their pleas. Thus any explanation of the events of April 1920 demands an analysis of the union's history, beginning with its conservative stance of 1913.

1913

1913 saw New Zealand's labour movement divided. On one side were those whose syndicalist views yielded them firm supporters of the strike weapon; on the other were those opposed to the syndicalist ideology. The ASRS executive was violently opposed to syndicalism and with 7 114 members the union comprised the most numerically strong anti-syndicalist group.

Despite the divisions, both the militants and the moderates believed that New Zealand's labour movement needed to be more unified. Their concern led to the Unity Congress of July

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¹ The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants has been known as the National Union of Railwaymen since 1972.

1913 at which was formed the United Federation of Labor² (UFOL). The railwaymen were invited to this congress and it was here that their attitude to the strike weapon was graphically illustrated.

A resolution empowering the UFOL to call its members out on strike whenever necessary was passed on July 5, the fifth day of the congress, and the ASRS delegates walked out in protest. In their view political action should have been at the top rather than the bottom of the congress's agenda since the strike could result in tragedy and failure as it had in Waihi in 1912. Also they had to consider their own position. The ASRS had always found constitutional methods of redress effective, and subscription to UFOL policies could spell the end of a cordial relationship with the Government and the Railways Department.

Disagreement between the UFOL and the ASRS did not end with the Unity Congress. The ASRS executive clearly demonstrated their views during the 1913 watersiders' dispute; a dispute which rapidly escalated to a national crisis. The UFOL realised the battle could be won if the ASRS joined the strike but despite their pleas, the ASRS executive stood unmoved:

the principle we stood for then (i.e. at the Unity Congress) is the principle we maintain today, fully believing that whatever disabilities we are suffering can be settled through the ballot box, and that instead of the strike being the first move, it should not be used until all other legitimate means have failed (*Railway review*, 12 December 1913, p. 507).

Why did the ASRS hold these views? A brief examination of the union's history should answer this question. The ASRS was first organised in 1886 and any railway servant was eligible to join. However it was severely weakened in 1890 after members became involved in the maritime strike. Derecognition had followed and some members were dismissed. Reinstatement was contingent upon their declaring the error of their ways, agreeing to obey all railway service rules and promising not to join the society as constituted (Henning, 1984, p. 57).

In 1894, under a Government supportive of union formation, the society was recognised once more. There were, however, conditions:

- affiliation with other unions was not permitted;
- only railway employees could join;
- the society had to confine its attentions to matters affecting railway employees.

However, contrary to Roth's assertion (1973, p. 17), the railwaymen did not promise to abjure strike tactics (*Railway review*, 3 July, 1894, p. 5). But they might as well have, given their behaviour over the next 30 years and their removal of all references to strikes from their rules.

Following recognition the society gained strength. Membership grew and a superannuation scheme was organised. There were some losses, though. The Railways Department clerical employees (i.e. the First Division) broke away and formed their own organisation in 1894 — the Railway Officers Institute. Later engine-drivers, firemen and cleaners laid plans for a separate body to represent themselves. By 1913, 1 in every 10 New Zealand union members belonged to the ASRS, but the union's membership was confined to the Second Division (i.e. manual) railway workers.

However, a large membership was not the key reason why the ASRS chose to eschew the strike weapon. More importantly, there were few issues over which they would want to strike. In the words of the society's journal, *Railway review*, New Zealand railwaymen had better conditions and better pay than their overseas counterparts. Besides, the society boasted a relatively cordial relationship with both the Government and the Railways Department. The Liberal Government had supported the union's growth and development, and had always been willing to listen to its representatives. Although the Liberals had been replaced in 1912 by Massey's conservative Reform Government, few of Massey's decisions had given the railwaymen cause for complaint. In fact, Massey pleased the ASRS by passing on concessions agreed to with the Liberals. These were embodied in the regulations accompanying the Government Railways Amendment Act 1913. They provided for an increase in perquisites and a minimum salary of £100 per annum for railwaymen over 21. Most importantly, the new

2 The fact it was spelt "United Federation of Labor" reflected the American influence.

regulations provided for increased (but limited) opportunity for the Second Division workers to be promoted to the clerical First Division. To the union's executive, this represented a positive response by Government to the needs of Second Division railwaymen.

The railwaymen valued these new benefits, benefits which the ASRS executive knew could be easily lost. It had happened in 1890 and could happen again. In their view little could be gained from the use of the strike weapon. However, the balance between the costs and benefits of striking was to change in the 7 years following 1913 and it is to an examination of these changes we now turn.

The winds of change

The 1913 Government regulations both pleased the ASRS and filled its members with expectation. Many improvements had been made; surely they could expect more in the near future. Although the regulations did provide for some improvement in the working conditions of the Second Division railwaymen, they also provided for the continuance of practices which the railwaymen considered to be unfair, e.g. the mere existence of the barrier between the First and Second Divisions and the rule stipulating "no person in the service (could) take an active part in politics other than recording his vote at elections" (*New Zealand gazette*, 1913, vol II, p. 3619). Dissatisfaction with these and other restrictions served to intensify the railwaymen's irritation with their working conditions during the war years. However, a more important reason for their increasing anger was the rising cost of living.

Retail prices had been rising steadily since 1911 and had increased by 10 percent by 1914. Food and rent costing 19s 10d in 1908 cost 21s 7d in 1914 (Department of Statistics, 1915, p. 787) and it was hardly surprising that the railwaymen, who had received on average a one shilling increase during the period, were beginning to complain.

The obvious solution to the money problem was to ask W H Herries, the Minister of Railways, for a wage increase. He was duly visited in July 1914 and a one shilling per day increase requested. The visit was unsuccessful — Herries argued that the concessions given to railway casuals under the Government Railways Amendment Act 1913, had cost the Government £120 000 and no further increase could be justified.

However it was not long before ASRS demands came to an abrupt halt. When the war began, industrial demands were replaced by patriotic fervour and sacrifice. As soon as war was declared the union executive announced their intention not to press any of their former demands. The executive passed resolutions:

That the President and General Secretary wait on the Minister of Railways and explain to him that in view of the present Imperial crisis, we do not at the present juncture intend pressing any of our claims on him (*Railway review*, 21 August 1914, p. 351).

and the membership had to be informed of the importance of "doing the right thing":

The crisis is a serious one, perhaps the most serious those men in the service have ever known of and we have our duty to perform. The first part of that duty is to avoid taking any action at a time which will in any way harass the powers that be, knowing they have greater troubles than ours to occupy their minds in the very interest of the Empire itself (*Railway review*, 18 September 1914, p. 399).

The railwaymen remained silent about their pay until April 1915 when they decided "something" had to be done. Retail prices had increased by 10.5 percent between 1914 and 1915 largely as a result of the war and the railwaymen had still not received any increase in pay. Government was not totally disinterested in their plight. Its response was an inquiry into the cost of living in 1914 and the Cost of Living Act, 1915, which provided for a Board of Trade to "offset the conditions brought about by war" (Department of Statistics, 1916, p. 362). Unfortunately the Board had few "real teeth" and increases in retail prices continued to erode the purchasing power of the working population's wages.

The railwaymen's complaints were not restricted to pay. The latter half of 1915 was characterised by discontent with the Railway Appeal Board, abortive discussions regarding other conditions, and the first stirrings of a more militant brand of discontent were being recorded in *Railway review*.

"Workers unite"

The ASRS executive soon realised the old constitutional methods of redress were not working. Their own strength had proved insufficient, clearly a new approach to difficulties was needed. Although the ASRS executive never embraced the revolutionary principles of marxism and syndicalism, they did adopt the emphasis on unity characteristic of these approaches.

What steps did the railwaymen take in this direction? Their first priority was to increase the ASRS's membership. A campaign to recruit more members was initiated by the union's executive at the end of 1915 and a moderate degree of success achieved. No doubt a central reason for the campaign was the fear of losing members and funds — railwaymen were joining the Expeditionary Force in increasing numbers. A second perceived threat to the ASRS was the growth of the Locomotive Engine-drivers, Firemen and Cleaners Association (EFCA).

Official recognition was first sought by the EFCA in 1909 when they pleaded before a Railways Committee that the ASRS had failed to represent them. Some commentaries have argued that the EFCA wanted a more radical approach to unionism than the ASRS (Waterson, 1959, p. 145), however the available evidence suggests otherwise. For example, the comments of the EFCA General Secretary reflect a conservative view and are worth quoting:

The Amalgamated Society here has practically the same object in view as the labour leaders in America when they wanted to get all the workers into one union so they could go out on strike . . . I must say that strikes are altogether out of the question, and on behalf of the Engine-drivers, Firemen and Cleaners Union I may say that such a thing never entered our heads. I as Secretary of that organisation, will never make use of a strike as a weapon to be used against the Government (Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1909, 1-6, McArley).

The 1909 bid was unsuccessful but by 1913 official recognition had been obtained. The ASRS always hoped EFCA members would "see the light" and "return to the fold". Meetings were held where the ASRS executive advocated amalgamation of the 2 groups, the EFCA disagreed — they wanted to retain their independence. The EFCA did support a federation of the 2 bodies but this did not please the ASRS. No conclusion was reached and hostility between the 2 groups continued.

Unity ideals were not restricted to railway workers. Common war-time problems necessitated the common search for solutions and the ASRS began to look to other groups for support. Other unions were also interested in a more unified approach to problems and as a result, 2 new groups were formed.

First the Council of New Zealand State Service Associations (CSSA), organised in 1916 was a unified response to common problems of state servants. It represented 26 000 members of the Public Service Association, Post and Telegraph Officers' Association, the New Zealand Educational Institute, Railway Officers Institute and ASRS. From the beginning its chief role involved pressuring Government for cost of living adjustments.

Secondly, the railwaymen became involved in the New Zealand Transport Workers' Advisory Board (TWAB) which was nurtured under the guiding hand of "Big" Jim Roberts and the Watersiders' Federation. A conference of railwaymen, drivers, tramwaymen and waterside workers began in Wellington on 26 June 1916 and a constitution was drawn up. Among its objectives, the Board aimed to organise all transport workers along the lines of industry and the idea of "One Big Union" dominated discussion.³ The EFCA could not abide the "One Big Industrial Union" concept because of its craft basis and later declined to affiliate.

The ASRS, on the other hand, had 4 good reasons for affiliating with the Board. First, the common difficulties faced by transport workers, in the face of an unsympathetic Government, demanded a united front. Second, the President and General Secretary believed the TWAB could be effective in stopping strikes as it enabled the intervention of a third party in disputes. Third, although it was a term of the ASRS's recognition that the society would not affiliate with any other union, most of those who had demanded this rule had long since retired. Finally, outside labour groups had become less radical in their ideology enabling a "meeting of the

3 The "One Big Union" ideal continually dominated the Transport Workers Advisory Board. According to Roberts, the phrase meant "organisation on the lines of industry, with full democratic control by the rank and file".

minds" between railwaymen and other workers. With the development of the New Zealand Labour Party in 1916, "evolution" rather than "revolution" became the ideology of most labour groups; a view the railwaymen had held for a much longer time.

In March 1918 the railwaymen made their final decision although they had been involved from the beginning. A resolution to join the TWAB was carried unanimously. No doubt their decision was a relief to Roberts, who knew that without the railwaymen's numerical strength, a viable transport workers' organisation could not exist.

Pressures from within

Unity with other labour groups may have developed naturally but lack of unity within ASRS ranks was a continuing problem. Since 1908, the union had been under the guidance of a Dominion-wide executive. Quarterly executive meetings were held but policy decisions were reserved for triennial conferences which elected the 7 executive members. These 7 individuals represented approximately 8 000 members — a clear demonstration of power being concentrated in a small number of hands.

Much of the flavour of the union's policies can be attributed to the personalities of its leaders. General Secretary, Joe Mack, was the only paid union official and was in charge of the day-to-day organisation of the union. An ardent supporter of prohibition, his views were frequently conservative, a fact which occasionally irritated some of the members. Nevertheless, Mack had persuasive powers and could usually convince the membership of the validity of his views.

The union's president since 1915, Richard Hampton, was also somewhat conservative and could persuade. In 1913, fortunate circumstances and a laudable list of achievements had resulted in little animosity between the executive and membership. But the balance changed in 1915 and membership began to demand more accountability. For Hampton and Mack, the solution was simple — touring the country by train and haranguing the members.

Dissatisfaction with the executive's performance took 2 main forms. First, the railway tradesmen felt they were not being represented. Secondly, many members wanted more money and, in their view, the executive was doing little to achieve this.

In May 1915, tradesmen's representatives met with the ASRS executive and argued that they were worse off than they had been 2 years previously. Executive members offered little sympathy and little was heard from the tradesmen until August the following year. This time the tradesmen made representations to a Railways Committee convened to examine their request to be recognised as an independent association. Unfortunately, for the tradesmen, their arguments failed to convince the Committee and their request was refused. Meanwhile, many other members were dissatisfied with the executive's performance. Branch irritation at the executive's lack of action over the rising cost of living was escalating and many were considering taking matters into their own hands.

But angry rhetoric on the part of the branches came to an abrupt end in May 1916. The Government, perhaps sensing the growing dissatisfaction of public sector workers, granted a war bonus to those whose annual salaries did not exceed £300. For Second Division railwaymen this represented an increase of one shilling per day — the first pay increase since 1912 for most of them.

The war bonus was greeted with general satisfaction by the ASRS executive — but not for long. Soon they realised how little they had received. Between 1912 and 1916 prices had risen by 24.5 percent; the average railwayman's salary increased by only 10 percent as a result of the 1916 war bonus. By November 1916, angry statements by railwaymen regarding the cost of living were being heard once more.

The persistence of old problems and the emergence of new ones

Ironically, it was the Government's conscription policy which provided the inspiration for a new solution to the workers' problems. The idea that wealth should be conscripted gained considerable support throughout the trade union movement during the second half of 1916 and together with the "One Big Union" ideology, it began to dominate the pages of leading union journals. The rationale was clear. Farmers were receiving high prices for their produce but the workers had to tighten their belts for the war effort. Wage increases had proved

unobtainable, thus the logical solution was to request a reduction in consumer prices.

Persuading the politicians that this view had merit became a central focus of CSSA activity. A petition advocating socialisation of foodstuff production and distribution was presented to Parliament and a committee to investigate the cost of living formed. Among its suggestions, the committee advocated the appointment of a Food Controller to control retail prices but unfortunately for the workers, this recommendation was never implemented.

Meanwhile, the ASRS members and other workers took matters into their own hands. Articles advocating co-operative societies began appearing in *Railway review*. Co-operation, according to their author, would enable workers to both produce and sell their own goods and thus undermine the power of the "monopolist".⁴ Despite initial reservations, the concept was successfully tried in November 1917 with a coal and firewood business. Railwaymen, it seemed, were bent on creating their own brand of socialism.

However, radical socialist thinking was not the reason for ASRS members' interest in co-operation. Neither did it underpin their demands for the socialisation of production and distribution of foodstuffs. Instead, if wages could not go up, prices would have to come down. More radical goals were not on the agenda. The ASRS executive viewed a labour movement run on class lines as being as "selfish as capitalism itself" (*Railway review*, July 27 1917, p. 315). Rather an ideology of putting railwaymen's needs first and labelling them "the common good" prevailed.

This attitude was clearly demonstrated during the 1917 coal miners' strike. When coal supplies diminished and train services were curtailed, some railwaymen did not get paid. Obviously the strike was not in ASRS interests. However, nowhere was this problem mentioned. Instead, the "official" ASRS view regarded the strike as a neglect of duty.

The year 1917 also brought a new problem. The Defence Department wanted people in the war; the New Zealand public wanted an improved railway service. Labelled by the railwaymen as "the double pressure", this new difficulty resulted in there being fewer railwaymen to do more work. Further pressures were created by resignations. Poor wages, working conditions and the increased availability of jobs elsewhere encouraged this trend. The effect of these new pressures resulted in further complaints from ASRS members and new policies from Government and the Railways Department. Members of the Government Railways Superannuation Fund were forbidden from retiring without the Minister's consent and women's labour was used to overcome the shortage of men. ASRS members found both policies unacceptable.

In a deliberate attempt to discourage further resignations and assist those with family responsibilities, an extra shilling per day was granted to all married railwaymen from December 1917. A further shilling per day was granted to all state servants from 1 October 1918.

Resignations fell and the Government felt some degree of success had been achieved. To the ASRS, little had changed. Between 1912 and 1919 wages had increased by 30 percent but prices had increased by 53 percent. Working conditions had deteriorated and the old problems of the division barrier and lack of political rights remained.

Nevertheless, the ASRS had reaped some benefits. Bonds had been formed with fellow state servants and fellow transport workers. As a body, the ASRS had become stronger and more unified. Certainly membership had declined due to the war and resignations, but by the beginning of 1919, 82 percent of the Second Division now belonged. This was an immense improvement over 1913 when the proportion was only 59 percent.

With a strong union, many grievances, and the end of the war, expectations were high. To the ASRS, the Government had run out of excuses — it was time for their grievances to be remedied.

Disappointment

When the war ended in November 1918, the age-old claims were joined by new ones. United States railwaymen had recently achieved the 8 hour day and the ASRS wanted this

4 The term "monopolist" is frequently mentioned in the ASRS journal *Railway review* and other publications of the time. Unfortunately, it tends to mean different things to different writers and is therefore ambiguous. It is reasonable to assume that the usual connotation of the term was "farmer" or "person supplying produce to the urban areas". In any context, it was used to refer to a person who exploited the system putting "business first and patriotism second".

policy to apply to New Zealand. They also wanted an opportunity for short-term placements in other countries for practical experience.

However, industrial muscle was not going to be used to achieve any of these goals. Firstly, since the Government could no longer use the war as an excuse, the ASRS fully expected their demands to be met. Secondly, radical attempts at attaining redress had not been used during the war, and in the executive council's view, there was little reason to use them now. A further reason why the ASRS executive thought their requests would be granted was the appointment of a new General Manager, R W McVilly, who had come up through the New Zealand railways, and was regarded as more sympathetic to ASRS claims.

The railwaymen's optimism rapidly gave way to disappointment. The Government had decided that no changes could be made until "post war conditions were known", "the financial position analysed" and the feelings of the railway workers returning from the war "taken into account". The railwaymen were furious. Rank and file anger resulted in the executive drawing up a list of proposed amendments to the Schedule of the Government Railways Act 1908 (effectively the railway workers' award). While they debated the size of a desirable wage increase with the membership, the Government made its decision: the 3 war bonuses were to be added to the men's permanent wages. The executive were satisfied.

The membership received little consultation. The executive scarcely made an attempt to seek rank and file views. Instead the membership had to be persuaded the Government's decision was right. This was done in the normal fashion. Members' representatives were gathered together; executive members applied their oratorical skills and finally the delegates were asked to vote. As usual, the executive won with a large majority and promised to move for other improvements as soon as the opportunity offered.

The importance of "being seen to be doing something" had also encouraged the executive council to strengthen its links with the TWAB. ASRS affiliation had greatly increased the Board's numerical strength and Jim Roberts' dream of "One Union — One Industry" was becoming a reality.

However, the railwaymen's ideology and that of Roberts were somewhat different. Roberts advocated worker ownership of the means of production and "One Union — One Industry" was a prerequisite for the realisation of this goal. The ASRS supported the "One Union — One Industry" goal because of its desire to be the only union for the railway service. Although Roth (1973, p. 13), has implied that the ASRS involvement in the Transport Workers' Federation encouraged the railwaymen to be more radical, there is a shortage of evidence to support this view. Rather the ASRS was solely interested in meeting its own needs. The EFCA undermined its strength and was therefore undesirable. ASRS members needed proof their executive was doing something about their problems. And here the ASRS's commitment to the Transport Workers' Federation ended.

If the executive's attempts at "doing something" cheered the members a little, their happiness did not last for long. Chronic staff shortages (which were exacerbated by the 1918-19 influenza epidemic), resulted in men working long hours for poor wages. Indeed, the months following the end of the war involved little change. ASRS members' conditions remained poor; their relationship with the departmental management worsened. Ironically it was an attempt by Government to correct the problems they faced which precipitated the strike. It is to an examination of these final events that we now turn.

Precipitating events

The events which took place immediately prior to the strike are not extraordinary on their own. Only when they are added to the weight of existing difficulties do they become significant. Discontent was intensified by a new factor: The Government Railways Amendment Bill which was introduced into the House of Representatives in September 1919. In fact, it was the events triggered by this Bill, that were the immediate cause of the strike.

Government had realised the seriousness of the railway situation. Despite a Parliamentary debate regarding the state of the railways in November 1918, still no improvement had occurred by the following September. Clearly something had to be done and William Massey, the Prime Minister, took over the railways portfolio himself.

Massey set up a select committee to inquire into the railway service, which in turn recommended the formation of a further committee. A Wages Board was established to "...

consider and report upon such questions affecting the wages and working conditions of members of the Railway service as may be referred to it by the Minister of Railways" (*New Zealand parliamentary debates*, 1919, vol 184, p. 1012). The Board was to be constituted as follows:

- (a) the Judge of the Arbitration Court — or other Judge of the Supreme Court — who would be chairman;
- (b) a representative of Government;
- (c) a representative appointed on the nomination of the Railway Officers' Institute;
- (d) a representative appointed on nomination of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants;
- (e) a representative appointed on the nomination of the Locomotive-engine Drivers, Firemen and Cleaners' Association (*ibid*).

Reluctantly the ASRS agreed to the plan. Mack was nominated as the society's representative on the Board leaving Hampton to act as ASRS advocate before the Board. Following arguments over whether the press should be invited and the suitability of the Railways Department advocate, the hearing finally began on 26 January 1920. Hampton argued that railwaymen were receiving insufficient wages, their hours were appalling and, as a result, experienced men were leaving the department. The departmental advocate disagreed. Undaunted, Hampton continued. The ASRS wanted sick and accident pay, the 44 hour week, overtime before 8am and after 5pm, the removal of the divisional barrier and representation at management level. The department's attitude was simple: none of these concessions was warranted.

On March 6 1920, 1 month and 6 days after the hearing had been completed, the chairman released his report. The report recommended a 1 shilling per day cost of living bonus for married men but failed to address any of the other grievances. Mr Justice Stringer's decision was that such matters were (1) outside the orders of reference and (2) about situations of which he had no expert knowledge. The railwaymen were incredulous.

News of the rail service's discontent reached Massey. A Treasury report was published stating that if railwaymen's wages were raised, taxes would also have to be increased. The ASRS was unimpressed. As a counter-attack, the executive council published a report in *Railway review* indicating that many freight rates had not been increased for 25 years. Meanwhile, a deputation to Parliament requested the dispute be investigated by a body consisting of representatives of the parties involved and a mutually agreed chairman, as was provided by the Labour Disputes Investigation Act 1913. Representations were also made directly to Massey regarding the Stringer Report's inadequacy and a reply was eagerly awaited.

A letter arrived on 22 April 1920, 2 days before the Prince of Wales disembarked in Auckland. Stringer's recommendation would apply until June 1920 when a new commission, but without a mutually agreed chairman, would inquire into wages. The letter made no mention of working conditions.

The executive council were at a loss over what to do. Mack weakly suggested that "a climax (was) at hand" but could not offer any more definite reaction. Helplessly he added: "I feel sure the men will never accept the commission proposed" (*Railway review* 30 April 1920, p. 189).

Mack may have never realised the prophetic nature of his words. In less than a week, tools were down, trains were stopped and the Prince marooned. The strike had begun.

Strike

The 1920 strike was not initiated by the ASRS. Ironically it was begun by the EFCA who had vowed, in 1909, never to use the strike as a weapon against the Government — something even the ASRS had never done!⁵ On Tuesday April 27, the EFCA sent a telegram to the Prime Minister stating that "Locomotive men had unanimously decided to cease work at midnight" (*New Zealand times*, 28 April 1920, p. 5).

The ASRS was initially most confused. Because of years of mutual animosity between the 2 unions, the EFCA had failed to inform the ASRS of its intentions. However, most ASRS members refused to work from the moment the strike began. It was not until 3 executive

5 The EFCA had supported strike action in May 1919 but this had never been put into effect.

members met on the night of Wednesday April 28, that all North Island members were instructed to "forthwith cease work" (*Railway review*, 28 May 1920, p. 257).

Prime Minister Massey's initial reaction was to try to avert embarrassment. A telegram was dispatched to the EFCA.

I trust that even now wiser counsels may prevail, and that . . . while our Royal visitor is the guest of New Zealand, peace may prevail between the railwaymen and the State. Anything in the way of a strike just now would be a disgrace to the whole of the Dominion, and more especially to those who became responsible for it . . . (*New Zealand times*, 28 April 1920, p. 5).

However, the railwaymen were not about to change their minds — a fact Massey soon realised. Following a special Cabinet meeting in Rotorua, he was hastily driven to Wellington to meet representatives from both organisations.

For the most part, railway services in the North Island ceased. First Division officers were requested to run trains but, in an unusual display of solidarity, they chose to support their colleagues. Should the strike be successful, no doubt some of their own grievances would be resolved.

Public reaction to the strike was mixed. From the upheaval that was created, it is curious that the railwaymen received any public sympathy at all. Passengers were stranded, food prices soared, steamers were delayed and the Railways Department lost £5 000 per day (*New Zealand times*, 30 April 1920, p. 5). Despite all this, little animosity was directed toward the strikers. Instead, concern surrounded the Royal Tour. The New Zealand Education Boards' Association appealed to the railwaymen not to deprive the nation's children of a chance to meet the Prince. The *New Zealand times* agreed:

while the merits are not in question, the railwaymen should wait until after the Tour has ended (*New Zealand times*, 30 April 1920, p.5).

Ironically, it was the Prince who solved the problem — he would "willingly give up the 3 days proposed for deer-stalking" in order that the children would not miss out (*ibid*, 30 April 1920, p. 5).

The strike by the ASRS was short-lived. A conference between the union and Massey was held on Friday April 30 and an agreement was reached in less than 30 minutes. The ASRS strike was over.

The EFCA was furious. In their view the ASRS had demanded too little and given in too easily. The EFCA wanted retrospection for any pay increase and its fight was not over yet. Nevertheless, a strike by the EFCA without the support of the ASRS was untenable, and on Monday May 3, EFCA members returned to work.

Neither union demanded immediate concessions. The ASRS agreed to have its grievances investigated under the Labour Disputes Investigation Act 1913. In its view a mutually agreed chairman and an opportunity for discussion of all the issues deemed relevant was sufficient. Radical demands were never made.

On June 2 the commission, chaired by G B Bullock, Dominion Superintendent of the New Zealand Shipping Company, reached an agreement on new wages and conditions for railway workers. Provisions made included the following:

- a 3 shilling per day increase for the Second Division;
- improved status of casual workers;
- increased availability of free passes;
- the 44 hour week;
- improved overtime and night rates;
- double pay on selected statutory holidays;
- improved promotion prospects.

Political rights and an end to the divisional barrier were missing from the list but the men did not seem to mind. This time the executive gave members the choice: if the agreement did not suit, they were free to reject it. But the agreement did suit. For the first time in 7 years, the New Zealand Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants was content.

Conclusion

April 28, 1920 signalled the end of an era for the ASRS. It did not represent a radical change in the union's policy. First, we must remember that the EFCA had struck first giving the ASRS little option. Either they joined in or they defeated a strike that was directly in their interests. Never before had they been in such a position. Secondly, the railwaymen's concern remained confined to their own interests and their own conception of the "common good". They were apologetic about disrupting the Royal Tour and, had the choice been theirs, they may well have rescheduled the timing of the strike. Nevertheless, Mack justified the strike as being consistent with the common interest:

... we think that the Government and the department will understand us better in the future than they apparently have done in the past, and this must be in the best interests of the public and all concerned (*New Zealand times*, 1 May 1920, p. 4).

Thirdly, the railwaymen had never promised to abjure strike methods, rather, the strike had always been the railwaymen's last weapon of defence. This had been clearly demonstrated by the railwaymen's actions in the years prior to 1920. In 1913, the ASRS had little use for the strike weapon; any benefits had been outweighed by their associated costs. Over the years this balance had been altered and, in 1920, the railwaymen had little to lose. Although every available constitutional method of redress had been tried, all had failed.

To summarise, in the eyes of the New Zealand public, the Government, the Railways Department, and the Transport Workers' Federation, the editor of *Railway review* was correct:

the railwaymen of New Zealand (had) cut the Gordian knot — they (had) abandoned their time honoured policy of peaceful negotiation ... and they (had) brought themselves into line with other classes of labour by adopting the strike as a last resort (*Railway review*, 28 May 1920, p. 257).

In reality ASRS policy had never altered.

Postscript

ASRS policy did change after the 1920 strike. Every member had witnessed the effectiveness of militant tactics and most were willing to strike should the occasion arise.

In 1924, 11 000 ASRS members downed tools in an effort to gain better wages. This time the Prince was absent and the Prime Minister was not embarrassed. In addition the EFCA did not support the strike. The railway tradesmen finally split from the ASRS, formed the Railway Tradesmen's Association and vowed never to use the strike weapon. The strike failed. Within a week work resumed and many of the gains made in 1920 were lost. This time the costs outweighed the benefits — a fact the ASRS only realised when it was too late.

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