Strategy for Success: The Pennsylvania Railroad and the 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike

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On July 1, 1922, 400,000 railroad shopmen began a strike that directly threatened the country's economic and social life. The highly skilled shopmen were powerful because they built and repaired the nation's locomotives and freight cars. Historians generally have concentrated on the part played by labor and government during this conflict [5, pp. 211-12; 34, pp. 117-19]. Railroad management, however, organized aggressively to defeat the strike. Management adopted tactics that were both active and reactive. In particular, the Pennsylvania Railroad was a major participant in developing strategies to defeat the strike. Moreover, the management of the Pennsylvania Railroad organized to overcome the strike beyond the boundaries of their own line of operation. Penn management represented the nation's railroads in bargaining discussions with President Warren Harding and labor leaders and, critically, supported other railroads by dispatching replacement workers. Above all, it is evident that the Pennsylvania was ready and able to protect itself and other railroads.

The importance of the Pennsylvania Railroad during the 1922 conflict was highlighted by its position within the industry. The Penn was a giant among giants. The system comprised over 10,500 miles of track located in 12 states and the District of Columbia. The Penn employed 55,000 shopmen, which constituted 15% of the nation's railroad shopforce [6, p. 572]. Its executives held important and influential positions in the employer group, the Association of Railway Executives (ARE). Vice President W. W. Atterbury was chairman of the powerful Labor Committee of the ARE. Atterbury, working closely with the Chairman of ARE, Thomas DeWitt Cuyler, pursued a course to undercut railroad labor power [6, p. 570]. Penn officials were also leaders of the more obstructionist group of railroad presidents who advocated the destruction of unionism. Reflecting other industry leaders, these railroad heads advocated the "American Plan." That is, the Penn wanted a return to pre-war conditions of unfettered, union-free

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labor relations [29, pp. 163-66]. Sparking this resistance was the experience of World War I. During the war the Wilson administration took control of the nation's rail systems. In order to guarantee labor peace and to prevent workers leaving the industry for better wages the government granted railroad labor organizations fundamental bargaining rights. Of particular importance, the organizations representing the 400,000 shopmen were accorded trade union recognition and a powerful position within the councils of federal railroad labor relations [10, pp. 164-70; 19, pp. 96-97]. Trade union power was further solidified as a result of the 1920 Transportation Act. The act established the Railroad Labor Board, a federal agency that oversaw the wages and working conditions of over two million workers [32, pp. 88-107].

From the beginning the relations between the Railroad Labor Board (RLB) and the Penn Railroad were bitter. Penn officials and others resented what they believed to be an intrusion by the RLB into managerial function. Beginning in 1921 Penn officials began to ignore RLB decisions and eventually went as far as conducting a representation election of their workforce. While the shopcrafts boycotted the election (claiming it was fraudulent), and the RLB refused to recognize the ballot, the Penn management installed their own company union. The controversy eventually went to the Supreme Court [32, pp. 295-329].

Exasperation with the RLB was not limited to the managerial group. After a series of important RLB rule changes and wage cuts, the nation's 400,000 shopmen decided to strike on July 1, 1922 [34, pp. 117-19]. Paradoxically, the Pennsylvania Railroad, keeping in line its disregard of RLB decisions, had not imposed the recommended wage cut. The Penn shopcrafts appeared confused and unsure whether to join the national strike. Thus at the beginning of the strike the shopmen's inability to put together a concerted effort weakened their position. The numbers of shopmen who struck the railroad confirmed the frailty of their industrial action. For the system as a whole only 52% walked out. Some regions, however, were affected more than others: Eastern Region, 31%; Central Region, 54%; Northwestern Region, 62%; and the Southwestern Region, 60% [12].

Although almost half the shopmen remained at work, management quickly organized to defeat the strike. In a July 13 letter to W. R. Scott, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, W. W. Atterbury outlined his strategy: "Our organization plans are not different from the organization which we have set up at all times to cope with matters of this kind." Each region established its own "permanent strike organization" and "all of the supervisory officers . . . immediately assumed their respective strike duties" [2]. The strategies adopted to defeat the strike encompassed a wide range of options. The primary focus was to continue train operation and ensure that rolling stock was kept in good repair. Thus recruitment of replacement workers took on an important function. The railroad immediately established labor agent offices along its line. The labor agencies came under direct control of the Superintendent of the Labor and Wage Bureau, W. W. Burrell. Once a clear demand for labor was established, the Superintendent would inform labor agents of the location where the workers should be sent. To expedite the movement of workmen, guides, described

as "labor pilots," escorted the replacements to their destination. Some supervisory personnel pushed for a more direct approach to recruiting workers. One official claimed he would try to pick up men in the Calumet District in Chicago. A lieutenant of the Chicago Police Force pointed out, however, that it "would simply mean committing suicide, not only for himself but for such men as he might be able to pick up" [21].

Concomitant with the above recruitment practices, management inaugurated an extensive advertising campaign. Local newspapers throughout the states along the road were utilized. Twenty-two newspapers in Indiana carried advertisements, as did fourteen in Illinois. The Penn experienced problems with some newspaper editors who refused to place an ad because they supported the strikers. Another example concerned a newspaper that stressed a strong parochial interest; the paper declined to accept ads that "require[d] the men to leave the[ir] city" [33]. Penn officials closely monitored newspapers for their effectiveness in drawing skilled workers. The primary reason for gauging the advertisements was their high cost. For example, the weekly advertising costs in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Herald-Examiner*, the *American*, the *News* and the *Abendpost* was $1,530. After analyzing the usefulness of such ads, General Superintendents began the process of cancellation. For example, seven were curtailed in Ohio and a further seven in Michigan. In conjunction with advertisements, hand bills and posters were produced and distributed throughout the states serviced by the railroad [25].

Officials bolstered newly employed forces with their own workers. For example, at Altoona, the major repair point of the railroad, capable helpers were promoted to mechanics. The helpers were then easily replaced by common laborers. This tactic had the advantage of rewarding loyal men and avoided hiring new, skilled workers. Other types of workers also filled in. Clerks, for example, were used as "experienced volunteers" and engaged in freight car repairs [30].

The railroad also established commissaries to feed and house replacement workers and guards. Already in place was a structure that fed and housed track laborers; therefore facilities were expanded. The Penn leased the commissaries to private concerns such as Jacobson Commissary Company and the Commissary Company of America. The supervision of the commissaries, however, was performed by Penn officials. In the Northwestern Region, Assistants to the Engineer Corps, Trainmasters, and Storekeepers, supervised the feeding of the replacements. Large numbers of men were serviced by the commissaries. In the Eastern Region 14,938 meals a day were served and 2,870 men were lodged each night. In the Northwestern Region, emergency camps were operated that fed 3,027 men and slept 1,650. The Central Region established 26 camps providing over 23,000 meals a day [13].

The railroad, however, experienced difficulty in hiring adequate numbers of competent workers. Not least was the problem of competition from other railroads in their areas of operation. The expanding economy also placed limits on the supply of qualified workmen.

Of those workers employed by the Penn, large numbers included ex-service men and students. The Bureau of Information of the Eastern

Railways found that of workers hired "about 25% are men formerly in the United States armed forces." Many of the students were from engineering colleges who used the strike to bolster vacation earnings and provide a practical experience of railroad work [8]. The quality of replacement workers however was poor. In numerous cases labor agents dispatched unqualified mechanics with little or no knowledge of locomotive repair. The underlying problem was the lack of mechanical competency of the agents. As one labor agent explained, "we come in contact with some very shrewd men looking for something soft. . . ." Another agent observed, "there are almost any number of helpers, half-baked mechanics and out-and-out boomers looking for a ride." Due to the scarcity of skilled men Penn officials drew up plans for accepting returning strikers. A policy was established that the returning workers had forfeited their seniority and had to accept the company union as their representative body. Officials refused, however, to take back supervisory officers and those men over 45 years old [23].

Criminal elements also used the services of the railroad. In one case labor agents were warned to be aware of "2 fingered Jack . . . this fellow will steal anything that is moveable." Even guards engaged in illegal activities. One replacement worker reported that guards located at Portsmouth, Ohio were "bootlegging." Other unwelcome visitors for the Penn were strikers posing as replacement labor. Once employed, these "workers" either garnered information on the volume and state of repairs, engaged in sabotage, or attempted to create a walkout [14].

Large numbers of railroad police provided critical support. Over 16,000 additional guards were employed during the strike. Their functions included the protection of railroad property and the arrest of those who threatened it. In many instances guards concentrated in railroad towns where strikers enjoyed widespread support. For example, there were 213 at Fort Wayne, Indiana; 50 at Crestline, Ohio and 69 at Logansport, Indiana. The numbers of guards stationed at the Fort Wayne Division rose from 13 to 358 by July 20 and those at the Logan Division rose from 6 to 97 [15]. The guards had extensive power. At Fort Wayne 150 guards were "sworn in as deputy sheriffs." The local sheriff, Albert Abbott, questioned the authority of these "deputy sheriffs" after he arrested guards who had left "railroad property with guns in their pockets." Abbott argued that men should patrol only railroad property and charged them with carrying concealed weapons. Special Judge Clarence McNabb freed the men, however, and declared that the guards "were given no limitation of power when the commissions were issued to them" [26, p. 2]. Guards also protected shuttle trains that transported replacement workers from one town to another. For example, workers recruited from Mansfield, Ohio were shunted back and forth to the town of Crestline. As well as feeding and housing the guards, the Pennsylvania supplied them with riot material. In all, 17,000 revolvers were issued, 220 shotguns, and 640 clubs [16].

The police also utilized extensive spy networks already in place. The spy reports furnished the Penn management with the strategies and movements of local union leaders. The reports identified strikers attempting to get police jobs, but more frequently, the accounts described illegal

activities. A series of reports outlined striker attempts to form "wrecking crews" to intimidate those men still working. Spies decoded instructions for sabotage. In one union circular the question was asked, "Are the trains on your division running on time?" The spy reported that the true meaning of the question was, "soap should be put into locomotive tenders and carborundum in oil" [27]. Just as important the mood of the strikers and leadership also was provided. Spies obtained crucial information on the tactics and strategies of the powerful Big Four operating brotherhoods (labor organizations not involved in the conflict). Penn officials were thus provided with important intelligence of local and national union policies [26, pp. 39-40].

After three weeks the Penn had formalized its structures to battle the strike. The functions of recruitment and protection would continue throughout the conflict. Once the framework was in place the railroad was able to locate problem areas concerning demand for workers. After directing replacement workers to needed areas and towns, the Penn turned its attention to helping other railroads with their own labor shortage. The shortage of shopmen on other railroads became especially acute on coal-carrying roads. Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, threatened at the end of July that if coal supplies could not be delivered then the government would take control. In an effort to deflect such an action the Eastern Presidents' Conference agreed on July 31 to supply competent shopmen to the Norfolk & Western, the Louisville & Nashville, and the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroads [9].

The Penn became the major supplier of shopmen. Its quota for the Chesapeake & Ohio (C. & O.) was 288, and for the Norfolk & Western (N. & W.) the number was 23 (although by August 10, fifty had been sent). Although a total of nine railroads supplied shopmen, the Pennsylvania delivered 31% of replacement labor to the C. & O. and 29% to the N. & W. [22]. The caliber of men sent underscores the Pennsylvania's commitment to keep coal-carrying railroad stock moving. Large numbers of the men were either gang or assistant foremen. Out of a group of 52 men directed to work on the C. & O., 25% were supervisory personnel. The gang dispatched to the N. & W. were equally well organized. The train put together for the trip and the stay included a "storage car, kitchen car, eating car and sleeping cars, together with cooks, waiters, guards and approximately fifty mechanics." R. H. Aishton, President of the American Railway Association, attested to the success of the operation by explaining to Atterbury, "Mighty good work-Most helpful thing that has happened here-Can you repeat?" [1].

But the festive mood was not to last. By the second week of August (the sixth week of the strike) the Pennsylvania Railroad, along with others, came under threat from the Big Four operating brotherhoods. The engineers, firemen, conductors, and trainmen were not engaged in strike action, but as the shopmen's conflict continued they became restless. Sub-standard equipment and armed guards added provocation. Many locomotives and cars were unsafe to operate because of poor repairs. By August 9 the situation hit a crisis stage when Big Four workers in the western section of the country took unofficial strike action [24, p. 520].

Meanwhile Penn operating crafts complained bitterly of undisciplined guards. One official representing the trainmen complained to I. W. Geer, General Manager of the Southwestern Region, that, "Our men have, on several occasions, been stopped in the yard by the gentlemen of special privilege, have been questioned, delayed, insulted, and these practices should be stopped." The union official then used threats to get his point across: "there is absolutely no need to keep such an army of low-breds to protect the interests of the Company . . . and if more assistance is not received from the Company, it might be just as well for us to enter the argument and have it over at once" [20].

Company officials immediately scrambled to assuage their angry operating crafts. An agreement was hammered out that recognized the right of engineers, firemen, and to others refuse to operate unsafe equipment. The company also promised to discipline over-zealous guards. By the third week of August, Penn officials were confident that conditions had settled down. Underlying this stance was the officials' knowledge that the threatened walk out was not going to take place. A confidential telegram from a Chicago informant explained, "There will be no sympathetic strike at present by the Big Four. . . . However, there may be considerable shooting-off in the papers" [28].

Just as problematic was the relationship between the railroads and the Harding Administration. Harding, fearing the effect of the strike on the economy, was determined to settle the conflict. He attempted to get the two sides together to discuss a settlement. W. W. Atterbury represented the railroads in the negotiations. The problem was seniority. The railroads would allow the men back to work only as "new" men. The shopcrafts refused to give up hard-won seniority rights and rejected the proposal [32, pp. 244-47]. At this juncture a break-away group of railroads attempted to sign a peace agreement with their shopmen. The accommodating railroad presidents were led by Daniel Willard of the Baltimore & Ohio, and included S. W. Warfield, President of Seaboard Airline Railroad, and Felix Harrison of Southern Railway [11, pp. 234-35]. Atterbury and the presidents of other railroads, however, wanted to maintain a unified response. Atterbury attempted to squelch the idea of a separate peace by attacking Willard. Alluding to Willard's background as a man who worked his way up from an engineer to president of the B. & O., Atterbury explained on July 24, "It may be that what is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh, and it might be pleaded that Mr. Willard has for that cause been unconsciously influenced to the wrong course" [3].

Atterbury and the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, Samuel Rea, conducted a concerted campaign to pressure Willard from his conciliatory stance. Telegrams were sent to business organizations (such as the National Industrial Council) to encourage Willard to back off from separate negotiations. Correspondingly, the National Industrial Council explained to Willard that his independent tack was "bound to seriously lessen respect for government and weaken whole theory of arbitration in industry . . . your action is clearly embarrassing to all roads . . . and we deem it both duty and privilege to urge our views and to expect careful consideration of the same" [7]. The reach of the campaign was widespread.

Nathan B. Williams, Vice President of the National Association of Manufacturers, explained, "Mr. Willard was in receipt of so many telegrams from business men that he should stand firm that he had imagined that concerted efforts to that end were proceeding from this office [29, p. 169].

For all the effort spent by the Penn and others to defeat Willard's separate plan, they were nonetheless overshadowed by the breakdown of the nation's rolling stock. By late August a crisis situation existed. Increasing breakdowns of locomotives directly threatened the transportation of crucial foodstuffs and coal. On September 1, the Harding administration stepped in with a federal injunction that effectively ended the strike [5, pp. 211-12; 4, p. 494]. The shopcraft leadership scrambled to sign agreements with those railroads that appeared sympathetic. Led by Penn officials, over two-thirds of the railroads rebuffed union efforts at negotiation.

Immediately following the federal injunction, Penn officials intensified their efforts to defeat the shopmen. On September 8, "three special gangs of 500 employees each" were formed and dispatched to Canton and Dennison, Ohio and Olean, New York. The purpose of the gangs was to "break the strike at those points." Penn officials also diverted a gang returning from working on the Norfolk & Western Railroad to Columbus, Ohio. Again, the purpose was to break the strikers. Although the Pennsylvania Railroad continued to experience frequent breakdowns of rolling stock, by November it employed sufficient numbers of workers to provide an adequate service. As early as September 8, Penn officials were streamlining their workforce. For example, it was ordered "get rid of the inefficient and any radicals who may have slipped in" [17].

The union leadership refused to call off the strike. Although effectively over, it was not until 1928 that union presidents canceled the strike order. The Pennsylvania Railroad was successful at defeating the shopmen. But at what cost? Between July 1, 1922 and February 28, 1923 direct expenditures totaled $15.4 million. The major costs included $1,579,000 for establishing commissaries and camps; $5,156,000 for the operation of the commissaries; $2,772,000 for extra guards; wage and overtime payments of $3,052,000; and a bonus allowance for loyal workers of $1,373,000 [18]. Penn officials obviously were convinced that the battle was worth fighting. Thus the Penn operated throughout the 1920s with no interference from their shopmen or the union organizations that once represented them. The question that remains, however, is why did the Penn management reject the accommodative policy of the B. & O. Railroad? Surely time, effort, and money could have been saved by negotiating with the shopmen. Instead, the Pennsylvania was determined to rid itself of a union presence it deemed superfluous. Its policy therefore embodied two strategies: organizing a replacement workforce to protect railroad property and meeting head-on any challenge to the policy of outright destruction of the shopmen's organizations.

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