

The canal boatmen's strike of 1923

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On 13 August 1923 the movement of long-distance commercial traffic on those canals linking London, the Midlands and north-west England came to a virtual standstill when the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) called out on strike those of its members employed by Fellows Morton & Clayton (FMC), one of the country's largest canal carrying companies. (1) This dispute was to last for fourteen weeks, though in the context of industrial turmoil between 1918 and 1926 it has been an event barely recalled either in the economic and social histories covering this period or in the published recollections of those personnel most actively involved.(2)

Nevertheless, despite this apparent insignificance, a narrative of the origins and course of the strike can be justified for three specific reasons. First, not only was it the sole strike in FMC's history (and, perhaps, the longest ever to involve any single canal carrying company), it was also one of the first disputes to involve the recently created TGWU. To analyse this dispute, therefore, is to trace the expansion of the union's sphere of activity into non-river-based trades and occupations, and also to examine the interaction between a company with no strike record, let alone negotiating experience, and a large, but young, national union keen to flex its industrial muscle on behalf of a neglected section of industrial society. Second, the dispute can be related to the particular characteristics of the canal carrying industry and to its changing role within the national freight distribution system. Thus, on the one hand, the strike was part of the union's campaign to improve the working conditions of canal boatmen, whilst on the other hand its causes can be traced to the competition between canals and railways for the carriage of bulk traffic, and to the growing rivalry of road transport to both. Third, in an industry where long-distance carrying was still dominated by family boats, the strike provides a unique opportunity to study a section of the canal community at close quarters. One outcome of the strike call was that FMC boats and their occupants gathered at those locations where the company had depots, and it was to these depots that the local and national press were drawn to comment on the background to the dispute and to describe events and activities. Most of the depots were in large towns and cities, and so the impact of the dispute upon the local community was slight: the exception was that at Braunston, a village near Daventry, Northamptonshire, at the junction of the Grand Junction (now Grand Union) and Oxford Canals. It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to examine the boatmen's strike of 1923 within the context of this small canalside settlement in north-west Northamptonshire.

The canal at Braunston

To most boatmen operating between the major urban centres of midland England, or between Birmingham and London, the name of Braunston was synonymous with the canal, for, one consequence of the most active period of waterway construction, between 1770 and 1815, was the emergence of this village as the focal point of the canal system in the south Midlands. The strategic importance of Braunston had been recognised from the

outset when, in 1788, the village was selected by Pickford's, then a canal-based carrying company, as one of the major depots in its national distribution system. (3) With the completion of the Grand Junction, Warwick & Napton, and Warwick & Birmingham Canals in 1800 (these providing an alternative and shorter route between Birmingham and London) Braunston prospered as a canal centre, a fact reflected not only in the volume of boat movements and toll income (4) but also in the decision by Pickford's, in the 1840-'s, to transfer thirty families from Manchester to a boat repair dock alongside its Braunston depot.(5). Although Pickford's closed this dock, and withdrew from nearly all its canal operations in 1847, the census of 1851 still identified sixty of the 264 inhabited dwellings at Braunston as housing canal workers and 173 out of the population of 1,253 as 'boat people who passed during the night'(6). In 1858 the area around the bottom lock (on the Grand junction Canal) was described as a boatman's village 'where the people on the land seemed to belong to the people on the water; where everybody knew everybody and seemed glad to see everybody, and where there was some provision made for (all] the boatman's requirements'.(7)

Despite the challenge from the railways in the second half of the nineteenth century, Braunston retained its position as a major canal centre. Two factors contributed to this. The first was the physical dimensions of the canal locks immediately to the north and south: on the line of the Grand junction the locks were wide and could accommodate two narrow boats at a time, thus facilitating boats working in pairs, whilst on all the canals between Braunston and Birmingham the locks were narrow, could accept only one narrow boat at a time, and were generally worked by single boats. (8) As a result Braunston became a key change-over point and attracted extensive wharfage, stabling and warehousing as well as boat-building and repair facilities.(9)

(Figure 1 – The position of Braunston)

Second, although a succession of different companies dominated long distance trading between London and the Midlands throughout the nineteenth century, there was a tendency for each company to absorb the staff, vessels and established customs and practices of its predecessor; the effect was to maintain the role of those existing depots on the waterway network.(10) By the 1890s the most important canal carrying company trading on this route was Fellows Morton & Clayton, a firm whose origins were in the industrial west Midlands. (11) Its take-over of the London traffic of the London & Midland Counties Canal Company in 1886, by other mergers and a programme of boat building which saw over 140 vessels added to the fleet between 1886 and 1923, (12) gave FMC sufficient importance on the Grand Junction Canal for it to negotiate preferential tolls with the Grand Junction Canal Company and to act as its intermediary in the purchase of the canal branch to Leicester in 1894. (13) FMC had several depots on the waterway system, but on the main route of the Grand Junction Canal, where its growing presence was to help increase traffic tonnages by over 50 per cent between 1888 and 1905, (14) it had only two - at Brentford and at Braunston. Thus in a period of general decline in canal carrying the emergence of FMC as one of the largest canal-based companies in England was to retain the status of the Grand Junction Canal as a major trade artery and Braunston as one of its most important centres:(15) indeed, to generations of boatmen employed by FMC the village of Braunston was regarded as

home [and] ... they wanted to be buried here whether they had a home here or not and wherever they died'. (16)

The origins of the strike

Disputes between canal boatmen and their employers were not unknown during the nineteenth century and were restricted neither to certain parts of Britain nor to particular companies. Nevertheless, there is little to suggest that such disputes, including strikes, were precipitated and organised other than by the boatmen themselves and then only by those working for the larger carrying companies. (17) Evidence presented to the Factory Commission of 1876 indicated that 'canal boat drivers have no organisation amongst themselves like a Trade Union', (18) though this was equally true of many other unskilled and general workers employed in the transport industry. In this sense the canal boatmen should not be seen as a special case, though the peculiar circumstances of long-distance boating rendered their occupation particularly difficult to organise into concerted industrial action.

The unionisation of the boatmen working for FMC is unclear, since detailed union and company records appear not to have survived. (19) What is clear, however, is that much of FMC's trading activity was concerned with the movement of cargoes between England's major ports and the industrial Midlands: inevitably the loading and unloading process at the docks brought boatmen into contact with lightermen, rivermen and other dock workers. Particularly significant in this respect was the contact at Brentford and Limehouse with the London dockers, (20) for it was among this group that men such as Ben Tillett and Harry Gosling had demonstrated the strength of organised labour - *vide* the London dock strike of 1889 - as a device for tackling working conditions and other occupational grievances. From such successes in the docks these union leaders devised a twofold strategy, first to amalgamate the separate, but transport-related, unions into one powerful body 'as a means of giving effect to the claims formulated by the port workers, by the seamen and other bodies of workers in the transport trade', (21) and second to draw public attention to the iniquities of their working environment by mass meetings and strikes and by pressure on government to establish investigative commissions and inquiries.

In 1910 over thirty unions engaged in waterside transport work agreed to create the National Transport Workers' Federation, with Harry Gosling as President, (22) and there followed, in 1911 and 1912, a succession of strikes which, on occasions, held up all services borne by rail, road, canal or river throughout the country. Although there were difficulties in achieving co-ordinated industrial action, government controls over rail and canal transport during World War I brought the unions closer together and quickened the process away from federation and towards amalgamation. (23) In June 1920 the National Transport Workers' Federation voted in favour of an amalgamation of transport unions, and there followed discussions and conferences to which unions representing road transport workers were invited. Following balloting of individual members, eleven unions met in May 1921 and decided to merge into the National Union of Transport and General Workers, which would officially function from 1 January 1922: Harry Gosling was elected president, and secretary to the Waterways Trade Group, Ernest Bevin secretary both to the union and to its Docks Trade Group. (24)

Associated with this process of political reorganisation was a growing commitment among the union leaders to the plight of all other general workers in the transport industry. In particular the canal boatmen were identified as one minority group requiring special help, for the union 'keenly realises that there are many things from which these people have to suffer and some of them can only be described as scandalous'. (25) Early in 1919 a joint committee of employers, and representatives of the Transport Workers' Federation, was formed to consider the hours of work of canal workers, whilst in November 1919 Ernest Bevin, on behalf of the Federation, achieved 'the appointment of a committee, composed of public men together with departmental representatives to inquire into the whole subject [of living-in] on canal boats'. (26) The living conditions of canal boatmen were revealed to a wider audience early in 1923 when, as the newly elected MP for Whitechapel, Harry Gosling posed questions to the Minister of Health (27) and also later in the same year when he became Minister of Transport and Paymaster General in the first Labour government.

This thrust at national level was complemented by vigorous local recruitment campaigns, and by union intervention in localised disputes about wage rates and working conditions. Particular efforts to increase membership were made at Kidderminster and Bilston in the Midlands, Ellesmere Port in north-west England and, in association with the union's Docks Trade Group, at Brentford, where this important junction between the Midland canal system and the Port of London is becoming 'a strong outpost'. (28) It will be recalled that FMC had an important depot at Brentford, so it must have been here that boatmen working for the company's southern fleet were recruited. Between September 1922 and March 1923 the union had successfully negotiated agreements on wages and conditions of employment with several canal companies, such as W. Gossage (Widnes), the Midlands & Coast Canal Carrying Company, the Severn & Worcester Canal Company and the Birmingham Canal Navigation Company. (29) However, in March 1923 there was the first indication of problems when the TGWU journal *The Record* stated that difficulties have been experienced in conducting negotiations with certain firms engaged in canal transport, particularly [those] on long journeys'. (30)

The root of the problem was the union's determination to convert its piecemeal negotiations with individual companies into a national programme for canal workers. By June 1923 this programme had been approved by the TGWU's General Executive Council. It contained six major proposals:

- 1 The working week would be based upon forty-eight hours, and where a shorter working week was in operation this would continue but minimum wage rates would be agreed.
- 2 A joint committee would be appointed to calculate the time for each working trip and to fix tonnage rates.
- 3 There would be a weekly wage for captains of £1 5s and of £1 for mates, together with tonnage rates as agreed in (2) above. For steam-powered narrow boats, captains would be paid £1 2s 6d and drivers £1, with a bonus for the latter of 2s 6d for washing boilers. Tonnage rates would be added to these basic wages.
- 4 The agreed rates would not be subject to any deductions for provisions for horses, or for provender, gear and other extraneous charges.
- 5 Within twelve months of the date of this programme, two adult males would be employed on each boat, both of whom would be recognised as company employees and paid as such.

6 A sub-committee would be formed to inquire into the wage rates of other canal employees such as butty boatmen, lock keepers and tradesmen. This would make recommendations on a minimum wage level.(31)

Underpinning this programme was a desire to remove two fundamental problems from the established system of long-distance canal carrying. The first, a social problem, concerned the employment of women and children on narrow boats: Despite earlier attempts to regulate living conditions on boats and to provide an education for boatchildren, (32) the 1921 inquiry, prompted, it will be recalled by the TGWU's predecessor, had still revealed a substantial number of family boats on the canal system and high levels of illiteracy among both parents and children. Thus, argued the union, if crews became all-male, wives could be left at home and children provided with a continuous education. Furthermore such action would remove an anomaly in the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1897 whereby women and children were not covered for sickness and injury, since it was argued that only the boatman worked for the employer and that his dependants worked for him. However, since wives and children provided an important source of unpaid labour, their removal would need to be accompanied either by an increased payment to the boatman or by additional paid labour. A reform of the wage system, therefore, became the second major thrust to the union's programme.

It is virtually impossible to identify any real pattern to the wage structure for working boatmen, since each company had its own policy, with complex variations based upon route, amount of night travelling, tonnages carried, war bonuses, cargoes, duration of trip and tasks, and expenses incurred. However, from contemporary newspaper reports of interviews with FMC boatmen it is possible to get some indication of income levels. One account, of a pair of boats working from Birmingham to London with a crew of three men, recorded a gross income of £6 7s 6d for the fifty-five hour journey, out of which there were expenses of about £1 for the purchase of ropes and tunnel tickets, whilst in another a boatman carrying 25 tons from Coventry to Brentford, and returning to Wolverhampton with a `back-load' of 24 tons, received £9 10s for a trip which lasted twenty-three days. When the latter had paid all his expenses he was left with about £6 or under £2 per week to keep himself, wife and three children. FMC estimated a weekly income of £10 15s for a man, his wife and two youths working a motor and butty boat between south Staffordshire and London, and £5 3s 9d for a single-horse boat on the same journey. However, because boatmen were not paid for waiting time (or were given only a demurrage rate of 2s 10d per day) and were not guaranteed a back-load, average rates were most unlikely to reach these figures. Indeed, one boatman stated that `taking the year through, we work twelve hours a day, seven days a week and we do not average 25/- per week'.(33)

On the basis of these grievances the TGWU called a national conference with the major carrying companies, but the companies were reluctant to participate. First, as a director of FMC had stated two years previously, the introduction of the forty-eight-hour week would mean 'it would take so long to get your boats through the country that you will practically have nothing to carry ... we are in competition with railways ... [and roads] ... and time is an element of the [price] contract [with the boatmen]'.(34) Indeed, the operation of such a scheme with the Shropshire Union Railway & Canal Company was cited as the main reason for the withdrawal of this company (with over 200 boats) from

all canal carrying in 1921.'(35) Second, the removal of unpaid wives and children would lead inevitably to an increased wage bill for the companies and a further loss of competitiveness with road and rail transport. For the latter part of World War I all independent canal companies had been placed under the Canal Control Committee, which, among other things, had restored any financial losses incurred. The decontrol of the independently owned canals in 1920 meant a return to open competition and, with the economic recession of the early 1920s, this had led to cuts in staffing levels and in wage rates. (36) Unlike most canal carrying companies, FMC was better able to compete with road and rail transport, since it tended to specialise in high-class traffic, such as foodstuffs and metals, which attracted better rates, and could offer a wide range of facilities (warehousing, cartage and clerical staff) more akin to those provided by the railway and road haulage companies. By 1920, however, FMC was facing a 150 per cent increase in its toll payments (compared with pre-war levels) to the canal owners as they in turn struggled to compete with the railways for a diminishing haulage trade; since this meant the FMC had to adjust freight rates to its customers, 'until we have had a twelve-months period working with those, we hardly know whether we are solvent' (37) Any conference, therefore, which might increase either individual wage levels or the overall wage bill was unlikely to find support among the carrying companies. And because the union proposed the removal of women from boats there was little enthusiasm, for this aspect at least, from the boatmen either. Indeed it was stated that 'they would separate from their Union rather than separate from their wives'. (38)

The refusal of FMC to attend the conference was compounded by its determination to act independently on the wage levels of its employees. Thus when the railway companies reduced rates early in 1923 FMC responded with its own cut (of 15 per cent) in April and then, on 10 August 1923, it announced an intention to reduce boatmen's wages from the following Monday - for steamer captains working between Braunston and Brentford a cut of 4s on a round trip, for steamer and butty boat operating as a pair of cut of 10s, and for London-bound butty boats and horse boats a reduction of 4d per ton on tonnage rates. The average reduction amounted to about 6-5 per cent. This was the last straw as far as the union was concerned, and as soon as Mr Shaw, a full-time official, returned from the FMC offices confirming the company's decision, the TGWU 'had no alternative but to stop the boats'(39)

The strike

There were about 600 men on the FMC payroll at this time, (40) and, although not all its employees were members of the TGWU, the recruitment campaigns at Brentford and Ellesmere Port seem to have achieved a 100 per cent membership of FMC boatmen. Thus, when the strike call was made, it was natural that the boats would be assembled at FMC depots so that maximum pressure could be placed upon the company. (41) At Braunston between fifty and sixty boats tied up in the approaches to the FMC wharf and along both sides of the Oxford and Grand Junction canals. This created an addition of about 300 people to the village's population (1,081 in 1921) and considerable pressure upon the local facilities. In order to administer the strike at Braunston the TGWU sent Mr Sam Brooks from Area 5 headquarters at West Bromwich. He took up residence at the Ship Hotel, adjacent to the wharf and to FMC's depot. Despite minimal experience of the canal trade, (42) Brooks was to make a big impression on the boatmen, not just by his physical appearance - for he was a tall, well built man - but also for the way in which he

Figure 2 (H141) and Figure 3 (H159)

organised a wide range of social activities in addition to his more usual union duties. Throughout the strike there were concert parties and open-air church services for the strike-bound families, and most functions concluded with the distribution of cigarettes to the men, sweets to the children and a speech from Mr Brooks reminding them all of the need for a determined and united stand until a settlement was reached. There were further opportunities for solidarity, and communal grief, at the three funerals which occurred during the strike, none more so than that for Edward Walker, aged twelve who fell from his father's butty boat and drowned: 'an extremely impressive sight was presented as the cortege, numbering probably 100, proceeded from the Castle Inn, where the body had been resting, to the church ... many of the followers carried touching bouquets of wild flowers to place on the coffin'. (43)

The continued presence of such a large number of families enabled the union to activate elements of its national programme, particularly those relating to the educational needs of parents and children. Dismayed by men who could not sign for strike pay, Mr Brooks undertook to teach them to read and write, and when Braunston school reopened for the autumn term forty-six boat children aged four to eleven, 'temporarily living at Braunston as their boats are held up by the Boatmen's Strike', (44) were admitted. Although the school had a good reputation for its attention to boat children, (45) it was incapable of absorbing so many into its existing structure, and so, on 17 September, a supplementary teacher, Miss Mabel Hayes, was appointed with a specific responsibility for these children. The school also attended to other aspects of their welfare, and there were several collections of footwear and clothing 'for these poverty ridden children: their boots and underclothing were in a terrible state [with] many young children being without a shirt'.(46)

However, the prime function of the union was to support and represent the boatmen. At Braunston the men were paid full strike pay, regardless of their period of membership, whilst donations and collections produced a further £ 110 for distribution. This gave a weekly supplement of 2s 6d to married and 1s 6d to single men.(47) As far as negotiations were concerned, much activity in the initial stages took place at a national level. Thus, on 16 August, a meeting was convened between Messrs Gosling, Crump and Shaw, representing the Union, and FMC, at which the union offered a resumption of work in return for independent arbitration on the boatmen's case. (48) This FMC refused and, at a later meeting, threatened liquidation of the company if the wage reductions were not accepted. As a compromise, however, it did suggest that the reduction could be carried out in two stages, that there would be no more wage reductions before March 1924 and that it would consider arbitration (and make any outcome retrospective) if the boatmen would resume work on the reduced rates. Meetings at Braunston and at the other depots rejected both proposals. On 21 August there was another meeting between Harry Gosling, A. J. Ash (managing director of FMC) and Sir David Shackleton (chief adviser at the Ministry of Labour) but Ash 'declined to discuss the dispute in a reasonable way' (49) so no further official contacts were proposed for the immediate future. On 13 September all TGWU officers involved in the strike met, and on the following day Harry Gosling travelled to Braunston to speak to the boatmen. His address was of a general nature, emphasising the need for the organisation of canal workers in order to improve working conditions.(50) Specifically he emphasised the importance of regular schooling

for boat children, and he made a special point of talking to them at Braunston. In his autobiography he recalled the occasion: `when I got among the children and they heard who I was, they began to enquire if the strike was over. I told them I was very sorry, but it was not over yet. They did not appear to mind in the least, though I thought it would be bad news for them. In fact they seemed relieved, so I asked why they wanted to know. They told me enthusiastically that because of the strike they had been able to go to school!" (51)

When a further meeting between the union representatives and A. J. Ash did take place it brought no changes whatsoever in the company's position. As a result the union checked whether FMC had made any official move towards its threat of liquidation. This proved negative, though additional evidence of the company's hardening attitude emerged when, in October 1923, all the striking boatmen were sent a letter from FMC's solicitors containing `formal notice that as you ceased work without proper notice' ten weeks ago, they [the company] require you to forthwith quit the cabin which you occupied as their servant'. (52) The union instructed the boatmen to stand firm.

It would appear that the main reason behind the eviction threat was FMC's desire to unload the cargoes on to lorries and to deliver them to anxious customers by road. At Braunston alone it was estimated that 1,000 tons of sugar and tea, bound for Birmingham, were held up. Inevitably the boatmen saw this as an act of extreme provocation and at several of the depots they took steps to impede the unloading operation. At Braunston, the three boats which FMC had selected were moved from the wharf to the canal proper and the entrance was blocked by four other boats loaded with pitch. FMC's officials attempted to gain access to the boats, but a tug-of-war developed with the boatmen, the latter supported by a crowd of womenfolk who `cheered them and uttered such witticisms as they could think of and deemed appropriate to the occasion.' In the stalemate which followed, a local truce was called in the hope of a national settlement, but when this proved fruitless a second attempt was made to unload the three boats. On this occasion, 5 September, a detachment of police was drafted in to supervise the operation, and after some spirited gestures of resistance by the boatmen, celebrated by the hoisting of flags, the playing of gramophones and melodeons, and dancing and singing on the towpath, the boats were brought to the wharf and successfully unloaded, `whilst the canal workers sat on the barges [sic] near by and contented themselves with booing and shouting' (53)

The company's determination to distribute strike-bound cargoes to its customers led to similar confrontations at other depots, though in the process it raised a fundamental issue of trespass which was to take the dispute, initially, to the High Court, and to an eventual settlement by arbitration.

During the early years of trading on the Grand Junction Canal arrangements for the safe delivery of cargoes were extremely casual, with the result that the carrying companies either had to reimburse customers for losses in transit, or had to make disclaimers on their responsibilities for any items of value carried on their boats. (54) Persistent pilfering by Pickfords' boatmen, 'a vile set of rogues', compelled that company to make the boatmen totally responsible for a cargo from the point of loading to the point of discharge, a decision upheld in the Court of Exchequer in 1844. (55) Since the succession of companies which dominated trading on the Grand Junction Canal in the late nineteenth century had tended to retain the practices of predecessors, this arrangement still held in 1923. Thus when FMC officials attempted to board and unload the boats they were accused of breaching this long established principle (for, strictly speaking, the boats were

still in transit) and of damaging towing and mooring ropes. It will be recalled that the boatman was responsible for the purchase of ropes, etc., so they belonged to him and not to the company. (56)

The union was quick to put forward these points in its defence of the boatmen, though when one of its own full-time officials, Fred Potter, (57) was seen on board FMC boats at Brentford the company was equally quick to repond and, on 6 November, issue a writ against him. This took the form of an injunction

“restraining the Defendant [Potter] from procuring or attempting to procure a breach of contract between the Plaintiff [FMC] and their Bailors by threats of violence or otherwise and from interfering or attempting to interfere by threats or otherwise with the rights of the Plaintiffs to enter into or continue such contracts or contractual relations with the Bailors as they will. And generally to carry on their business as they would and to restrain the Defendant from trespassing or ordering or inducing others to trespass upon the said Canal boats the property of the Plaintiffs.” (58)

When the case was brought before Mr Justice Romer on 9 November 1923 there was an immediate request for an adjournment from Mr T. R. Hughes, KC (appearing for Potter) since he had been given little time to consider the evidence. This request developed into a general discussion on the background to the case wherein all the familiar grievances were aired. The significant development, however, was that the union's desire to settle the dispute was now reciprocated by FMC, as a result of which the judge suggested that the case should rest for one week 'in the hope that I shall hear nothing more of it, and that the parties will be able to arrange their differences in the meantime' (59)

In the event the court did reconvene, though in the intervening week there were active discussions between FMC and the TGWU resulting in a union offer of a return to work, on the terms which applied when the strike began, if a conference could be arranged to find a settlement or if FMC would agree to arbitration. FMC's response was to accept arbitration, and so the court's function was to define terms of reference, namely that the Minister of Labour would appoint an arbitrator “who shall, after hearing the parties, decide the following question: whether or not the employers are justified for the reason mentioned in making the proposed or any reduction in the wages of the said employees.” (60) This outcome was relayed to all the depots by the local representatives, and at the Braunston meeting on the evening of Sunday 18 November it was agreed that the union's recommendation of a return to work be supported. At about 7 a.m. on 19 November 1923 “the boats began to move, but some of them may be delayed several days longer owing to the fact that horses require attention before resuming their journeys on the towpath”. On Friday 23 November Miss Hayes ceased her duties at Braunston school and by the following Friday all the boat children had been withdrawn from the school and had rejoined their parents' boats. (61) The strike at Braunston was over.

Conclusion

Arbitration on the case took place at the industrial court which met in London on 20 November. After hearing evidence from both sides it decided that “the average reduction of 6.47 per cent proposed by the company went further than was necessary”, though it expressed the opinion that, with the revival of trade, FMC should be capable of paying a fair remuneration to its employees, particularly those working the lower-paid horse-boat

traffic. Hence the court directed “that the scales of pay in force immediately after the last adjustment in January 1923 be readjusted by an average reduction of 5 per cent, to take effect in two equal instalments of 2.5 per cent each, the first reduction to take effect on single trips commencing on and after 19 November 1923 and the second reduction on single trips commencing on or after 19 December 1923” (62) Other tonnage and trip rates were to be adjusted on a similar basis, with any item upon which the parties could not agree to be referred back to the court for final determination.

Despite the fact that the boatmen had to accept a wage cut, the union saw the dispute, including the outcome, as a major success. First, it had sustained the strike for three months in a number of geographically dispersed depots without a single boat being moved. This was a tribute not only to the boatmen (and women) but also to the union's organisational ability and its regional and national officials. Second, the fact that the union had denied FMC's intention both to reduce wages without consultation, and to refuse arbitration was a success for its strategy in handling relations with employers. Under the guidance of leaders such as Ernest Bevin and Ben Tillett, all unions had to accept that their role in the difficult economic circumstances of the early 1920s was little more than that of “protective societies concerned with resisting wage reductions”. Nevertheless, argued Tillett, such conditions “tend to impose upon both parties [i.e. unions and employers] a commonsense policy of co-operation, admitting duality of authority but insisting upon a unity of interest”.(63) In such circumstances negotiations and direct formal relations with employers became the key elements of the TGWU's strategy - hence the national programme for canal workers - though, in a post-war period which witnessed rising unemployment, a fall in real wages, increasing frustration at unfulfilled social problems and a negative attitude on the part of employers, it was realised that the strike weapon still had a powerful cutting edge. Thus the policy for the first few years of the TGWU's existence was to employ peaceful negotiation and strike action as two different yet complementary approaches `provided priority was given to negotiations'. (64) The course and outcome of the boatmen's dispute was, therefore, a clear vindication of this strategy. Third, the successful organisation of this dispute gave the TGWU much-needed confidence after its disastrous dock strike earlier in 1923. In this dispute Ernest Bevin had successfully negotiated a two-stage wage reduction for dock workers, only to see a strike of 40,000 against the agreement just before the second stage was to become operational, with one group of workers, led by Fred Potter, seceding from the union.

Bolstered by the success of the boatmen's strike, the TGWU turned to other aspects of its national programme for canal workers, with Harry Gosling, president of the union and Member of Parliament, as its leading campaigner. The anomalous position of the boatman's wife, under the Workmen's Compensation Act 1897, was removed in 1924 when FMC and Thomas Clayton (Oldbury) Ltd agreed to be responsible for the employment of a captain and mate on each boat, but attempts to legislate for the findings of the 1921 'Living-in' committee - particularly those relating to the employment of women and the education of children - were not so successful. A private member's Bill, sponsored by Gosling, received considerable attention in the Commons and in the letter page of *The Times*, but by the time it had reached the committee stage in 1931, a year after Gosling's death, there had been so many modifications to its original intentions that it was withdrawn.(65)

The successful penetration by the TGWU into the canal community sent shivers down the spines of the canal proprietors. This was particularly the case on the Grand Junction Canal, where the dock strike and boatmen's strike of 1923 had resulted in considerable loss of income from tolls and tunnel charges. (66) Thomas Millner, engineer responsible for the section of canal from Braunston to Fenny Stratford, had been sent to Braunston on several occasions to ensure the free passage of non-FMC boats, and in mid November he received a letter from William Yates, the Grand Junction Canal Company's chief engineer, requiring information on the 'absolute minimum number of men you can manage with, assuming all the work except what is absolutely necessary is stopped'. Although the union had few members among GJCC employees, Millner was told, 'please go into this carefully for fear of a total withdrawal of labour'. (67)

How much the boatmen gained from the strike is more difficult to assess. The contemporary feeling, expressed by FMC and by a reporter for the Manchester Guardian, was that the union alone was responsible for the strike action and that without the behaviour of TGWU officials such as Fred Potter 'there would be no difficulty in coming to terms with the men'. (68) Furthermore, although they stood behind the union to a man, there must have been bitter disappointment at what they ironically described as another 'Irishman's rise', albeit 1.5 per cent less than that wanted by FMC. In view of the failure to achieve very much else of the union's national programme life after the strike continued much as before, but on reduced wages, though to this day there is an enduring feeling at Braunston that some of the strike ringleaders were victimised by the company, either by the switching of some of its operations to other depots or by the severity of Mr (Mac) Anderson, its fleet manager, on men who did not meet his demanding schedules. Nevertheless the company did continue to trade, and through the difficult years of the 1920s and 1930s it provided regular work for its employees - indeed, immediately after the strike it embarked upon a major modernisation programme, phasing out its uneconomic steamer fleet and introducing new diesel-powered boats and unpowered butties. (69) In 1929 the Grand Junction Canal Company merged with the Regents Canal, Warwick & Napton and Warwick & Birmingham companies to form the Grand Union Canal Company; there followed a programme of massive investment in the line of canal between London and Birmingham, including dredging, the widening of locks north of Braunston, and the creation of a new carrying fleet.

However, although there was some revival of the canal trade in the 1930s and during World War II, most of the canals were nationalised on 1 January 1948 and their trading activities taken over by the British Transport Commission. Still a family-controlled firm, FMC found it increasingly difficult to operate alongside this new set-up and against road transport - the latter a particularly suitable form of conveyance for the higher-value products, such as sugar, tea and sauce, in which FMC had specialised. In the first half of 1948 the company recorded its first-ever trading loss, of £5,000, and decided to go into voluntary liquidation. On 1 January 1949 its assets were bought up by BTC and the boats in its southern fleet incorporated with those of the former Grand Union Canal Carrying Company. (70)

With the demise of FMC and the progressive decline in commercial narrowboating on the Midland canal system, the strike of 1923 has become an increasingly distant memory, both for the boatmen who participated and for the union which organised and controlled it. Nevertheless, the strike remained the only one in FMC's history of sixty years of canal carrying, and one of the first disputes to be handled by the newly created Transport &

General Workers' Union. It is for these reasons that it will endure and that its story deserves to be told.

Notes

1 Two other companies also became involved in the strike, namely the Midland & Coast Canal Company and the Chester & Liverpool Lighterage Company Ltd. At the end of the dispute these two companies agreed to accept the settlement imposed upon FMC.

2 In the TGWU house journal *The Record*, XXVIII (1958), the obituary notice for Sam Brooks, union organiser at Braunston, gave the year as 1921 and the duration as sixteen weeks. In Harry Gosling's autobiography *Up and Down Stream* (1927), p. 195, he also gave 1921, even though he was actively involved in the dispute, as president of the TGWU and secretary to its Waterways Trade Group, and had spoken to the boatmen at Braunston.

3 G. L. Turnbull, 'Pickford's and the canal carrying trade, 1780-1850', *Transport History*, VI (1973), pp. 5-29. Braunston stood on the London-Chester road, and the stretch between Old Stratford and Dunchurch (near Rugby), which passed through the village, had been turnpiked as early as 1720. There were further improvements to the road by Thomas Telford in the 1820s and this, together with its location at the junction of the Oxford and Grand junction canals, made Braunston 'a village of great thoroughfare both by land and by water' (Pigot & Co.'s *National Commercial Directory*, 1830, reprinted by Northamptonshire Libraries, 1975).

4 Between 1793 and 1806 the takings at Braunston toll office increased from £966 to £19,040 and the tonnages gauged from 953 tons to 18,495 tons, whilst in 1830 the toll takings at Braunston (£35,365 6s 1d) were twice those at neighbouring Hawkesbury (£15,482 18s 9d) and Napton (£ 13,419 9s 2½d). H. J. Compton, *The Oxford Canal* (Newton Abbot, 1976), pp. 79-80; Northamptonshire Record Office (N.R.O.), RB 19 Canals.

5 *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852, XL, p. 298. The move took place between 1841 and 1845 and was completed only two years before Pickford's withdrew from canal trading.

6 N.R.O., Braunston Parish Records, ACC 19741 227.

7 J. Hollinshead, *On the Canal: a Narrative of a Voyage from London to Birmingham in 1858*, Waterways Museum, 1973, p. 44.

8 A. H. Faulkner, *FMC: a Short History of Fellows, Morton and Clayton Limited* (1975). The locks on the main line of the Grand Union, formerly the Warwick & Napton and Warwick & Birmingham canals, were widened in the 1930s.

9 Kelly's directories for the later nineteenth century give the following information on boatbuilding at Braunston: 1854 James Hughes, boatbuilder; 1877 Thos. Bradshaw and James boatbuilders, Wm. Stephenson, boatbuilder, Wm. Nurser, boatbuilder. In 1885 Nurser was the only boatbuilder recorded. This family firm continued until 1941, when it was taken over by the Samuel Barlow Coal Company.

10 Pickford's was based at Braunston from 1788 to 1847 and was followed by the Grand Junction Company's Carrying Establishment from 1847 to 1876: this company employed William Camwell of Braunston for craft repairs and the building of new boats. After 1876 the Grand junction's traffic manager joined the London & Staffordshire Carrying Company, which also bought several GJ boats and steamers and took over much of the London trade, whilst several GJ agents formed the Midland Counties Carrying Company.

Both these firms had been absorbed into FMC by 1886. A. H. Faulkner, *The Grand Junction Canal* (Newton Abbot. 1972).

11 Faulkner (1975), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 46-8.

13 Faulkner (1972), *op. cit.*, p. 190.

14 Tonnage figures were as follows: 1888, 1,172,463 tons; 1905, 1,794,233 tons (Faulkner, 1972, *op. cit.*, p. 203).

15 According to the registers of boat inspections held by Daventry District Council, and including the stretch of canal passing through Braunston, the percentage of boats inspected which were owned by FMC was as follows: 1890-94, 12.61, 1900-04, 21.83; 1910-14, 27.71; 1920-24, 63.13. At the 1891 census twenty boats were enumerated in the Braunston registration district, in 1911 twenty-two boats were enumerated in Braunston civil parish, and in 1921 twenty-two boats were enumerated in Daventry rural district, which included the parish of Braunston.

16 N.R.O., RB 19 Canals, 104/5.

17 H. Hanson, *The Canal Boatmen, 1760-1914* (Manchester, 1975).

18 Factory Commission (1876), *Parl. Papers, 1876, XXX*, evidence of E. Pamphilon (q. 10527).

19 For a similar conclusion see S. R. Broadbridge, 'Living conditions on Midland canal boats', *Transport History, III* (1970), pp. 36-51, 41.

20 In Faulkner (1975), *op. cit.*, p. 12, there is a photograph of FMC boatmen outside the Six Bells inn, Brentford, where inevitably they would have come into contact with Thames watermen. The management of the Six Bells used to provide its boatmen customers with a free copy of the annual tide book for the navigation of the river.

21 B. Tillett, *Memories and Reflections* (1931), p. 239.

22 V. L. Allen, *Trade Union Leadership* (1957).

23 In 1914, 1,025 miles of canals in railway ownership came under the Railway Executive Committee, and 2,251 miles of independent canals were organised under the Canal Control Committee in March 1917. These committees aimed to provide some national co-ordination of canal carrying and agreements on wage rates. The independent waterways were returned to their owners in August 1920.

24 Allen, *op. cit.*

25 *The Record, II* (April 1923), p. 14.

26 Ministry of Health, Report of the Departmental Committee appointed to Inquire into the Practice of Living-in on Canal Boats ... [Committee on Living-in], 1921, p. 3.

27 *The Record, II* (June and July 1923).

28 [*ibid.*, January 1923, p. 15.

29 *Ibid.*, September-December 1922, February-March 1923.

30 *Ibid.*, March 1923.

31 *Ibid.*, June 1923.

32 Canal Boats Acts of 1877 and 1884. Section B of the Education Act, 1884, required annual reports to be submitted to Parliament on the enforcement of the Education Acts upon children in canal boats.

33 *Rugby Advertiser*, 31 August 1923.

34 Committee on Living-in, 1921, evidence of C. F. Jones, q. 436-7.

35 *LMS Railway Magazine, II* May 1925.

36 For example, in July 1920 W. Yates, Chief Engineer to the Grand Junction Canal Company, wrote to T. W. Millner, District Engineer for the section from Braunston to Fenny Stratford, asking for a statement on 'what reductions - inevitable owing to the decontrol of Canals by the Government - can be made consistent with the carrying out of the minimum amount of necessary work to keep the Canal open'. By 13 August 1920 informal notices had been served on thirty-two men working on this stretch of canal. On 19 December 1921 Millner was told to reduce the wages of all 48 hour men by 1d per hour and 56-60 hour men by 0.75d per hour; on 30 March 1922 he was ordered to reduce wages by 0.5d per hour for 48 hour men and 0.25d per hour for 56-60 hour men; on 20 June 1923 the wages of all men in the district were reduced by a further 0.5d per hour, 'a similar amount to the reduction on the railways'. The effect was that between 1 January 1922 and 2 July 1923 there had been a reduction in weekly wages of 10s for 48 and 60 hour men and of 9s 4d for 56 hour men.

37 Committee on Living-in, 1921, evidence of C. F. Jones, q. 486.

38 Ibid., evidence of Rev. W. Ward, q. 840.

39 The Record, III (September 1923).

40 This figure was quoted in evidence given to the industrial court in 1923. In 1920 FMC had 208 boats registered as dwellings, of which twenty-one were steamers, twenty-five motor boats and 162 unpowered butty boats (Committee on Living-in, 1921, evidence of C. F. Jones, q. 279, q. 288. This compares with the 202 boats registered as dwellings in the Shropshire Union company's fleet, 1920.

41 The narrative of events at Braunston has been based upon three local newspapers, the Rugby Advertiser, the Northampton Mercury and the Northampton Daily Echo. The other Midland depots where boats gathered were Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Nottingham, Coventry, Leicester and Market Drayton.

42 Samuel Brooks was born in 1880, and after a period of service in the navy he joined Spreckley's brewery at Worcester. In 1919 he became an officer of the National Union of Vehicle Workers, which in 1922 became part of the TGWU. Brooks's main interests were in the conditions of vehicle workers, particularly road transport drivers, and from 1938 to 1944, when he retired, he was Commercial Services Group secretary for Area 5, based at West Bromwich. He died in 1958. The Record, XXXVIII (April 1958).

43 Rugby Advertiser, 31 August 1923.

44 Braunston School, Admissions Register, 1923. I am grateful to Mr D. Thrower, headmaster of Braunston School, for permission to use and quote from these records.

45 In the evidence of W. G. E. Childs, Inspector of Canal Boats, to the Committee on Living-in, 1921, the school at Braunston was described as 'the best type on the main canals. I do not know who is responsible for the erection, or how it is controlled, but it is a very well-known school along the waterways, and that is where the children most assemble for school' (q. 997).

46 Braunston School, Log Book, 17 September and 5 October 1923.

47 The Record, III (January 1923).

48 TGWU, Minutes of Waterways Section, 18 October 1923.

49 Ibid., 21 August 1923.

50 Rugby Advertiser, 21 September 1923.

51 H. Gosling, Up and Doom Stream (1927), p. 195.

52 Rugby Advertiser, 2 November 1923.

53 Ibid., 7 September 1923.

- 54 Northampton Mercury, 28 August 1802.
- 55 Turnbull. *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
- 56 Giving evidence to the Committee on Living-in, 1921, C. F. Jones stated that although the men had to buy towing lines and ropes, FMC had offered to sell them at pre-war prices (q. 405).
- 57 Along with his left-wing colleague Fred Thompson, Potter had led the dockers' rebellion against Bevin's negotiated reduction of dockers' wages earlier in 1923. Though the TGWU eventually brought them back into the union fold, they continued to criticise Bevin's refusal to use more militant tactics and, after the General Strike of 1926, created a new breakaway union, the National Union of Transport & Allied Workers. This union failed to break the resolve of Bevin or of the TGWU, and after October 1926 nothing more was heard of the union or of Potter and Thompson. A. Bullock. *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, I, Trade Union Leader, 1881-1940* (1960)
- 58 Public Record Office (P.R.O.) J54/1874. Potter was asked to pay 1s by way of damages and £135 as costs to FMC (P.R.O. J15/3693).
- 59 There is a full verbatim report of the court case in *The Record*, III (November 1923).
- 60 *Ibid.*; December 1923.
- 61 Northampton Mercury, 23 November 1923; Braunston School, Log Book, 23 November 1923.
- 62 *The Record*, III (December 1923); *Rugby Advertiser*, 30 November 1923.
- 63 Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 48, Tillett, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- 64 Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- 65 *The Record*, IV (November 1924), and see also XI (August 1931); H. Hanson, *Canal People* (Newton Abbot, 1978), pp. 136--40.
- 66 Analysis of the monthly statements of costs incurred by the Braunston tunnel tug reveals the following: boats towed through Braunston tunnel (August to November) in 1922, 2,891; 1923, 2,499; 1924, 2,947; profit (August to November) in 1922, £124 6s; 1923, £83 2s 5d, 1924, 1175 10s 6d. In other words the Grand Junction Company lost about £70 profit on the Braunston tug alone during the strike; however, despite the strike, nearly 2,500 boats were towed through the tunnel, an average of twenty-eight per day, indicating both the considerable volume of traffic still using the canal and the intention of the company to keep the route open. (I am grateful to Mr George Freeston, of Blisworth, for the loan of these returns.)
- 67 Letter from W. Yates to T. W. Millner, 12 November 1923. Information from private papers belonging to Mr George Freeston.
- 68 Hanson, *op. cit.*, p. 158. In the *Manchester Guardian*, 14 September 1923, it was stated, 'This is their first strike, and is due to the accident that they now belong to the Transport Workers Union.'
- 69 From 1923 to 1929 forty-six motor boats were commissioned for the FMC fleet, and a further fifty-three between 1930 and 1939. Faulkner, (1975), *op. cit.*, pp. 46-8.
- 70 C. Hadfield, *The Canals of the East Midlands* (Newton Abbot, 1970), p. 247.

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