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“Tout Travail Doit Nourrir Son Homme”

The Dakar-Niger Railroad and the 1947-1948 Strike in the Political
and Labor History of Senegal

Julia Coyner Robinson
Independent Study Project
The School for International Training
Spring 2007
Project Advisor: Rokhaya Fall
Academic Director: Souleye Diallo

Dedication

To Ousmane Sembene, who sparked my interest with beautiful historical inaccuracies.

From a 1947 striker's poster: "Tout travail doit nourrir son homme (All work must nourish its man)," quoted in Mor Sene *La Grève des Cheminots*, 64.

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I. Abstract

This project examines the history of the Dakar-Niger railroad from its birth to its decline to illuminate the nature of the rail strike of 1947-1948 in French West Africa. The strike would prove to be a landmark in the continuous resistance of colonized peoples against the colonial state. The railroad was and is a physical as well as an invisible presence in the economic, political, and social history, and the connections that would form around this history of resistance and of colonialism from its earliest days would come to define not only the strike but the history of Senegal and of West Africa in general. In this endeavor, archival and secondary data collection formed the brunt of research, but interviews with historical witnesses and participant observation of ex-colonial railroad sites proved invaluable to the project. In analyzing the patterns of connection, coercion and resistance that came out of this research, the project examines colonial policies and practices, individual and collective strikes, the community ties that solidified the unionism, and the politics and ideologies that shaped or attempted to shape the labor movement.

II. Introduction

At midnight on October 10, 1947, most of the African workers on the Dakar-Niger, Abidjan-Niger, Benin-Niger, and Conakry-Niger railways of l'Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) walked off the job. Most of these workers, or *cheminots*, continued to strike for five months and ten days, essentially blocking all colonial raw material export in AOF until returning to work on March 19, 1948. The length of the strike, its minute organization, and the unity and resolve of the strikers have been preserved and recorded in multiple fashions, through memory, historical analysis, and fiction, each way enriching as well as altering the facts of the strike. The strike has reached a mythical status among *cheminots* and historians alike, an event that is often linked to the struggle for independence and to anticolonial politics, either in its initiation or its conclusion. The reality, however, was much more complicated, and this study seeks to unpack and re-examine the web of African and Senegalese politics, anticolonial and pro-French rhetoric, and union struggles that lie behind the 1947 railway strike to better understand the motivations and results of the strike.

The Dakar-Niger, the rail line that is the focus of this study, helped extend colonial control and expand the economic exploitation of l'Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF). At the center of the desire for colonial political and economic control was a desire to exploit

labor, and “even the basic requirement of improved transport, road and railway construction, was ultimately related to the urgency for releasing human labor used in portage to other forms of production labor.”¹ The railroad was inextricably linked to colonial coercion, which took the form of territorial expansion and forced labor on the line’s construction and elsewhere, as it also forced Senegalese to migrate into or out of French control or to resist against French forays into their lands and lives.

It also allowed the evolving French colonial mission in the interwar and postwar periods to be furthered, namely the increase in infrastructure and the tightening of “control and stabilization” in the labor force,² even as “proletarianization” of the Senegalese labor forces, evident in the 1938 railway strikes,³ began to force changes on the colonial system as well. The French labor policy was then designed so that it divided the most skilled, valuable workers from others by creating different salary and benefit levels,⁴ or *cadres*. As colonial rhetoric changed, so did Senegalese assertions of basic rights and protections, which pointed to the unfulfilled promises of the French Republic, such as equality for Senegalese and French alike. As Ibrahima Sarr, the *cheminot* union leader, said in 1946, the *cadre* system was comprised of “antiquated colonial methods condemned even by THE NEW AND TRUE FRANCE which wishes that all its children...be equal in duties and rights and that the *recompense of labor be a function* solely of merit and capacity.”⁵ This employment of French assimilationist language would prove to be an effective if controversial tool, at least among scholars who have studied the strike.

The Dakar-Niger played the central role in the creation and perpetuation of the 1947-1948 strike, which grew out of intense dissatisfaction with the unequal *cadre* system, a visibly racist structure that institutionalized higher wages and benefits for whites and a select few Senegalese but categorized most Senegalese as part-time laborers—even workers of several years. Young workers from the Union des Jeunes de Thiès (UJT), mostly educated railway clerks, “brought out a youthful vigor against the perceived lethargy of older Senegalese politicians and a new combativeness towards the French,”⁶ and revitalized the *cheminot* union

¹ Bill Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society Since 1800* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1998), 99.

² Frederick Cooper, “‘Our Strike’: Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa,” in *The Journal of African History*, vol. 37 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84.

³ Freund, 118.

⁴ Steven Feierman, “Social Change in Colonial Africa,” in *African History: From Earliest Times to Independence*, 2d ed (London: Pearson Education, 1995), 510.

⁵ Cooper, “Our Strike,” 87.

⁶ Cooper, “Our Strike,” 85.

in Thiès by ousting the old leader and putting in the younger and more dynamic UJT leader Ibrahima Sarr.

Once the strikes ended after “cinq mois et dix jours (five months and ten days),” which was a phrase continually repeated by all interviewed informants, the strikers had made very few material gains that they would not have received in earlier conciliation meetings. The end of the strike did, however, signal a new relationship for politicians and the union, who became a fixture of Senghor’s party in later years. It also established that colonized Senegalese and West Africans had some power to resist racist colonial practice, especially when they remained together in a visibly united and numerous front, attacked an economic vulnerability, and actually kept striking. Many historians argue, in fact, that the railroad strikes contributed to the blossoming of national consciousness and the independence movement, as do many ex-strikers.

The political implications of the strike, however, have been subject to a historical debate, some arguing for the strike as a vital aspect of pro-independence and anti-colonialist movements and others arguing the opposite: that the strike was actually reliant on French rhetoric around equality and on the French labor system to formulate and defend their demands. Frederick Cooper, in his paper ‘*Our Strike*’: *Equality, Anticolonial Politics, and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa*, which looks specifically at the strike and makes extensive use of oral histories from ex-strikers, takes the position that earlier studies concocted an “all-too-neat assimilation of social and political struggles [that] is a matter of hindsight.” He argued instead for the necessity of the French connection for the strike’s success, but Cooper writes, this connection still “needs to be unpacked.”⁷ In his massive volume *Décolonisation et Travail en Afrique*, which examines labor in British and French Africa from 1935 to independence, Cooper became even more radical in his opinion, arguing that the strike was actually a power struggle between the union and the management, whose structure was rather “a French structure than a backward colonial organization based on race (une structure française q’une organisation coloniale arriérée basée sur la race).”⁸ James Jones’s work *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*, which examined the history of the railroad from its conception to independence, focusing more on the Soudan than Senegal, argued: “It [the strike] showed that despite decades of effort to ‘industrialize’ Africans, wage

⁷ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 82.

⁸ Frederick Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail en Afrique : L’Afrique Britannique et Française 1935-1960*, transl. François-G. Barbier Wiesser, (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2004), 230.

earners remained linked to their society in ways that could oppose French assimilation.”⁹ Mor Sene, in his master’s thesis *La Grève des Cheminots du Dakar-Niger*, argued for the strike as a “form of colonial resistance...that seemed to put colonial domination in question in struggling against the discrimination in salaries and in work conditions (une forme de résistance contre le colonialisme...[qui semblait] remettre en question la domination coloniale en luttant contre la discrimination dans les salaire et dans les conditions du travail).”¹⁰ Although Jean Suret-Canale’s *La Grève des Cheminots Africains d’AOF* focuses on the idea that the strike grew out of a French Cold War distrust of unions and Communism, he points out that the rail strikers in AOF actually fared better than their French counterparts who were striking in France at the same time, and that their struggle, which came at a time of popular agitation in many sectors, had an “undisputable significance (signification incontestable).”¹¹ Malick Sow, in his master’s thesis *Thiès et ses Cheminots dans le Mouvement Syndical Sénégalais* focuses on the youth unionists that came out of Thiès who demands “were implicit in the sensitive question of independence (posent en filigrane la sensible question de l’indépendance).”¹² Omar Guèye wrote that unionists in this time period were “nationalists who were unaware of themselves : their demands at the most basic raised more questions about the colonial presence than the structure of the administration (nationalistes qui s’ignoraient: leurs revendications dans le fond, remettaient plus en cause la presence colonial que la structure de l’autorité administrative).”¹³

In this large body of work, the question of the nature of the strike and of strikers’ intentions in striking is examined, but conclusions vary. The admanance of ex-strikers over their autonomy from political parties also complicates the issue. This project, however, seeks to study the political and ideological nature of the railroad strike of 1947 and to add another viewpoint to the historical record. In so doing, the study looks at the conditions in colonial practice and resistance, to those practices, from the earliest conception of the railroad, that set the stage for the showdown that was 1947. From the "scramble" for Africa through the First World War, the majority of what would become the Dakar-Niger was built, and in its construction established racist labor divisions, forced labor, and the beginnings of individual

⁹James A. Jones, *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World : Workers of the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger 1881-1963* (Portsmouth : Hienneman, 2002), 64.

¹⁰ Mor Sene, *La Grève des Cheminots du Dakar-Niger 1947-1948*, master’s thesis, (Dakar: UCAD Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1986-1987), 121.

¹¹ Jean Suret-Canale, *La Grève des Cheminots Africains d’AOF (1947-1948)*, UCAD Reserves, 121.

¹² Malick Sow *Thiès et ses Cheminots dans le Mouvement Syndical Sénégalais 1882-1962*, master’s thesis (Dakar: UCAD Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 2003-2004), 3.

¹³ Omar Guèye *Le Mouvement Syndical au Sénégal Pendant la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, post-graduate thesis (Dakar: UCAD Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1990-1991), 29.

resistance that would quickly turn into unified mass resistance. In the Inter-War period, French colonial philosophy underwent a rhetoric change that nonetheless only proved the Janus-faced nature of the colonial enterprise where fact and idea were on opposite sides. Furthermore, the *cheminots* exerted themselves as a group and in striking, fell into the rifts that the administration had carefully constructed: those of job status and race. World War II proved a turning point, when militants questioned not only the fascist Vichy regime but pointed to the similar colonial policies that the Free French government had with its wartime enemy as a way to achieve labor reforms. After the war, the French government further altered its philosophies to instate an assimilationism that would provide challenges to the system with a new method to force the colonial administration to fulfill its promises. The strike of 1947-1948 grew out of all of these previous factors and ingeniously exploited the strengths, such as the close-knit nature of the *cheminot* community, that colonialism had unwittingly imparted to its second-class "citizens." After the strike, however, the rail lost its significance in the community and the union became too enmeshed in politics to function in the same way, as politicians highjacked the wave of support after the strike for their personal gain. Ironically, it was African politicians and not the French colonials that sounded the death knell for the union's former power: those very leaders who had not only promised independence but who had seemed to achieve it ultimately turned their backs on the unionists that had bolstered them.

III. Methodology

Research took place in Dakar and Thiès. Dakar is home to numerous libraries and reading rooms of Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), which were imperative resources for the study, as well as the Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS). Dakar was also a strike hotbed, and many living remnants of the strike era and colonialism, namely old colonial structures, such as the train station, *cheminot* housing, and the rail line, as well as ex-strikers, were all found in Dakar. Thiès is also a site of living history, and the town is imbued with its colonial past and with its strong connections to the railroad—it grew out of the rail line, and some of the most definitive labor agitation, such as the bloody auxiliary strike of 1938, first came out of Thiès. It was home to the rail union headquarters for all of AOF during the strike period, and it has a history as a site of radical, anticolonial, and/or union presence. *Quartiers* in the city still carry the names of strike heroes, such as *Cité Ibrahima Sarr*, which envelops the train tracks with its rail company buildings, old colonial European *cheminot* housing, and

a monument to the *cheminots* at the intersection leading into the neighborhood. Retired *cheminots* still sit around under the trees together. Thiès was also the site of a series of interviews conducted in 1994 by Professor Babacar Fall, Fred Cooper, and university students for research and the preservation of Senegalese oral history and testimony. As such, both areas provided vital information to the project, and the rail line that connects them further enhanced research, providing a physical and visual link between the two strike sites.

Archival data collection took up the brunt of the research, since the strike occurred 60 years ago. Secondary data was imperative to the project, providing historical contexts, opinions, and theories that aided in shaping a thesis and in understanding the events as they occurred. This research took place at Université Cheikh Anta Diop in the main library, especially the reserves, in the library of the History Department and in the library at the *Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire* (IFAN), as well as at the West African Research Center (WARC) and online. Documents took the form of scholarly articles, books, interview transcripts, and theses, and some of these books and articles came straight from the professors who had wrote them or who had collaborated on research. Many of these documents were for on-site research only and several, such as UCAD's master's and post-graduate theses, which came out of the UCAD and History Department libraries, were only available in Dakar. Other scholarly articles online or also available in print in the US indicated and noted researchers, documents, and archives that were only accessible in Senegal, such as the numbers for files in the ANS or the names of Senegalese ex-strikers interviewed for past research and the Senegalese scholars who interviewed them.

Archival data, or primary documents, included taped interviews from a Senegalese oral history project (unfortunately of poor quality), memoirs, colonial publications, films, and newspaper clippings and colonial records from ANS. These provided an immediate historical connection and a record of events from the principal actors. This type of data had an easily discernible bias that enhanced the study by offering a range of opinion, from, for example, the anti-colonial, even anti-Senghor stance of Mamadou Dia in *Mémoires d'un Militant du Tiers-Monde*, to the 1931 book on the railroad published by the Gouvernement Général de l'AOF that celebrated the sacrifices of French officers and deplored the attitudes of African rail workers. These documents came from IFAN, ANS, the Institut Français, and professors. All of these were accessible only in Senegal, and they forced research to take on a more analytical form, since the thesis or patterns behind the information were harder to discern.

The study of material data took up the last aspect of archival data collection, and coupled with participant observation, allowed a visual representation of the history. The

Dakar-Niger still runs to Bamako, despite limited service, and riding the train from Dakar to Thiès was included in research time, as were visits to the old *gares* or stations at the two research sites, as well as to old colonial rail buildings, such as the ancient lodgings for European *cheminots* in *Cité Ibrahima Sarr*. Dakar and Thiès provided a large amount of material data to sit in, walk through, and ride on, and all of it added to an overall understanding of the historical space, the importance of the railroad in Senegalese life and of the imposition of a colonial presence that still reigns in some parts of Senegal.

Participant observation as a method helped in this endeavor, since sitting in these old colonial spaces and analyzing their usage today underlined the importance of the railroad and of the presence (or lack thereof) of rail unions today. Participant observation took place on the train, in the two *gares*, on the streets of Thiès during the May Day workers' march, and in the old rail *quartier Cité Ibrahima Sarr*.

Interviews were also conducted with retired *cheminots* and ex-strikers in Dakar and Thiès. The interviewees were all of a very mature age, and locating anyone to interview at all relied heavily on dumb luck: visits to friends of friends, the *gare*, and to the rail headquarters in Thiès provided lucky breaks, since, sixty years after the strike, there are a diminishing number of strikers or even *cheminots* with a living memory of colonialism available for interviews. These interviews provided a living testimony to the events as they occurred, though none of the interviews were without bias. Those conducted with *cheminots* not involved in the strike provided an opportunity to study the perception of the strike from those who worked with or near to the strikers. Interviews with strikers revealed a deep desire for *their* version of the truth, to set the record straight, even if their eyewitness records could not help but be shaped by bias, reactions to historical events, and their experiences during and after the strike.

There were many advantages to the study's methodologies. First, the chosen locations provided research opportunities available nowhere else in the world, from access to professors that had written on the strike, to documents for on-site consultation only, such as the non-digitalized ANS records and UCAD theses. The historical sites visited and experienced for the project were similarly only visible on-location. Interviews subjects, who were haphazardly discovered and were of an old age, were also only available due to location selection.

The disadvantages, similarly, were that the limited nature of the documents and sites meant they were often difficult or time-consuming to access. The files at ANS, for example, were not well set-up for random searching; they required a previous knowledge of which files,

in the correct numerical notation, were needed, and research without such knowledge was very slow. The non-digitalized nature of catalogues at IFAN, as well, made it difficult to find sources without having a pre-made list, especially for a researcher using many of these search methods for the first time.

Archival research was extremely informative and extremely broad. The body of work that made up secondary data was intimidatingly large, a phenomenon which was advantageous in that it allowed for a thorough study of the strike and disadvantageous in that it was extremely time-consuming in an already short time period. Heavy reliance on secondary data also runs two risks: first, that the researcher does not take adequate advantage of site-specific data and second, that original conclusions are more difficult to form. This was countered by an effort to use secondary data only available in Dakar, such as university theses or the film on the Dakar-Niger shown at the Institut Français in Dakar. The primary documentation, or archival data, was also hard to access or of deteriorated or poor quality, such as many of the archive files from ANS and the taped interviews provided by a professor, and it also required a certain level of historical knowledge to analyze, making it difficult to attribute collected data to a specific theory. This, however, provided its greatest advantage: primary documentation cannot be divorced from its inherent bias, since it is often a record on-the-ground from principal actors. This factor gave this section of data a breadth of viewpoints and offered the opportunity for the author's independent analysis. Material data, like archival data, was imperative to an independent understanding and analysis of the available strike data, even if it was often run-down and overwhelming, such as the train or the *gares*.

Participant observation allowed research to extend to a physical interaction with the material, which helped broaden the scope of data collection to an area outside the typical historian's realm of books and printed material and out of the past and into an understanding of the present condition of the rail, the *cheminots*, and their union. The problem with participant observation was that in its limited time frame, it was more difficult to draw conclusions about, for example, union presence in Thiès, and the deteriorating and often-repaired historical sites were neither entirely preserved in their original forms nor were they in any way marked to better confirm their identity and use. For example, the old colonial buildings in *Cité Ibrahima Sarr* looked just like the Thiès houses for European *cheminots* pictured in a 1931 colonial publication, but no plaque or monument expert was available.

Finally, interviewing provided the most fruitful and the most problematic of methodologies. First of all, all interviews took place right after meeting informants for the first time, that is to say, there were no preliminary meetings to establish rapport. Secondly,

most of the interviews required some form of interpretation, either from a third party or from one informant translating on-the-fly for a second informant. The interviews were conducted by the author in French and/or with a translator in Wolof. Thirdly, the interviews were never in closed, neutral settings, and they were conducted, for two of the three interview sessions, with two *cheminots* at a time. Last of all, proper ethics were followed as closely as possible, but given the time frame, education and language levels of most of the informants (and the language limitations of the researcher), and the drop-in nature of the interviews, only oral consent was appropriate, and in one case, an informant asked for compensation, which was paid by the translator, who was reimbursed later by the author. The difficulty in finding contacts contributed to these disadvantages, a factor that came out of the time frame and out of the elderly nature of informants. The author feels that even though all of these factors should be considered in examining informant evidence, the testimonies themselves still provide an extremely important portion of the study. The interviews are critical to understanding the reality of the 1947-1948 strike, which, according to informants, has been marred by politicians, historians, and writers, but has also been rewritten by strikers and by their *cheminot* comrades.

IV. Results and Analysis

From the Scramble to World War I:

The Early Colonial Project and the First Stages of Railroad Construction

Colonialism came early to Senegal, as it was one of the export centers for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Forays into the interior, however, took longer to arrive. At the second wave of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the US in the late nineteenth century, “the capitalist quest for raw materials” increased dramatically,¹⁴ and the “virgin” land as well as the untapped consumer market in the interior of the African continent became increasingly attractive, spurring the “Scramble” for Africa among the European powers. Furthermore, France was feeling bruised after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Thus, the colonial enterprise presented a way to “restore national pride,” a call echoed and carried out

¹⁴ Freund, 78.

by disgraced military officers dispatched to the colonies,¹⁵ to gain control over and to explore the interior. The great problem of the colonial system for its administrators, however, was the constant fight for enough funding, and metropolitan budgets forced the colonial governments to run conquest and control on the cheap, which often meant that administrators and military men resorted to coercive measures, such as forced labor, to save money.

The idea for a railroad connecting the Niger River to the coast sprung up very early in the French colonial conquest of West Africa. The idea, according to a 1912 AOF report for the railroad from the Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS), originated with Louis Faidherbe, Governor-General of Senegal from 1854-1865. “From 1863 he preoccupied himself with opening to French trade the reputedly rich and populated regions that constituted the Soudanese empire (Dès 1863 il se préoccupa d’ouvrir au commerce français les régions réputées riches et peuplées qui constituaient l’empire soudanais).”¹⁶ For historian Mamadou Diouf, colonial railroad projects were a way to address the colonial state’s inability to establish political control and to develop an economic system beneficial to the Métropole. As it became increasingly unstable to rule the populations in Senegal, the instatement of military controls was the only option, but it “disturbed the commercial transactions and rendered impossible the installation of ‘peace and tranquility’ favorable to peanut cultivation, which was the basis of the faidherbian theory and the colonial expansion taken up by the Third Republic (Cela perturbait les transactions commerciales et rendait impossible l’instauration de “la paix et la tranquillité” propices à la culture arachidière, base de la théorie faidherbienne et l’expansion coloniale reprise par la IIIe République).”¹⁷ Furthermore, a rail was needed beyond the economic: it was militarily necessary for “the pacification of the Soudan and of the Niger River Valley (pour le pacification du Soudan et de la vallée du Niger),” according to the Gouvernement Général de l’AOF text.¹⁸ Resistance along the railroad in West Africa came early, following the coercive tactics instated by the colonial administration: “[The railroad’s] realization created vigorous skirmishes between the colonial administration and the tradition powers, anxious to preserve their independence and seeing in the construction of the railroad a menace for their sovereignty (Sa réalisation donna lieu à de vives escarmouches entre l’administration coloniale et le pouvoir traditionnel soucieux de préserver son

¹⁵ Jones, 3.

¹⁶ “AOF Haut-Sénégal et Niger Rapport Annuel,” series 2G12-37, (ANS, 1912), 1.

¹⁷ Mamadou Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe Siècle : Pouvoir Ceddo et Conquête Coloniale*, (Paris : Editions Karthala 1990), 264.

¹⁸ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, *Le Chemin de Fer de Thiès au Niger*, (Rochefort-Sur-Mer: Imprimerie A. Thoyon-Thièze, 1931), 6.

indépendance et qui voyait dans la construction de la voie ferrée une menace pour sa souveraineté).”¹⁹ In this background of economic expansion, injured national ego, cheap conquest, and increasing agitation on the part of semi-colonized peoples, the railroad was born. The railroad evolved from colonial thinking as an almost natural progression, as conquest and coastal or border trade expanded and deepened into the unexplored interior. Colonial ideology at this time was interested in little more than conquering “unknown” territory, restoring national prestige, and making a buck or two along the way. Interestingly, even as colonial rhetoric evolved over the years, the conduct established in these early years remained the basis of colonial practice throughout the rest of the colonial period.

The *Ministre de la Marine* (Minister of the Navy) submitted a proposal on February 5, 1880, for the railroad that would become the Kayes-Niger, linking the Kayes area to the Niger River in present-day Mali, and after later construction, the Dakar-Niger. The line became “the great commercial artery (la grande artère commerciale)” of the colonies of the AOF. Despite its “strategic utility (utilité stratégique),” the line was built with a small metropolitan budget, which greatly limited its commercial and economic functioning in later years.²⁰ The Ministry of the Navy was selected to build the line because no private firm would assume such a great economic risk. The first engineer on the project, Ardaneau, proposed a racially-divided labor force in October of 1881, a theme that would follow the colonial administration into the next century and well past the 1947-1948 strike. He wanted 200 Africans to load/unload materials, 40 Chinese and 150 Africans to do construction, 50 Africans to maintain the machines, and 50 Africans to make bricks and tiles. On track construction, there would be 600 Moroccans to do grading, 200 Chinese to lay track, 275 Chinese for other tasks, 50 Africans for bridge construction assistance and 48 European overseers.²¹ In the end, however, Chinese workers (an idea inspired by the use of Chinese labor on the successful American Transcontinental Railroad) proved too expensive for more than a few Chinese laborers for skilled tasks, and the economic crisis from 1878-1882 in Morocco made it easy to recruit Moroccan workers. The Moroccan labor force, however, was “decimated” by yellow fever and other illnesses. Local and imported sub-Saharan African labor became the only choice for a swift and cheap completion of the railroad.²² The idea of race-specific labor was not a new idea, but Ardaneau’s proposal laid out in plain sight the racial theories of

¹⁹ Sene, 8.

²⁰ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 6-7.

²¹ Jones, 7-8.

²² Jones, 9-10.

colonialism: Africans were “incapable” of doing skilled labor and Europeans should only act as management. Ironically, although these practices would continue in the colonial workplace in later decades, the economic constraints of the Métropole made the total accomplishment of this racial theory impossible at this time, and Africans were put in positions that would lead to skilled labor employment on the railroad, even as Europeans continued to “supervise.”

In the 1931 Gouvernement Général publication on the railroad, there is no mention of the imported and local labor forces, merely that the rail construction project was undertaken February 24, 1881, with a budget of 8,552,751 francs, after no studies or surveys of the land or any means of communication other than the river, which was only navigable for three to four months of the year. Despite these conditions of “certain failure (une échec certaine),” the personnel under Ardaneau “fought against every difficulty with a competence, a zeal, and a tenacity deserving of the greatest elegies (lutta contre toutes les difficultés avec une compétence, un zèle, une ténacité dignes des plus grands éloges).” Despite the apparently glorious efforts of the French officers and civilian engineers, there was a fever, a labor shortage, and not enough materials, so the project failed: between 1881 and 1884, only 54.7 kilometers had been built, at 23,987,000 francs. Between 1885 and 1890, work was officially stopped.²³ The French press referred to the project as “nos folies de Kayes-Bamako.”²⁴

Work resumed under the new Commandant-Supérieur du Haut-Fleuve, Joseph Galliéni. There were no funds to hire workers, so Galliéni, “an innovator,” used prisoners of war and refugees from the French conquest campaigns. He also greatly exploited the *villages du liberté*, liberty villages, which cropped up near military camps on the supply route and railroad between Kayes and Bamako as runaway slaves sought work as well as protection from their former masters. Most of the inhabitants in liberty villages at this time were refugees from the French wars with Ahmadou Tall and Samori Touré. There were 6,000 people “delivered” to liberty villages over two years in the Soudan.²⁵ Liberty villages, which developed due to colonial conflict and the French “humanitarianism” that sought to end slavery in Africa (abolition was also one of the justifications for colonialism in the first place), actually became centers of coercion, where ex-slaves and refugees were forced to work for the colonial state. The colonial *mission civilisatrice*, which preached a “noble” rhetoric, was in actuality the way that the colonial administration was able to forcibly extract

²³ Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 8.

²⁴ Jones, 11.

²⁵ Jones, 12-15.

labor and goods from the colonies. The words did not match up with the reality.

Kayes-Niger construction occurred after the rainy season, in November and December when the harvest was over and the ground was firm enough for heavy transportation. After January, temperatures began to rise, along with the death rate of laborers. Workers usually left in May or June to plant their crops for the rainy season cultivation period. Under these conditions, the military reported having “difficulty...recruiting and retaining” labor. It was a “construction site that was consistently understaffed by men who needed constant supervision to prevent desertion.”²⁶ Resistance followed right behind coercion, both intentionally to avoid hard work and the loss of liberty and because Senegalese and Malian rail laborers had a work obligation that was more important: feeding their families with the crops planted in the rainy season. Galliéni use of forced labor for railroad construction launched such coercion “on an unprecedented scale [in] the Soudan.” Earlier forced portage on the supply route to the Soudan had been hard but short work, with a lower death and injury rate. There was not much interest in working the railroad, so both recruitment and retention of recruits were very unsuccessful, especially when there was no budget for wages. Coercion became the order of the day, and the French campaigns against the Tukolor and Samorian empires created a “flood of refugees” that were “easier to control” in their desperation.²⁷ At the end of construction, Galliéni got a promotion, despite outstandingly shoddy work: railroad ties were not termite resistant, ties were placed as far as two meters apart (twice the recommended distance) and were too thin, and bridges and culverts did not drain well during the rainy season.²⁸ The Gouvernement Général in 1931 wrote that Galliéni’s work “had nothing of a railroad except for a name (n'avait d'un chemin de fer que le nom).”²⁹ The budgetary concerns that plagued the rail from the beginning obliged *colons* to instate the quickest, cheapest, and dirtiest forms of labor and construction: work had to be forced and whatever could be built was acceptable. In the long run, however, this probably cost the colonial administration more money, since renovations had to be done. As in future endeavors, in trying to save money or to get around financial constraints, the French colonial government ended up losing. In the 1940s, the financial bind of the railroad would lead the rail administration to keep wages and conditions poor, and the strike that followed in 1947 would end up costing the government and the rail more money than simple wage hikes.

Two survey groups were sent out in 1892-1893, demonstrating the lesson learned from the

²⁶ Jones, 15.

²⁷ Jones, 20.

²⁸ Jones, 16.

²⁹ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 8.

first construction stage, when work started with no survey teams or planning. The 1931 colonial publication implies that there was often an *indigène* work team, but there is never a mention of how those *indigenes* were “recruited”: even their origins are unclear. After one of the missions returned, the *Comité des Travaux Publics* in July granted a budget of 76,000 francs per kilometer. The Comité also “stated with regret that the results were not acquired without the price of a cruel sacrifice in men, the mission having seen 2 officers, 4 non-commissioned officers or soldiers die, out of a personnel of 4 officers and 20 men (constate en outre, avec regret, ce qui n'ont été acquis qu'au prix de cruels sacrifices en hommes, la mission ayant vu mourir 2 officiers, 4 sous-officiers ou soldats sur un personnel de 4 officiers et 20 hommes).”³⁰ There is no mention in the 1931 publication of how many Africans may have also died.

Under Captain Klobb, a team improved existing track, with 966 Africans, 826 in unskilled labor (422 are forced and 404 are volunteers), 20 foremen, 3 interpreters, and 84 Africans “deemed” skilled by Klobb. Albert Grodet, first civilian governor of the Upper Senegal Valley, December 1893, opened the Kayes-Bamako railroad for private use on January 1, 1894, which made French commercial interests and the government more enthusiastic about the venture. The Bafing River Bridge was completed in 1896, and steam could now be used to get construction materials to the East.³¹ The bridge was inaugurated in May of 1896, after eight years of delay at the river. “This event reanimated confidence and marked a revival of opinion in favor of the Kayes-Niger (Cet événement ramina la confiance et marqua un revirement d'opinion en faveur du Kayes-Niger),” according to the Gouvernement Général de l'AOF in 1931.³² Once the government felt confident that the railroad would begin to pay for itself, financial interest resumed. On this set of renovations, skilled African labor was used, which set a precedent for colonial labor practices.

The railroad project was then given to the *Cinquième Régiment du Génie* (military engineers), who had previous railroad construction experience.³³ In 1898, the *Département des Colonies* approved the proposal written by the *Direction du Chemin de Fer* to build 40-50 kilometers of track a year, with work projected to end in 1906 at a budget of 24,719,000 francs. The 1931 administration publication mentioned that a yellow fever epidemic in 1900 delayed work, and the worsening of the epidemic in 1901 and “took numerous victims in the ranks of the European personnel in charge of work supervision (fit de nombreuses victimes

³⁰ Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 13.

³¹ Jones, 17.

³² Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 16.

³³ Jones, 16.

dans les rangs du personnel européens chargé de la surveillance des travaux).”³⁴ Once again, there was no mention of casualties among African forced and volunteer laborers.

African labor increased fivefold from 1,091 to almost 5,000 over the building period from 1898-1904. At the time, the liberty village populations were very high, showing an increase from 4,000 to 10,000, which was partly augmented by an economic disaster after Samori Touré’s defeat in 1898 and the Sahelian famine of 1902-1903. These workers were laid off in 1904 following the completion of the project, and they “joined a large population of displaced Africans who already lived near the rail line.”³⁵ The 1931 colonial publication praised the success of construction: “These results greatly added to the glory of the officers and engineers of the Engineering Corps. They dearly paid for [the results] by the loss of a large number among them who are now resting beside the magnificent work that passes on to the younger generations their imperishable memory (Ces résultats ajoutent grandement à la gloire des officiers et sapeurs du Génie. Ils l’ont d’ailleurs chèrement payée par la perte d’un grand nombre d’entre eux reposant à côté de l’œuvre magnifique qui transmet aux jeunes générations leur impérissable souvenir).”³⁶ The sacrifice of the Africans working under the corps of engineers was completely ignored. James Jones pointed out that the Kayes-Niger was completed “20 years late and 40 million francs over budget.”³⁷ Colonial ideology did not match up with colonial practice, and colonial memory, similarly, did not match up to the historical record. Like Galliéni, who advanced despite his poor work, the construction of the railroad itself, glorified by the French government, was actually a series of failures that finally got somewhere. It was a financial disaster, and the French taxpayers footed the bill. This pattern of propaganda would continue to mask the reality “on the ground” in AOF.

In 1904, the Kayes-Niger saw an “immediate increase in French economic activity.” Commercial firms opened branches in Bamako, where the whites ran the shops and the Africans loaded and unloaded goods into the warehouses. Heavy materials could now be delivered to the Niger as well, and Bamako became the capital of the Soudan. From 1902 to 1907, the population of Bamako grew from 3,800 to 6,000.³⁸ This growth was only the first to manifest the economic powerhouse that the railroad would become. By 1905, all circulating trains were running at expected capacity. From January 1, 1893, traffic increased on a whole on the Kayes-Niger, except during the yellow fever epidemic. Operation revenues

³⁴ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 17.

³⁵ Jones, 17-18.

³⁶ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 20.

³⁷ Jones, 20.

³⁸ Jones, 21.

increased from 130,000 francs in 1893 to 2,700,000 francs in 1905. In 1893, there were 33,000 passengers and in 1904, 61,000. Between 1897 and 1904, tons of merchandise increased from 6,963 to 294,396 tons. Merchandise revenue increased from 164,087 francs to 1,564,463 francs.³⁹ In 1905, the train personnel included African workers as mechanics, train and station chiefs, conductors, and other workers. As reported by the government in 1931: “The training of mechanics was difficult. With tenacity, they were able to suitably instruct, in 1905, twenty or so mechanics and as many conductors. (La formation des mécaniciens a été difficile. Avec de la tenacité, on était parvenu à instruire convenablement, en 1905, une vingtaine de mécaniciens et autant de chauffeurs...).”⁴⁰ Africans were in skilled jobs, finally trusted to complete their tasks. They were put in charge of operating the huge machine that would churn out huge revenues for France and change the face of labor in the AOF colonies.

Wage labor became a reality and started to develop, though not set, in the colonial mind as a way to control and “civilize.” The railroad completion “greatly expanded the market for wage labor in the interior,” according to James Jones. Since importation was easier, more French moved into the interior and prices dropped, in turn meaning that better censuses could be implemented and enterprises were more easily started up, which in turn meant that because everyone could be accounted for, tax collection was better, and since start-up costs lessened, there were more trading opportunities. Both of these factors were enticements to enter the wage system—since taxes and enterprises had to be paid for in cash.⁴¹ The railroad was no longer just an economic endeavor, it was a tool for the *mission civilisatrice*.

Labor recruitment was problematic in the first half of the 20th Century. This was due to low wages, the social stigma associated with manual labor, “its unfamiliarity to Africans,” and the simple fact that working the line meant increased contact with Europeans. A study in Guinea from 1900-1914 concluded that most laborers were conscripted, malnourished, mistreated, and poorly paid. The Thiès-Niger’s conditions were similar, except that there were more choices in terms of labor, such as portage and other unskilled work that created “competition” with the railroad. A 1912 report studying why Africans did not volunteer for rail work found that it was the work itself: 95% of the work allocated to Africans was hard, physical labor such as grading (which James Jones terms “moving dirt”), or digging up ballast

³⁹ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 29-30.

⁴⁰ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 26-27.

⁴¹ Jones, 24.

(rocks), which were put between the ties.⁴² The French did not buy machines to aid workers or save time, and the most demanding work went to Africans. In these conditions, forced labor was the easiest way to get workers. By 1912, there was “strong political and ideological support [in France]...for forced labor [...]” General Charles Mangin supported forced labor as a tool to “civilize” African soldiers and to give the French a greater number of disciplined troops in case of another war with Germany. The *Ministre des Colonies* authorized the use of forced labor in 1912. There were 1,560 conscripts by the end of 1912, and penal labor was also permitted for construction and public route maintenance in AOF.⁴³ Thus, conscription became the official French policy, all in the name of forcing Senegalese and other West Africans to do the labor that the French would not have done for wages, to save money, to impose French mores on African “recruits, and to build up the military aspect of the Empire. Forced labor was a many-faceted practice, but it also forced Africans to come into contact with Europeans, and these contacts, which would deepen as Africans moved into the wage labor system and out of the forced labor one, gave workers their first taste of the equality and civil rights that they would be promised in subsequent years.

The Thiès-Kayes line was constructed from 1907-1923. In an overview of preliminary work being done on the Thiès-Kayes, the 1931 publication mentions that the camels used to cross the desert near the Saloum Delta in Senegal were fatigued by their labors⁴⁴ but neglects to include the state of the Africans involved in the survey work. In 1912, budget cuts from the Chamber of Deputies meant that the majority of Tukolor work force had to be fired. 150 workers were left at the end of the firings,⁴⁵ meaning that 90% of the workers were laid off, many of whom had been with the line for “many years (plusieurs années).” They were replaced with “requisitioned (réquisitionnée)” workers who, “despite the efforts of the European personnel, could never replace the dedicated and loyal Tukolor volunteers sent back to their village by unforeseeable unemployment. This was the origin of all the disappointments in the years following (malgré les efforts du personnel européen, ne put jamais remplacer les volontaires toucouleurs dévoués et fidèle que ce chômage imprévisible avait rendus à leur village. C’est là l’origine de tous les mécomptes des années à venir).”⁴⁶ Interestingly enough, the government blamed the “disappointments” of the following years on forced laborers, which seems, to some extent, to criticize forced labor as a practice. The

⁴² Jones, 25.

⁴³ Jones, 27-28.

⁴⁴ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 41.

⁴⁵ Jones, 28.

⁴⁶ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 46.

immediate layoffs of workers, which, as in 1904 did not seem to bother officials at the time, would also remain a strong pattern over the years, as labor in the colonies was seen as easily dispensable, with no consequences for poor treatment. This assumption underestimated the power of the Senegalese, Malian, and other railroad labor that would strike time and again over bad working conditions, layoffs, and low salaries.

At WWI (1914), personnel were sent back overseas for the war effort, though the origins of this personnel are not specified, and much of the train construction and operation materiel was sent back to France for the war effort. This meant that construction and operation stopped on the line. The train line that opened in Sinthiou-Malène in 1915 allowed *tirailleurs* recruited from the Soudan to be sent to the war in Europe.⁴⁷ There was an “acute labor shortage” at the war due to, according to officials, Africans’ attempts to avoid military service. This makes some sense, since the recruits were “treated like prisoners of war” in at least one incident.⁴⁸ Once again, colonized people were forced to contribute to a system that offered them nothing other than words: the promises of benefits, the high poetry of glory, and the language of inclusion, which were used to ship them off to war. Desertions and recruitment dodging were early forms of resistance to colonial labor practices, and these individual work moratoriums would broaden and unite in later years to true strikes.

The railroad was more than a change in the Senegalese and Soudanese physical landscape: it vastly altered the social, political, and economic landscapes of both regions. Marx wrote that the role of the railroad in the global expansion of capitalism was as the “principal factor of economic submission, bringing about the surpassing of a strictly political solution [to expansion] (agent principal de la soumission économique, traduisant le dépassement de la solution strictement politique).”⁴⁹ The colonial *export economy* was established only with the advent of the rail. The export economy, or *la traite*, was meant to drain goods from the interior. The railroad was the “pièce de maîtrise (controlling component)” for the export economy and the center of French investments. In 1907, the colonial administration was allocated 100 million francs for export infrastructure, 78.5% of which went to railroad infrastructure. As in the rest of the colonies, Senegal and the Soudan were submitted to “the politics of specialization (la politique de spécialisation),” in which each colony was designated as the producer of the single product that best suited the region’s agricultural conditions. For Senegal, it was peanuts, and each kilometer of rail sustained an export

⁴⁷ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 46-47.

⁴⁸ Jones, 28.

⁴⁹ Diouf, 264.

production of 300 tons of peanuts.⁵⁰ According to James Jones, “When Europeans invested in colonial industrialization, they only did so to facilitate the export of raw materials by improving storage and shipment [...]”⁵¹ The Dakar-Niger, intended initially as a supply route for the military conquest of the Niger Valley, became the “largest industrial enterprise” in AOF and the “umbilical cord” to the interior. Despite its role in military conquest, the line was initially meant to be a “tool for social and economic development.” The railroad did stimulate “some local labor,” but “the main thing that the railroad consumed in Africa was labor.”⁵² The railroad created the conditions for the export economy, and despite the crippling effect this system would have on the colonies well past independence, it was a very fragile endeavor, one that could easily be stopped up. The railroad, the power source for the colonial administration, was also an exposed area, and threats to that source would allow Africans to stand up to the French.

The birth of the railroad came just after the birth of “high colonialism” for the French empire. It was, conveniently, a tool for social “development,” political control, and economic exploitation. Colonial rhetoric around the railroad made many promises to the French administration, the metropolitan citizens, and colonial subjects, but it was little more than men with guns coercing Africans to work. These forced laborers did not take long to resist those that were exploiting them, however, and the railroad is inextricably linked to a long history of conflict that takes every form imaginable. In its conception, the railroad, to a certain extent, created the conditions that would bring about strong challenges to the colonial administration and presented Africans with a way to claim agency over their own lives, to resist. The connections that the railroad would forge among Senegalese and Malians, among West African peoples, simply in its tying together of different regions by a train, would create an even strong unification.

The Inter-War Period: A New French Philosophy and the First Strikes

The end of WWI brought an increased level of colonial intervention in the colonies, but it also saw an increase in labor agitation. As Abdoulaye Cissé, an informant interviewed in Dakar, said: “Chaque fois qu’il y a une guerre...après [il y a] toujours des événements (Every time there is war...afterwards there are events).”⁵³ The Interwar period proved this

⁵⁰ Sene, 12-13.

⁵¹ Jones, 2.

⁵² Jones, xix.

⁵³ Abdoulaye Cissé, interview by the author, notes, Dakar, Senegal, 3 May 2007.

statement too true, ringing in a series of *cheminot* strikes that would begin to challenge their treatment in the colonial system.

After the war, forced labor and resistance to it continued. Resistance took many forms, from outright desertion to theft, work delays, sabotage, feigned sickness, and “target work” (making enough for a specific objective and then quitting).⁵⁴ Work started again in 1920, and 7,000 laborers worked for the line, including volunteer and skilled labor. In 1922, there were 8,000 laborers, most of which were Africans managed by military supervision.⁵⁵ The number of travelers on the Thiès-Kayes increased from 1910-1923, from 130,025 to 447,583, according to the 1931 report, because “The *indigène* loves to travel (L’indigène aime voyager...).”⁵⁶ 1920 mid-January to mid-November, there were 1,000 workers on the Thiès-Kayes. 241 deserted, 31 on a single day, 26 deserted twice. There were 896 forced workers on the Thiès-Niger in 1925, and 312 of them deserted in the last five months.⁵⁷ Fear of death and disease made desertions increase, worsened by the numerous epidemics that hit the line. Albert Londres, a French writer, who traveled to West Africa in the 1920s wrote that labor recruitment had “depopulated the West African federation,” estimating that nearly 600,000 French West Africans had moved to the Gold Coast, 2 million to Nigeria, and 10,000 Ivoirians had moved from their villages into the forest. Londres said that the “psychological impact” of forced labor meant that whites were associated with “government” and “nightmare.” To reduce the African resistance to forced labor, the French improved compensation, increasing and improving rations, raising wages, and also increasing punishments.⁵⁸ These forms of resistance, however, were coupled with unified labor resistance in the form of strikes. The deep impact that forced and wage labor had on West Africa could be seen in the massive movement of peoples out of affected areas or into cities, the latter establishing circumstances that would lead to population concentrations of laborers. These concentrations facilitated unification and solidarity.

In 1919, the *cheminots*, African and European alike, sent a telegram to the *Direction du Réseau* (the management), demanding higher wages to offset the rising cost of living after WWI and the end of bad treatment. They threatened a 24-hour strike for April 12th. The Direction responded with “intimidation and repression (l’intimidation et la repression),” by calling for over a hundred *tirailleurs* to patrol train stations. Workers responded in turn by

⁵⁴ Jones, 28.

⁵⁵ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 48-49.

⁵⁶ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 57.

⁵⁷ Jones, 28.

⁵⁸ Jones, 30-31.

dispersing all over the country so that their strike could occur, which it did on April 13th. The Europeans went back to work on the 14th, and the African workers followed on the 16th, once the essential demands had been met. This was, for the labor movement, “its first big victory (sa première grande victoire),” but there was a growing frustration with European workers who broke with the African strikers and also got even higher wage hikes.⁵⁹ This was one of the last times African and European workers would strike together, and the divisions between them would grow to the point that European equated management and establishment. At the strike of 1947, leader Ibrahima Sarr even had to express that the strike was not anti-white, it was the racial hierarchy of the workplace that forced African workers to go up against their French bosses.⁶⁰

The Thiès-Niger, which after subsequent extensions became known as the Dakar-Niger, was fused on August 15, 1923. Problems with different gauges between the Thiès-Kayes and the Kayes-Niger, equipment and personnel shortages on the line made the line at first unsuccessful for material evacuation.⁶¹ Service was irregular, there were thefts, “the integrity of certain workers was lowered (la conscience de certains agents baissa),” and the commercial litigation ensuing from delays and financial losses led to monetary damage for the line. In 1925, a reorganization of the line was called for to deal with the glitches.⁶² This reorganization included security increases to stop thefts, according to the 1931 publication, but this could have also been due to the strike of 1925, as a repressive measure. Trains and car numbers were also upped, and station and service buildings were constructed, repaired, and upgraded.⁶³ Once again, poor colonial planning initially led to a greater expenditure of metropolitan taxes.

The Kayes-Niger goods and passenger traffic increased, and to address the need for labor, the French imported workers. This led to problems in 1924 and a strike in 1925. Resentment was increased as efficiency measures, such as eliminating the morning break, were put into place.⁶⁴ Workers were imported from Spain, Italy, and Algeria in 1924, though the administration reports referred to them collectively as “Moroccans.” They created more tension in the workplace, such as one incident where a manager told a sub-Saharan worker, “In Morocco, natives don't get to speak. Here, I am in charge, and you, *sale nègre*, shut your mouth.” Thus began a series of attacks against the new managers, the imprisonment of

⁵⁹ Sene, 22-24.

⁶⁰ Sene, 65.

⁶¹ Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 62-63.

⁶² Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 67.

⁶³ Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, 70-72.

⁶⁴ Jones, 38-40.

attackers, and a strike on the Dakar-Saint Louis line the next year, followed by other strikes in different sectors. 1925 became “known as the year of *grands grèves*.”⁶⁵ The 1931 colonial publication noted the labor agitation in 1924 and 1925:

In fact, from the end of 1924, a certain agitation manifested itself among the Thiès-Niger workers, who demanded a readjustment of their remunerations to the cost, ever rising, of life. Promises were made and the preparation of pay was under study, but it did not advance quickly enough for the liking of the agents who manifested a feverish impatience and a noticeably bad spirit (En fait, dès la fin de 1924, une certaine effervescence se manifesta parmi les agents du Thiès-Niger qui réclamaient un réajustement de leurs émoulements au coût, sans cesse croissant, de la vie. Des promesses avaient été faites et la préparation des nouvelles soldes était à l'étude mais elle n'avancait pas assez vite au gré des agents qui manifestèrent une impatience fébrile et un mauvais esprit très net).⁶⁶

As in 1919, the strikes on the Dakar-Saint Louis line in 1925 deliberately coincided with the largest period of export. The Chamber of Commerce responded by chiding the rail direction, charging that if the administration had been more conciliatory and cooperative, the strike could have been avoided. The president of the Dakar Chamber of Commerce also said that there had already been an approved decision to raise wages, and that it was the fault of bureaucratic delays in the Métropole.⁶⁷ The administration then had meetings with “various African *notables*” but no workers, and decrees in October of 1925 and March of 1926 altered salaries, conditions, and hours.⁶⁸ The railroad, which had now become the center of France’s colonial “stratégie économique,” was extremely sensitive to strikes and sabotage. The swift action on the part of the Chamber of Commerce in both 1919 and 1925 illustrates the importance that the railroad had gained in the French economy.⁶⁹ The way in which these early strikes were dealt with poses an interesting contradiction: though the rail direction was often supported by the colonial administration in an initial use of intimidation and repression, they ultimately gave into workers’ demands and commercial pressure.⁷⁰ This pattern of behavior led to a bloody end to the strike of 1938 as well as communicated to workers that their actions could achieve progress in the workplace, especially when that action threatened metropolitan interests.

It was illegal for Africans to unionize until 1937, but cadre members with professional school diplomas could form *associations amicales*, and the railroad formed the *Association*

⁶⁵ Jones, 50.

⁶⁶ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 66.

⁶⁷ Sene, 25-26

⁶⁸ Jones, 50-51.

⁶⁹ Sene, 13.

⁷⁰ Sene, 31.

amicale professionnelle des Agents du Chemin de fer du Thiès-Niger in 1925. The administration treated the *cadre* workers as the representatives of all African rail workers.⁷¹ The *amicale* could not call strikes or negotiate contracts, but it did train labor leaders, collect dues, and offer the administration a way to spy on workers through police informants planted at meetings. François Gning was elected and served for 17 years as secretary-general and spokesman for the *cheminots*. Gning was an *évolué* who worked from age 18 on the railroad as an accountant. He was wounded in WWI, and was an active member in the Socialist Party (which was under the leadership of Lamine Guèye).⁷² Thus, the *cheminot* labor movement entered a new stage: that of legal organization, even if an *amicale* was not technically a union. The railroad would witness many of the first and most bitter strikes in AOF, and the leadership of the *amicale* would play a role in union action (or lack thereof) past the strike of 1947.

From the end of the 19th Century to the 1920s, French colonial thinking evolved from thinking that Africans had “primitive brains” incapable of more than agricultural work to establishing technical schools and offering them employment in skilled jobs. These jobs had good salaries, were long term, and had good conditions because the French wanted to retain them. The colonial administration began to use Africans in non-construction jobs because of the economic constraints from the Métropole: they could pay Africans lower wages and did not have to pay transportation fees for foreign workers, plus Africans could, in theory, better stand the climate, while European numbers dropped dramatically due to illness.⁷³ The differences between African construction and African skilled labor, however, were great. Railroad towns like Thiès received discounted goods, and skilled operators received free and discounted train tickets every year. There was also a food cooperative set up in Thiès for operators.⁷⁴ This move toward placing West Africans in skilled jobs set about enforcing two colonial phenomena. The first was working as cheaply as possible, and since colonized West Africans did not have the same rights as Europeans, they were put into skilled labor. The second employed the theory that work could make the colonized “evolve,” and those who worked within the system, such as François Gning, would be rewarded with support and power. This attitude led to nascent divisions between those who assimilated to French ideals and ways and those who did not, or could not.

⁷¹ Jones, 45.

⁷² Jones, 51.

⁷³ Jones, 35-38.

⁷⁴ Jones, 41.

The technical schools set up to train African workers also set up another division among the *cheminots*: that of job status. The first of these was the *Compagnie indigène de sapeurs des chemins de fer* in Bamako in the fall of 1925. Recruits came from all over the AOF for a three-year service, where they were trained militarily and as rail workers in different capacities.⁷⁵ These schools “legitimized the use of educational qualifications to stratify the railroad workforce.” Decrees on the 7th and 12th of March, 1925 put African operating employees in the *cadre commun* and Europeans in the *cadre commun supérieur*. When the first graduates exited the technical schools, a third cadre, the *cadre locale secondaire*, was created for Africans with advanced technical training, such as scribes, station chiefs, telegraph operators, and signal men. The *cadre local supérieur* included Africans who had completed technical apprenticeships, such as foremen and supervisors. The *cadre commun supérieur* was made up of African workers (mostly accounting clerks) and European employees. The majority of African workers, however, were auxiliaries, who had no contracts and were hired on a day-to-day basis. In 1926, the *cadre commun supérieur* earned 3,000-11,000 francs a month. The *cadre locale secondaire* earned 1,700 to 3,000 francs a month. Auxiliaries earned less than 100 francs a month.⁷⁶ Thus race became institutionalized as the basis of hierarchy. Those chosen few *évolués* would graduate technical schools and move into the mid- to high-level *cadres* while Europeans reserved the top, best paying jobs. Those relegated to the bottom were cursed with precarious employ, low wages, and no rights.

Over the next decade, labor activity was relatively calm, nipped in the bud by reforms for specific grievances and also “by the collusion of African labor leaders whose privileged position at a time of economic depression gave them a stake in maintaining the status quo.”⁷⁷ In the 1930s, the Great Depression was strongly felt all over AOF, and 1933 was an especially difficult year in Senegal. Workers wanted job protection and security, so they were less interested in union organizing.⁷⁸ The Depression also served to further disconnect skilled African labor from unskilled and from Europeans as well. Skilled African workers were protected even over European workers, who were laid off along with unskilled African workers to compensate for the price dip in colonial exports. African professionals were protected because they earned less than Europeans in equivalent jobs, which saved the colonial administration money. They were given more responsibilities and were viewed as

⁷⁵ Gouvernement Général de l’AOF, 103.

⁷⁶ Jones, 45.

⁷⁷ Jones, 51.

⁷⁸ Sene, 26.

privileged.⁷⁹ Skilled African labor was an investment—one that required recruitment and training. Since this investment was cheaper than European labor, skilled laborers gained more advantages than their unskilled comrades and even, to some extent, their European counterparts. This furthered their importance to the railroad, which increased their clout, as it distanced them from their fellow workers, Europeans because of race and Africans because of job status and rights.

A new government took power in France in 1936, and the ruling party, the *Front Populaire*, was socialist in ideology. The *Front Populaire* legalized unions in the colonies in 1937, and union activity was revitalized. The limits for union affiliation, however, included an educational cutoff, meaning that only “those that could fluently speak, read, and write French (ceux qui savaient parler, lire, et écrire couramment le français),”⁸⁰ and who held a *certificat d’études primaires* could join unions.⁸¹ Those excluded by this restriction, however, could form *associations amicales*. Marius Moutet, Minister of the Colonies and the father of the decree, was an assimilationist. He wanted Africans to be encouraged to learn French, hence the restrictions, according to Mor Sene. In 1937 there were 119 associations, 42 of which were official unions.⁸² As before, the *cadre* agents, who had educational degrees from the technical schools that trained them, were allowed to speak for all of the *cheminots*, though the majority of African workers were relegated to auxiliary status and had no rights. This division would only worsen, culminating in the 1938 strike in Thiès. The *Front Populaire* seemed to promise rights and opportunities for its colonies, but in reality, it merely strengthened the racialized system that had been instated in the first stages of construction on the railroad.

The socialist government under the *Front Populaire* considered “African workers, and even strikers...as an integral part of normalized society (les travailleurs africains, et même les grévistes...comme partie intégrante de la société normalisée).”⁸³ Marius Moutet illustrated the new contradictory philosophy of the *Front Populaire* when he said in 1937: “We have no interest in developing wage labor. We must on the contrary permit populations to cultivate their own land (Nous n'avons aucun intérêt à développer le travail salarié. Nous devons au contraire permettre aux populations de cultiver leurs propres terres).”⁸⁴ Thus, despite

⁷⁹ Jones, 46.

⁸⁰ Sene, 26-27.

⁸¹ Babacar Fall, “Le Mouvement Syndical in Afrique Occidentale Francophone, 1900-1968,” in *Matériaux pour l'Histoire de Notre Temps*, no. 84 (October-December 2006), 51.

⁸² Sene, 27-28.

⁸³ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 49.

⁸⁴ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 48.

legislation that seemed to encourage industrialization or wage labor, the French administration still held onto the belief of the African peasant, who was tied to the land and interested only in farming. This even seemed to be a preferred alternative to the striking wage laborer. The *Front Populaire* seemed to give hope for colonial reforms for “the maximum of social justice and human possibilities (le maximum de justice sociale et de possibilités humaines),”⁸⁵ but it continually fell short of its philosophies and its promises.

Further divisions between the elite *cadre* and the auxiliaries were broadened with *Front Populaire* political actions. Marcel DeCoppet, governor of AOF, wanted to plant the seeds of socialism in Africa. In so doing, he encouraged pro-*Front Populaire* groups to accept the membership of “Africains cultivés” and in Senegal particularly,

a series of very original alliances formed: the socialist mayor of Dakar, Lamine Guèye, and his unionist friends [such as Gning] became the *de facto* allies of the governor of AOF while the deputy Galandou Diouf, the mayor’s rival, formed intrigues with certain anti-Front Populaire dealers as well as with certain groups of Africans rejected by their socialist ‘comrades’ (une série d’alliances assez originales se constituèrent: le maire socialiste de Dakar, Lamine Guèye, et ses amis syndicalistes devinrent des alliés de fait du gouverneur général de l’AOF alors que le député Galandou Diouf, rival du maire, nouait des intrigues aussi bien avec les milieux d’affaires anti-Front Populaires qu’avec certains groupes d’Africains rejetés par leur ‘camarades’ socialistes).⁸⁶

Politicians and politics entered the union scene, either for or against the auxiliaries that had been pushed aside by *cadre* agents, who looked to their own interests in their union under Gning. Ten years before the strike of 1947, Lamine Guèye had already marked his position as with the administration and against the welfare of many workers, a position that he would maintain through WWII and the strikes of 1946 and 1947. Meanwhile, rival politicians attempted to form alliances with those left out of the range of colonial support, another theme that would repeat following the strike of 1947, when Senghor pulled the *cheminots* into his new party in 1949. The *cheminots* could not stay clear of politics and politicians, no matter how hard they tried to preserve autonomy, and whether or not they officially affiliated with a party, they still felt the pull of politics. These alliances and divisions would harden into the conflict that was the strike of 1938 and further define the establishment elites as separate and more favored by the colonial administration than the voiceless, though not powerless, auxiliaries.

⁸⁵ Omar Guèye, *La Grève de 1946 au Sénégal*, master’s thesis (Dakar: UCAD Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, October 1990), 13.

⁸⁶ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 49.

Once unions were allowed in 1937 for educated workers, the *cheminot* association became a union under Gning, who told the Governor-General that auxiliaries should not be allowed into the union because they could develop a "too violent conception of union action." The auxiliaries began to meet separately from the *cadre* union,⁸⁷ since they felt that the union did not take their needs into account and Gning opposed all attempts to revitalize action for labor improvements. A call for a schism was started in Dakar, and discussions continued in Thiès.⁸⁸ The administration, nervous over the meetings, transferred one of the auxiliary leaders, Cheikh Diack, from Thiès to another station on September 15. On September 27, 1938, auxiliaries blocked the rail line at Thiès in protest. Troops were called in and six strikers were killed. Twenty-two soldiers were put on trial but their cases "disappeared" a few months later. Governor-General de Coppet was dismissed, as well as the railroad director and his assistant. The new director ignored the strike settlement of September 29, and by May 1939, 71 strikers were arrested and many of them were thrown into jail.⁸⁹ The 1938 strike was a defining moment in the *cheminot* labor movement. First, it showed how far the administration would go to stop strikes and how far it could go without too many consequences. It also proved that auxiliaries without a union could still challenge the colonial system: unions did not necessarily have a monopoly on organized protest, especially in conditions where workers lived in a close-knit community that was further united by its alienation from the norm. The strikers of 1947 most likely had the 1938 strike in mind when they prepared for their action, and Sarr's calls for peace and calm, which are recorded in police files on Sarr at the ANS,⁹⁰ could have been a reaction to the 1938 strike: since the colonial administration could have strikers shot, especially if they were considered to be violent, it was better to be as peaceful as possible. The 1947 strikers also may have realized that the key to a successful strike was the unification of *cadre* and auxiliary, which would bring together the educated elite, whose power lay in their ties to other elites and even the administration, and the raw power of numbers that the auxiliaries brought.

A decree in 1939 reiterated the status of permanent and temporary labor: permanent workers were defined as the *cadre* agents and auxiliaries, temporary workers were *journaliers*, who were recruited for high-activity periods. The cadres were split into the *cadre du personnel supérieur*, which had four advancement levels and included administration and management positions. They also had housing or housing indemnities. They were all

⁸⁷ Jones, 52-3.

⁸⁸ Sene, 28.

⁸⁹ Jones, 52-3.

⁹⁰ "Renseignement 501 RG," Series 21G (ANS, 3 October 1947).

European. Next was the *cadre commun supérieur*, which included inspection personnel, mostly Europeans with “some (quelques)” évolués. The benefits were similar to those of the *cadre du personnel supérieur*, but these benefits were especially better for European workers. Next came the *cadre secondaire*, which had seven advancement levels and was made up of agents advancing from the *cadre local*, which had two designations, the *cadre local secondaire* and the *cadre local supérieur*. This cadre was made up of technical school graduates. All cadre agents had job security, a set salary, a fixed and clarified way to advance, and sick days.⁹¹

Auxiliaries were “the crushing majority (l’écrasante majorité)” and had five stages of advancement. Auxiliaries had no guaranteed housing, and those who were housed lived in camps. They had no rights as workers and were easily fired. In Thiès, out of 1,975 *cheminots*, 1,600 were auxiliaries. According to Abdoulaye Ba, interviewed by Mor Sene, “An auxiliary who lost a parent in the morning had to go back to work in the afternoon...During work hours, an auxiliary who needed to relieve himself had to ask permission for a five-minute break. One minute extra exposed him to sanctions (Un auxiliaire qui perdait un parent le matin, devait reprendre le travail l’après-midi...Durant les heures du travail, un auxiliaire qui sentait le besoin de se soulager devait demander une permission de cinq minutes. Une minute de plus l’exposait à des sanctions).” One of the only benefits to the auxiliaries’ situation was that, like most African *cheminots*, they lived in concentrated areas and worked close together in their places of work. The concentration of workers “resulted in forging in the breast of this proletariat a class conscience that went beyond ethnic or other differences (avait fini par forger au sein de ce prolétariat une conscience de classe par-dessus les différences ethniques ou autres).”⁹² The obvious privilege of European and select Africans carried on the racialized labor system that the colonial administration wanted in order to keep Europeans in ruling positions and Africans in subservient ones. Although colonial and French rhetoric would later suggest that West Africans and the French should be regarded as equal, the reality was that the *colons* and the Métropole bought into discriminatory practices and hierarchical theories surrounding race. This disparity would become the center of *cheminot* demands for equal pay and treatment, since they cut right to the heart of colonial duplicity.

At the end of the 1930s, three factors contributed to the beginnings of “true (vrais)” unions in francophone Africa. First, as an AOF proletariat began to form and expand, the

⁹¹ Sene, 19.

⁹² Sene, 19-21.

administration shied away from angering a population that could disrupt the social order and colonial presence. Second, a minority of metropolitan citizens, mostly unionists and *Front Populaire* progressivists, wanted to encourage social progress in the colonies. There were also members or sympathizers of the *Séction française de l'Internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) or the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) in the colonial administration. Third, overseas commercial and financial interests were worried enough about the “menace of anarchy (menace d’anarchie)” from unions that they were willing to begrudge some workers’ rights, under strictly-controlled conditions.⁹³ The conditions of work for *cadre* agents and auxiliaries also contributed to the nascent labor movement that enveloped the *cheminots*, and they “adopted the structures, tactics, and ideals of the French labor movement.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, the status of skilled laborers allowed them to connect with the bourgeois population,⁹⁵ which had both an up and a down side. The elite workers were capable of turning their backs on their auxiliary compatriots, illustrated by the strike of 1938 or any of Gning’s refusals to act against the colonial system, but it also gave them access to the French structures and rhetoric that would eventually lead to the strike of 1947-1948, which was run for the most part by the technical school-graduate elite, united auxiliary with *cadre*, and used the rhetoric of the French Republic and colonialism to underline the inherent hypocrisies of both. The importance of the elite technicians can be summed up in this: in Kayes as of 2002, when a male child is born, he is blessed with “Allaou ma keta sefou de garrou di, (May Allah make him become the station master [chef du gare]).”⁹⁶ These higher-*cadre* agents brought happiness to their families and enjoyed an immense amount of power, which was used both for and against the other Africans with whom they worked. Despite the union’s inaction in 1938, the railroad union was one of the most active in the 1936-1938 period.⁹⁷ Although conditions would change with the coming of the war, driving the union closer to the confrontation that became the strike of 1947-1948, many of the roots of that strike were firmly planted in the interwar period. This pattern, in fact, was replicated all over colonized Africa, as class conscience was born and developed among the populations pushed into the wage labor system.

WWII: Colonialism and Labor under Vichy and Free France

⁹³ Fall, 52.

⁹⁴ Jones, 35.

⁹⁵ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 71.

⁹⁶ Jones, 35.

⁹⁷ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 74.

The war brought many changes to the colonial system, as Africans were called upon to sacrifice as much, if not more, than their French “brothers,” whether they were of Vichy or Free French sympathies. The labor movement suffered under both regimes during the war, with one restricting almost as much as the other. The only difference was that once AOF was “liberated” from Vichy and joined Free France, the colonized pointed to the rhetoric that the Allied Forces and France employed to differentiate themselves from the fascism of the Axis powers and asked that it actually be extended to them as well. The use of colonial rhetoric to demand change crystallized as a tactic in this era.

At the fall of France to Germany in 1940, AOF joined the Vichy government, while l'Afrique Equatoriale Française (AEF) remained with Free France. Along with several other actions that suppressed civil liberties, Vichy illegalized union organizing.⁹⁸ In Dakar, the Vichy governor general, Pierre Boisson, increased the use of forced labor to continue the export economy's flow of raw materials out of the colonies. Since the export economy required manufactured goods to be imported to continue export, and there were no manufactured goods being shipped from war-torn Europe, forced labor was the chosen option to continue sending supplies to the Métropole. The levels of forced labor were so high, in fact, that even Boisson feared a “désastre (disaster).”⁹⁹ The Vichy policy stated that Africans had to be “submitted to ‘the obligation of work’ and in exchange [would] benefit from decent salaries, good work conditions, and the ability to have their families come to their places of work (soumis à ‘l’obligation de travail’ et en échange bénéficier de salaires décents, de bonnes conditions du travail, et de pouvoir faire venir leurs familles sur leurs lieux de travail).” In reality, this plan only continued the practice of forced labor in AOF, instead of fulfilling the Vichy colonial capitalist ideology, which was stated by Bertrand Mounier, a Vichy theorist, as the action of “attaching little by little the *indigène* to his job, to give him a sense of professionalism, to fill him with the mystique of work and progress...so that no one could escape from the obligations of work (d’attacher peu à peu l’indigène à son métier, de lui donner le sens de la profession, de lui insuffler une mystique de travail et du progress...que personne ne pourra échapper aux obligations du travail).”¹⁰⁰ During the war, the export economy once again demonstrated its weakness: it needed input for output, and when the imports stopped, so too did the entire economy. Furthermore, forced labor came back in full

⁹⁸ Fall, 53.

⁹⁹ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 119-120.

force, though it had not disappeared in the interwar period. The idea of work as a positive phenomenon that would discipline and civilize colonial subjects was not a new idea but rather one that reflected the colonial opinion that all Africans wanted to work just to sustain themselves, just to survive, and that they were incapable of European work. This sentiment would not disappear with the advent of the Free French, and neither would forced labor or repression.

In 1942, AOF joined Free France, and forced labor continued, despite the shift from the fascist sympathetic Vichy to the theoretically democratic France. This time it was a “moral obligation (obligation morale)” to work.¹⁰¹ The majority of labor in AOF was “recruited by [administrative] measures (recrutée par mesure),” at this time for both the public or private sector, according to the governor of Côte d’Ivoire, Dechamps.¹⁰² The practice that was increased under the fascist regime continued with the “democratic” one. Both regimes also regarded the African labor force as far from being “physically and intellectually capable of working at the European rhythm (physiquement et intellectuellement capable de travailler au rythme européen).”¹⁰³ The idea of racial hierarchy, which would later be incontrovertibly linked to Nazism, was perpetuated under Free France, which sought so hard to prove, through language, that it was different.

Once AOF rejoined Free France, however, union activity revitalized. A French decree restored the right to unionize, though this regulation still carried an educational restriction: union adherents still needed a degree.¹⁰⁴ In 1943, the *Syndicat des Travailleurs Indigènes du Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger* (STIDN) sent a letter to the governor protesting measures that curtailed rights during the war period, such as restrictions placed on auxiliaries that did not allow them to look for work elsewhere, despite poor conditions. The letter said: “the measure dictated by the ancient government [is] far from being compatible with the democratic spirit of the committee of national liberation, to which we are infinitely grateful for allowing the return of union liberties (le mesure dictée par l’ancien gouvernement étant loin d’être compatible avec l’esprit démocratique du comité de la libération nationale duquel nous sommes infiniment reconnaissants d’avoir permis le reprise des libertés syndicales).” Concessions were made for salary increases to offset the increase in the cost of living during the war after angry *cheminot* meetings in Thiès, and the union seemed to calm. More problems arose, however, as the *cadre* system created wage disparities at the hikes: the

¹⁰¹ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 124.

¹⁰² Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 128.

¹⁰³ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 133.

¹⁰⁴ Fall, 53.

Europeans and higher-*cadre* Africans got disproportionately higher wage increases. The government then revised the salary ladders after more heated meetings in Thiès. A marine transport enterprise, the *Manutention africaine*, noted “The indigene elements understand very well that enterprises need them and they become more and more demand, so that when they appeal for a salary increase, we will be obliged to give it (L’élément indigène comprend très bien que les entreprises ont besoin de lui et devient de plus en plus exigeant, donc quand il réclama une augmentation de salaire, nous serons obligés de la lui accorder).¹⁰⁵ This time, the colonial administration acted with appeasement, not guns. The African *cheminots* were employing the rhetoric of their oppressors to demand change, indicating the hypocrisies inherent in the structure of the system, which could not continue as an acceptable presence globally or to the Métropole if it actually articulated the philosophy that was being carried out. This was made particularly sensitive after the war.

Competing visions of the African worker continued under the Free French regime, as administrators waffled between accepting Africans as urban workers with rights and continuing to see them as peasants who needed to be forced to work.¹⁰⁶ Even as the colonial project allowed for an urban workforce with rights, if they were limited, *colons* could not divorce themselves from their *mission civilisatrice* that would drag the “dark masses” out of their depths. René Pleven explained colonialism as “liberating [the African from] the great scourges that ravage primitive societies, which they call illness, superstition, ignorance, tyranny, corruption, exploitation, or cruelty...To colonize is to civilize, or otherwise expressed, in its final analysis, to project into space one’s civilization (libératrice des grands fléaux qui ravagent les sociétés primitives, qu’ils appellent la maladie, la superstition, l’ignorance, la tyrannie, la corruption, l’exploitation ou la cruauté...Coloniser c’est civiliser, autrement dit, en dernière analyse, projeter dans l’espace sa civilisation).”¹⁰⁷ In reality, however, the *mission civilisatrice* was the system imbued with cruelty, exploitation, corruption, ignorance, and tyranny forced into a space. The West African worker, however, would soon prove to even the colonizers’ notions of a simple peasantry needing to be guided through to a “higher” state were completely backward.

Several factors under the Vichy and Free France regimes contributed to the conditions that would allow the railway strike only a few years later. According to James Jones, “Archival documents and oral sources portray World War II as a period when working

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 140-141.

¹⁰⁶ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 142.

¹⁰⁷ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 158.

conditions deteriorated, but labor resistance was minimal. Generally, that was true, but the seeds of a tremendous confrontation were planted during the years from 1939 to 1945.” Thiès, as shown above, “remained a center of agitation,” despite inaction and silence on the part of labor leadership.¹⁰⁸ From the end of 1943, there was a presence of Groupes d’Etudes Communistes (GEC) that organized against the Vichy regime and supported and inspired militant unionism.¹⁰⁹ Another factor was that of the clearly racist treatment of Africans in every area, even with rationing. In AOF, there were severe food shortages during the war. Ration cards allowed Europeans to receive better-quality food, such as pieces of meat, while Africans got the innards and bones of animals. One retired *cheminot* informant interviewed by Mor Sene explained: “We also lived our ‘apartheid’ (Nous vivions aussi notre ‘apartheid’).”¹¹⁰ The memory of this oppression would not fade after the war, and it was made more poignant by the later assimilationist insistences that French citizen and West African subject resided on the same plane in regards to French law.

One of the most vital components of the 1947-1948 strike was born under the Vichy colonial government and suffered repression: the *Union des Jeunes de Thiès* (UJT), which would later revitalize the *cheminot* union and whose leaders would take over the union to draw it into greater militancy. Gning regained control of the entire *cheminot* movement during the war, since the auxiliaries, even further restricted under Vichy, were unable to remain a separate organization.¹¹¹ Gning’s time, however, was drawing to a close. The UJT began by circulating an underground paper.¹¹² UJT members and contributors included Mory Tall, Aynina Fall, Doudou Ngom, Aly Bocar Kane, Abdou K. Sow, Birago Mbengue, and Ibrahima Sarr. Most of the UJT members were teachers and *cheminots* trained in technical schools. Their first newspaper was called *Afrique Libre*, but it was changed after a few issues to *Jeunesse et Démocratie*, published by Abdou K. Sow. More often than not, its articles attacked local authorities, whether *colons* or collaborators.¹¹³ The UJT “brought out a youthful vigor against the perceived lethargy of older Senegalese politicians and a new combativeness towards the French,” personally attacking even the higher up colonial administrators, such as the Circle Commandant of Thiès.¹¹⁴ Until the fifth issue, *Jeunesse et Démocratie* called itself “an organ of total socialism (un organe du socialisme integral),” but

¹⁰⁸ Jones, 53.

¹⁰⁹ Sene, 38.

¹¹⁰ Sene, 34-35.

¹¹¹ Sene, 40.

¹¹² Jones, 53.

¹¹³ Sene, 41.

¹¹⁴ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 85.

its actual affiliation is more difficult to gauge. Politics in general, however, were dominated by the SFIO and the *Quatre Communes* elite at this time. In an interview with Mor Sene, Abdou K. Sow asserted: “We were simply nationalists who decided to fight against the injustice to which we were all vulnerable (Nous étions simplement des nationalistes décidés à combattre l’injustice à laquelle nous étions tous sensibles).” The sixth issue of *Jeunesse et Démocratie* said it was “an organ of socialist youth un organe des jeunesses socialistes.” Most of UJT members became SFIO militants, and according to Sow, “We were the left wing of the party (Nous étions l’aile gauche du parti).”¹¹⁵ Malick Sow asserts that the UJT started as with “vague ambitions (ambitions vagues)” that hardened to “an orientation more or less political to become the youth sector of the Thiès SFIO (une orientation plus ou moins politique pour devenir la section jeune de la SFIO de Thiès).” For Mory Tall, the first secretary general of UJT, his group was a radical tool for Africa: “A program of action is needed to save Africa, and it’s up to us to establish it. If an atomic bomb has to be detonated to save Africa, that bomb must come from Thiès (Il faut pour sauver l’Afrique un programme d’action, c’est à nous qu’il appartient de l’établir. S’il y a une bombe atomique qui doit s’écarter pour sauver l’Afrique, cette bombe doit partir de Thiès).” Tall also called for the unification of all AOF unions under one federation and that despite ties to SFIO, the UJT would quickly break with the party if their needs were not met. Sarr, furthermore, berated Lamine Guèye and Léopold Senghor for their passivity towards Circle Commandant Cazenare of Thiès, who was meting out “une politique arbitraire (arbitrary policies).”¹¹⁶ The militancy of UJT during the Vichy regime was too much for officials, and the leaders were arrested by the Vichy government and exiled to the Soudan, Niger, and Upper Volta. One of them was Ibrahima Sarr.¹¹⁷

The similarities between Vichy and Free France did not go unnoticed or unexploited among *cheminots* during the war, and this proved to be a valuable tool in confronting the administration. This appeal to the “ideals” of France was not a series of attempts to buy into the colonial system so much as it was a way to really point out the hypocrisies of the French government. The radicalism that would define the UJT would not have allowed for that kind of rapprochement, especially after their ouster of the establishment figure François Gning in 1946. The strike was born out of the context of the war, when the hypocrisy of the French government became too much when the regime was placed beside that of Vichy. The young

¹¹⁵ Sene, 44-45.

¹¹⁶ Sow, 78-79.

¹¹⁷ Jones, 53.

unionists that stood up to the colonial administration and were exiled for it became the leaders of the 1947 strike movement that again challenged the colonial project and its system that depended so heavily on the maintenance of racialization.

The End of World War II : Changes in the Colonial System and the Lead-up to the Strike

When World War II drew to a close the balance of global power shifted and colonial empires came under scrutiny. As French colonial attitudes towards African societies and economies began to change and the Fourth Republic was formed, labor relations in Senegal began to evolve, if in rhetoric only. Furthermore, World War II allowed “the thousands of Blacks [in the colonial empire] to experience a brutal discovery of the white man. Long envelopped in the myth of invincibility, the white man revealed himself in all his veracity: human like all others (les milliers de Noires l’occasion d’une découverte brutale de l’homme blanc. Longtemps enveloppé de mythe de l’invincibilité, le Blanc s’était révélé dans toute sa véracité : humain comme tous les autres).” Africans returning from war came back with a “more acute sense of human dignity (sens plus aigu de la dignité humaine),”¹¹⁸ and the heavy involvement of Africans in the war effort in Europe as soldiers and at home demanded an examination of colonialism.

The Atlantic Charter, written by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill and signed by 26 nations in 1942, “opened the debate on colonialism in affirming ‘the right of peoples’ to choose their form of government. This opposition of international opinion to the colonial system forced France to accept the necessity of a new examination of its relations with its empire (ouvrait la brèche dans le colonialisme en affirmant ‘le droit des peuples’ à choisir leur forme de gouvernement. Cette opposition de l’opinion internationale au system coloniale poserait-elle à la France la nécessité d’un nouvel examen de ses rapports avec son empire).”¹¹⁹ The foundation of the United Nations and American and Soviet calls for decolonization underlined the new global focus on human rights¹²⁰ and the global wariness towards any political system that suggested fascism.

The Brazzaville Conference of February 1944 also complicated France’s position towards its colonies. Brazzaville, which gathered the higher-up colonial administrators to

¹¹⁸ Sene, 34.

¹¹⁹ Guèye *La Grève de 1946*, 23.

¹²⁰ Sene, 34.

discuss the future of the French Empire, noticeably lacked the presence of any Africans or other colonial subjects. At Brazzaville, colonial officials did give Africans a minority representation in the government,¹²¹ in the form of a weak territorial assembly, as well as the end of the *indigénat* code, which had separated citizens and subjects into two separate legal systems; a five-year timetable to end forced labor; the eight-hour workday; and the creation of the *Inspection du Travail* to regulate colonial labor practices and unions.¹²²

The Brazzaville communiqué, however, illustrated the flip side of France's nascent assimilationism: the authors expressed doubts over the ability of African workers to enter the wage system, as they "did not respect work contracts (*ne respecte pas les contrats du travail*)" and were subject to "laziness and inertia (*la paresse et l'inertie*)." The communiqué went on to say: "[...] Whether he is a citizen or a subject, the indigène only needs to furnish proof of his competence, of his training, and of his qualifications. For equal competence, equal pay (*qu'il soit citoyen ou sujet, l'indigène n'a à fournir que les preuves de son compétence, de sa formation, et de ses titres. A compétence égale, rémunération égale...*)." It was made clear, however, that management positions would rest in the hands of the French.¹²³ In the end, the recommendations of Brazzaville made it clear that despite a high rhetoric supporting extension of equality, the reality was far from achieving such a goal, and the intent of the French government was not to allow the colonies to govern themselves, whether as a wing of France or as independent nations. The status of the colonized as a worker remained in question, since colonials were still unable to decide if they saw Africans as peasants or workers. This double standard, of promising reform and equality and instead reinforcing a theory of racially based inferiority was a way to pretend that the ideals of the French government were being upheld while still maintaining control. The colonial system, in fact, could not hold without a systematic imposition of imbalanced race relations.

In late 1945, citizenship was extended to all French subjects in colonies, which also became officially a part of France,¹²⁴ designated as *territoires outre-mer* or overseas territories, and the subsequent elections in all of French Africa led to a victory for "le Bloc africain." Lamine Guèye and Léopold Senghor were elected deputies.¹²⁵ In AOF, a movement towards nationalist anticolonialism began after the war, resulting in the creation of such parties as the Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA) in October 1946, which

¹²¹ Cooper *Décolonisation et Travail*, 159.

¹²² Sene, 35.

¹²³ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 161-162.

¹²⁴ Cooper, "Our Strike," 84.

¹²⁵ Guèye *La Grève de 1946*, 21.

“would serve to support the development of unionism in francophone Africa (va servir de support au développement du syndicalisme en Afrique francophone),”¹²⁶ and “the democratic movement affirming the African personality (le mouvement démocratique affirmant la personnalité africaine).”¹²⁷ Freedom of the press was extended to French overseas territories in the fall of 1946 and the freedom of assembly and of association in the spring of 1946. The Loi Houphouët-Boigny of the spring of 1946, named after the Ivorian RDA politician who authored and became celebrated for the law, ended forced labor.¹²⁸ Despite these changes, the politicians, according to De Benoist, remained removed from their constituents: “While African parliamentary action exercised itself in the metropolitan assemblies, the *unions* were more in contact with the population and above all with the most dynamic classes (Alors que l’action des parlementaire africains s’exerçait dans des assemblées métropolitaines, les *syndicats* étaient davantage au contact avec les populations et surtout avec les classes les plus dynamiques...).”¹²⁹ Mor Sene, on the other hand, argues that the political empowerment of Africans and the legalization of unions in September of 1944 allowed unions *and* political parties to move out “of the limited circle of the intelligentsia to find support from the masses that was indispensable to their demands (du cadre restreint de l’intelligentsia, pour trouver un support de masse indispensable à leurs revendications).”¹³⁰ The reforms made by the French government were meant as token rights for colonized “citizens,” some token rights, but these few freedoms served, ultimately, to allow them to demand full rights and to create the frames that would bring independence.

The National Constitutional Assembly, which formed in 1946 to make the constitution for the Fourth Republic of France, asserted that the French Union was “a union founded on the equality of rights and of duties (une union fondée sur l’égalité des droits et des devoirs).”¹³¹ Thus began French assimilationism in earnest. This rhetoric added another layer of complication and hypocrisy to the French colonial system, which was obviously at odds with the high egalitarian language espoused by the Métropole and the colonial administration. Once the colonial administration realized the implications of political assimilation, such as full citizenship and equal representation, which would have meant, as historian Joseph-Roger De Benoist pointed out, “three hundred or four hundred African

¹²⁶ Fall, 53.

¹²⁷ Sene, 37-38.

¹²⁸ Sene, 37.

¹²⁹ Joseph-Roger De Benoist, *L’Afrique Occidentale Française de la Conférence de Brazzaville (1994) à l’Indépendance (1961)* (Dakar : Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1982), 181.

¹³⁰ Sene, 38-39.

¹³¹ Sene, 37.

deputies and, why not, a Black elected President of the Republic (trois cents ou quatre cents députés africains et, pourquoi pas, un Noir élu à la Présidence de la République),” they began to “back away (réculait).” At the mention of economic and social equality, which African unionists and politicians exploited to claim equal rights, the Métropole also reneged, insisting that African economies were not ready to support themselves. The 1946 Fourth Republic constitutional assembly did not formulate “a clear choice (un choix clair)” regarding assimilation, choosing instead to seek a space between colonialism and assimilation.¹³² In reality, all that changed with the introduction of assimilationism was that the term “empire” was replaced with “union,” and the Minister of Colonies became the Minister of Overseas France.

The assimilationist language, however, allowed what Mor Sene terms the “front du refus” (“the refusal front”) at a very early date to demand decolonization or the creation of a consented union with France based on equal rights. The *front du refus* was supported by the Parti Communiste français (PCF) and became the RDA.¹³³ According to De Benoist, decolonization was “provoked (provoquée)” because the Métropole would not take on the financial implications of assimilation, which also exposed its unwillingness to extend full democracy to its African “citizens.”¹³⁴ Henri Brunschwig, quoted in De Benoist, writes: “And one could say that ‘the opposition to the colonizer was enacted more in the name of [the colonizer’s] principles than in the name of specifically African traditions. The new generation of the founders of the new Africa took up the school of the West to oppose the West’ (Et l’on a pu dire que ‘l’opposition au colonisateur se fit plus au nom des principes de celui-ci qu’au nom des traditions spécifiquement africains...la génération des fondateurs de l’Afrique nouvelle se mit à l’école de l’Occident pour s’opposer à l’Occident’)”¹³⁵ Those who struggled against colonialism used the language of colonialism to topple it. Although the use of French rhetoric for African rights and liberty did seem to give in to the ideals that were oppressing the colonies, such a strategy was merely a tool in the hands of militants, who, whether or not they were consciously fighting for independence, were all the same going against the system, using its language to break it down.

The creation of Fonds d’investissement pour le développement économique et social (FIDES) by French legislation put money into AOF economies and infrastructure, such as the Dakar-Niger, which was upgraded and lengthened. This FIDES construction employed

¹³² De Benoist, 38-39.

¹³³ Sene, 37-38.

¹³⁴ De Benoist, 38.

¹³⁵ De Benoist, 181.

another 3,000 workers for new services in Thiès. This increase in activity allowed for a great union recruitment that still, however, remained divided by race. Europeans were “set up in a very privileged situation...[and] proved themselves to be racist by taking a position in favor of the management and of the government (disposant d’une situation très privilégiée...[et] se montraient racistes [en prenant] position en faveur du patronat et du gouvernement).”¹³⁶ As before the war, unions were divided along racial lines and the system favored white workers. “Development” was actually the updated term for the *mission civilisatrice*, and the colonial government had no intention of bettering the situation of colonized workers, unless an amelioration would also benefit their economic interests.

The end of the war and the years after also marked a new demographic shift in who was involved in politics. After the war, education in the colonies improved and expanded, allowing youth to move to the forefront of the nationalist movement, though this occurred predominantly after 1950.¹³⁷ For Omar Guèye, “The war marks the political awakening of the young generations who wanted to have a little right of inspection in their country (La guerre marque le réveil politique des jeunes générations qui désiraient avoir un petit droit de regard dans l’administration de leur pays).”¹³⁸ Assimilationist rhetoric would be the way to demand the rights and equality denied to them, even if the new militants were only using that rhetoric to point out the hypocrisy of colonialism. The older, elite establishment, made up of Quatre Communes évolués, such as politician Lamine Guèye and union leader François Gning, “accepted this assimilation as the departure point of an evolution towards total equality of rights with the metropolitan citizens (acceptaient cette assimilation comme point de départ d’une évolution vers une totale égalité des droits avec les citoyens métropolitains).”¹³⁹ Like the new youth militants, such as the UJT, elite Africans embraced assimilationist rhetoric. The difference would manifest itself through the different ways in which the two groups treated assimilationism. For the elites, a slow “evolution” to “prepare” Africans for the rights of French citizens was not only acceptable, it was preferable: they often bought into the colonial racialized system as much as the *colons* themselves. For Lamine Guèye, “Thus, this man, this Senegalese, exults at the idea of ‘Senegal, integral part of France.’ He was prepared to live and to die for this idea (Ainsi cet homme, ce Sénégalais, s’exaltait à l’idée d’un ‘Sénégal, partie intégrante de la France.’ Il était préparé à vivre et à

¹³⁶ Fall, 53.

¹³⁷ De Benoist, 180.

¹³⁸ Guèye *La Grève de 1946*, 19

¹³⁹ De Benoist, 39.

mourir pour cette idée).”¹⁴⁰ The new generation of African unionists and militants used the colonial rhetoric just as freely, but their intention was to illustrate how far the expressed colonial and French ideology were from reality: the “whited sepulcher” of colonialism had to be exposed to the metropolitan public and to the world so as to gain rights, freedoms, and even possibly independence.

The *Cheminot* Strike of 1947-1948

The railway strike of 1947-1948 was a new breed of strike in AOF, one that extended across colonial borders, if not across professional ones. The strike was unique and notable for its great duration. “Cinq mois et dix jours,” (five months and ten days) was the constant refrain of every informant interviewed by the author, ex-striker or no. The level of mobilization and unity required in the union and in the community also set the rail strike apart, even if the demands of the strikers were not met as fully as hoped. The political influences and elements that attempted to and did effect the strike and the strikers created new connections that tied the *cheminots* inextricably to the emerging struggle against colonialism in AOF and to the political parties that would run Senegal in the lead-up to and after independence. This connection, however, has remained questionable throughout the body of historical work on the strike and was strongly rejected by the informants of this project. Research, however, points to an undeniable link between the *cheminot* union and political parties. Despite this conflict over the historical record, the strike was a “direct threat to the colonial system”¹⁴¹ economically, socially, politically, and ideologically, and indubitably shaped the path Senegal would take to independence.

The Lead-Up to the Strike

In January of 1946, dockers, commercial and industrial laborers, and government functionaries went on strike for 11 days, an event later referred to as the Senegalese General Strike of 1946. There were more agitations and strikes all over Senegal for two months after the walkout. The strikers made “substantial gains” in the work place after demanding a shift in labor status from temporary to permanent, job security, and a system of advancement.¹⁴² The most glaring absence was that of the *Syndicat des Travailleurs Indigènes du Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger* (STIDN). François Gning, still union Secretary General, refused 1946 strike participation for his union, an act that was unforgotten and unforgiven by both the *cheminots*

¹⁴⁰ De Benoist, 40.

¹⁴¹ Jones, 56.

¹⁴² Frederick Cooper, “The Senegalese General Strike of 1946 and the Labor Question in Post-War French Africa,” in *The Canadian Journal of African Studies*, no. XXIV (1990), 166.

in the UJT and by the striking unions. According to James Jones, “[Frederick] Cooper attributed this to Gning's socialist ties, which made him reluctant to embarrass the local administration, plus the fact that railroad workers had already won a number of concessions on their own. As a result, railroad workers received none of the concessions awarded to other workers after the general strike.”¹⁴³ In other words, since the *cheminots* were still reaping in the benefits from earlier concessions, Gning saw no reason to challenge the colonial administrators who had supported the labor leader for almost two decades. According to Mor Sene, Gning kept the *cheminots* out of the 1946 general strike by cutting a deal with the Régie that upped salaries, especially for elites.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, the demands from the General Strike were very similar to those that the *cheminots* would submit a few months later. After the 1946 strike, Gning started a strike fund partly as a “delay tactic,” so that, as he explained, “the example furnished by the groups that recently went on strike will allow railwaymen to reflect on the gravity of an act which constitutes a two-edged sword.”¹⁴⁵ This non-participation in the General Strike would anger many *cheminots* and further damage Gning's position in the union. The days of back channel contacts and collaborations with the government were coming to a close.

In this atmosphere, the UJT moved to take over the union. The conflict with Gning grew as auxiliary delegates demanded support from the union for salary readjustments and *cadre* agents denounced the arbitrary *cadre* classification, in which agents of similar status were put into different levels.¹⁴⁶ On May 23, 1946, the UJT staged a “revolution” in the STIDN at a 1,000 person meeting in Thiès, attacking Gning's non-combativeness, his non-cooperation in the 1946 strike, and his alienation of non-elites. Gning resigned and Ibrahima Sarr was named Secretary General.¹⁴⁷ As opposed to Gning, who was a Quatre Communes évolué committed to privilege and hierarchy, unwilling to attack the top. The UJT was mostly made up of young Muslims.¹⁴⁸ This takeover was a mobilizing action in STIDN, one that opened a new era for the union. Overt inaction and passivity were no longer acceptable in a union leader, and as Lamine Guèye would discover after the strike, they were no longer acceptable in a political leader either.

On July 17, 1946, the Régie des Chemins de Fer was designated to take over the AOF railroad system under Director Cunéo, replacing the Direction des Travaux Publics. It was

¹⁴³ Jones, 54.

¹⁴⁴ Sene, 40.

¹⁴⁵ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 84-85.

¹⁴⁶ Sene, 46.

¹⁴⁷ Cooper “*Our Strike*,” 86.

¹⁴⁸ Cooper “*Our Strike*,” 86.

“an organism with an industrial and commercial character endowed with a civilian personality and financial autonomy (un organisme caractère civile et commerciale doté de la personnalité civile et de l’autonomie financière).” The Régie changes occurred because the railroad was no longer economically viable for the government to run. Essentially, the government wanted to “get rid of the burden (débarrasser du fardeau)” that was the railroad.¹⁴⁹ In 1946, there were 478 Europeans, 1,729 Africans, and 15,726 auxiliaries on the line.¹⁵⁰ The Régie takeover was an attempt to make the railroad semi-public and semi-corporate, a move that meant railroad workers were no longer government employees and their wages and any future wage increases would have to depend on the success of the revenue of the railroad, not government budgeting. According to Jones, “For the activists of the Jeunes de Thiès [who took over STIDN], this [the Régie change] was the last straw.”¹⁵¹ The colonial administration played a significant role in the Régie, and the makeup of the Régie’s administrative board, which was full of colonial officials, illustrated the “desire of the metropolitan authorities to control the railroad (volonté des autorités métropolitaines de contrôler les chemins de fer),”¹⁵² despite the administration’s desire to separate itself from the financial nightmare of the railroad. As before, the colonial administration took steps to save itself money, to force colonial projects to pay for themselves while attempting to preserve control over those projects.

After the UJT takeover, the union’s tone shifted dramatically. At his takeover as secretary-general, Sarr reorganized the union into subdivisions, five in Thiès and seven along the rest of the line.¹⁵³ As Sarr traveled the line in 1946, African *cheminot* unions in AOF decided to band together, forming the Fédération des Syndicats des Cheminots Africains (FSCA), with central direction ceded to the Comité Directeur, or the leaders of the Dakar-Niger union branch at Thiès, under Sarr.¹⁵⁴ In July of 1946, Sarr protested: “The Régie refuses to give us everything it has given the other [European] union Direction: printing, circulation, union cards. It is now necessary for us to count on our own strength (La Régie nous refuse tout ce qu’elle avait accordé à l’autre Direction: impression, circulation, cartes syndicales. Il nous faut donc compter sur nos propres forces).” Sarr asked for an annual membership fee and donations for a strike fund, “because the demands that we will submit in August must find the union ready (Car les revendications que nous déposerons en Août doivent trouver le syndicat

¹⁴⁹ Suret-Canale 87-88.

¹⁵⁰ Cooper “*Our Strike*,” 88-89.

¹⁵¹ Jones, 54-55.

¹⁵² Sene, 16.

¹⁵³ Sene, 46-7.

¹⁵⁴ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 88.

prêt).”¹⁵⁵ In August of 1946, the union submitted its demands, at the center of which was the *cadre unique*¹⁵⁶ and the integration of auxiliaries into the *cadre* system. The union also called for a three-day AOF-wide strike. This action initially seemed successful.¹⁵⁷

For the auxiliaries and many other *cheminots*, the demands “translated their desire to end the injustice that they could feel in their bones (traduisait leur volonté de mettre un terme à une injustice qu’ils avaient sentie dans leur chair).”¹⁵⁸ The demands were a way to express the frustration the *cheminots* felt at being promised equality and never getting it. For the Régie, the demands came at a moment when “it otherwise envisaged staff reductions spread out over three years (a elle envisagerait d’ailleurs une compression des effectifs étalée sur trois ans).”¹⁵⁹ As usual, the railroad was in a financial bind, and as on previous occasions, the easiest way to get of the financial problem was with uncompensated layoffs and poor wages. For the European *cheminots*, the demands meant the end of their privileges, since they believed that once there was a *cadre unique*, privileges would universally decrease instead of increase, in an effort to save money.¹⁶⁰ This set them apart and against the African *cheminots* even more firmly than before. For the colonial administration, the end of inequality in a work setting “seemed to put in question the system of colonial domination one of the pillars of which was discrimination (semblaient remettre en question le système de domination coloniale dont un des piliers était la discrimination).”¹⁶¹ This questioning of the colonial system came through the rhetoric of the French Republic, which, ironically, negated the entire operation of its empire in the language of its constitution. According to Jean Suret-Canale, the Régie exploited the sentiment among European *cheminots* to keep the workers divided by “la barrière de couleur” (the color barrier). Though there were some sympathizers in the European rail union, they could not stop the split between European and African *cheminots* from occurring.¹⁶² The Régie did not refuse the demand for the *cadre unique*, but it did stipulate that such a change would only come with layoffs,¹⁶³ which would be decided with the collaboration of the union. The Haut Commissaire put together a commission to study the union demands, called the Commission Villedieuil.¹⁶⁴ The Commission Villedieuil talks,

¹⁵⁵ Sene, 49.

¹⁵⁶ Sene, 6.

¹⁵⁷ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 90.

¹⁵⁸ Sene, 49.

¹⁵⁹ Sene, 50.

¹⁶⁰ Sene, 50.

¹⁶¹ Sene, 51.

¹⁶² Suret-Canale, 91-92.

¹⁶³ Suret-Canale 89.

¹⁶⁴ Sene, 51.

which were held in twenty rounds between December and August, were constantly at an impasse.¹⁶⁵

In October of 1946, representatives of the four railroads (FSCA) voted for disassociation from the Confédération Générale du Travail, the French union conglomerate, because, “as Sarr explained, the organization of the railroad placed all European employees in the position of management with respect to Africans, so a single union could not possibly represent both groups' interests.” Sarr and his comrades also rejected official political party affiliation.¹⁶⁶ This autonomy would not last past the strike, but the union did display a new combativeness in rejecting support from a European organization: these actions further proved that despite the French assimilationist rhetoric that the union would exploit, they did not necessarily want that assimilation. The union was ready to be an organization independent of the crutch and the limitation of a French union federation.

In response to the Commission Villedeuil resistance, new union demands were submitted March 21, 1947. The union's demands included: “severance packages equal to one month of pay for each year of service, the retention of all auxiliaries with more than three years of service, and prompt notice of the number of auxiliaries that were to be fired by the Régie (prime de licenciement égale à un mois de solde par année de service ; le maintien dans leurs fonctions tous auxiliaires comptant plus de 3 ans d'ancienneté, au réseau ; d'être informé le plus tot possible, du nombre des auxiliaires à licencier par la Régie).”¹⁶⁷ In April, the frustrated union withdrew from the Commission Villedeuil and called for a strike on April 19, when President Vincent Auriol was scheduled to visit the colonies. To prepare for the April strike and further action, the union took control of the Thiès food cooperative, the union treasury accounted for 735,925 francs and asked for more donations from *cheminots*, and the union leadership traveled the line to explain the union's position so that workers would strike in large numbers on the strike date.¹⁶⁸ This first strike was quickly but thoroughly planned, as the union counted money, prepared food supplies, and mobilized the line. Meticulous planning would be one of the strengths of the longer strike that would follow in the fall.

The April 1947 strike ended quickly, as its visibility was embarrassing to the colonial administration during the presidential visit—it ended on the strike date, April 19, after a meeting between President Auriol and Régie and colonial administrations. The Régie agreed to the union demands, including auxiliary integration and the *cadre unique*. At this time,

¹⁶⁵ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 91.

¹⁶⁶ Jones, 55.

¹⁶⁷ Sene, 52.

¹⁶⁸ Sene, 52-53.

however, the French economy was not doing well, so officials tried to keep prices and wages down (since wage increases affected price levels). In August 1947, the Régie announced that it was “in the red” and would not be able to commence auxiliary integration.¹⁶⁹ In September, the union met in Thiès to fix a strike date, October 10.¹⁷⁰ Sarr convinced the union, which had agitated for an earlier strike date, to delay a month to rally more along the Dakar-Niger and around AOF, to organize the cooperative to stockpile food, and to create a strike committee for each union sub-division for daily meetings to “maintain discipline” during the strike.¹⁷¹ The new union leadership thorough preparation for the strike provided the movement with more power, allowing the strikers to maintain longer without a steady income. Sarr then toured around AOF, to Côte d'Ivoire, Dahomey, and Guinée, to get the rail lines in the AOF behind the Dakar-Niger. Gaston Fiankan, the Ivorian union leader, promised the Abidjan-Niger Line's participation in the strike.¹⁷² On October 8th, Sarr called for calm during the strike, aware of the administration's ability to use any and all tactics to break the strike, especially if strikers became violent.¹⁷³ The *Gouverneur-Général* met with union leaders on the eve of the strike in an attempt to intimidate them, while the *Inspection du Travail* tried to offer conciliation, but the walk-out occurred all the same on midnight of October 10th, when 17,000 cheminots and 2,000 dockers stopped work. On November 1st, only 38 Africans were on the job.¹⁷⁴

Community, Family, and Other Support Systems

Historians are unanimous in recognizing that the incredible length of the strike rested on two important factors: the meticulous planning and strong leadership that went into the initial stages of the strike and the West African community that supported the strikers throughout the five months and ten days. Frederick Cooper wrote that there was “No question that the leadership played a big part” in the unity and length of the strike, which was discussed and planned in far in advance. Daily strike meetings in Thiès aired out all doubts and concerns and were a way to ensure that “peer pressure was maintained.” At signs of uncertainty, Sarr traveled the line to boost morale through a “direct approach.” Sarr “cemented a personal identification of the cause with himself and with the strike committee.”¹⁷⁵ This personal

¹⁶⁹ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 91.

¹⁷⁰ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 92.

¹⁷¹ Jones, 59.

¹⁷² Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 92.

¹⁷³ Suret-Canale, 97-98.

¹⁷⁴ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 93.

¹⁷⁵ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 107.

identification not only kept the strike going, it further solidified Sarr as the center of the strike, and he was later associated as the symbol of the strike and the *cheminots*.

The second factor, that of community support, proved vital to the strike's duration. Jean Suret-Canale attributed the survival of the strike to family ties, which he described as "la tradition de la solidarité africaine."¹⁷⁶ For Frederick Cooper, family ties, urban connections, and the timing of the strike after the harvest were all important, and women played a central role in maintaining discipline. One striking *cheminot* said: "We are now like marabouts: we are not working, but we have our food all the same (Nous sommes maintenant comme des marabouts: nous ne travaillons pas, mais nous avons cependant notre revitaillement)."¹⁷⁷ As for women, Mor Sene wrote: "The *cheminots* are unanimous in saying that they were magnificent...at the sides of their husbands (Les cheminots sont unanimes pour dire qu'elles étaient magnifiques...aux cotés de leurs maris)." Women sold their jewelry and clothes to feed their families and were integral in criticism of strikebreakers and possibly even hardening the resolve of those who were thinking of caving in. They made songs praising Sarr and criticizing those who broke the strike. They even invented new braids that were named after Sarr.¹⁷⁸ In 1938, women handed rocks to the men to throw at colonial troops, but in 1947, the strike was "non-violent [and] carefully controlled." The women contributed food, sold goods at the market, and engaged in non-wage activities to support their families.¹⁷⁹ Although Ousmane Sembene's *God Bits of Wood* accurately depicts the central role of women in the strike effort, his narrative goes too far, according to the historical record, since he recounts a women's march from Thiès to Dakar as well as intense skirmishes between women and colonial police and soldiers, which, according to Frederick Cooper, do not hold up to oral accounts by ex-strikers and police reports.¹⁸⁰ In interviews with informants, however, the oral history runs up against a contradiction. El Hadj Yoro Faye, a high-*cadre* agent who participated in the strike and Maïssa Sow, an ex-*cheminot* mentioned that women threw rocks at the police and military men who had come to evict them from their Régie housing. They called this "une révolte contre l'armée," where women also gathered to march in protest against their evictions and fought against the authorities with the pestles they used to pound millet.¹⁸¹ Another informant, Abdoulaye Cissé, the union archivist and self-proclaimed "expert" on the truth about the strike, asserted forcefully that was no violence of

¹⁷⁶ Suret-Canale, 118.

¹⁷⁷ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 232.

¹⁷⁸ Sene, 90-91.

¹⁷⁹ Cooper, "Our Strike," 94.

¹⁸⁰ Cooper, "Our Strike," 95-96.

¹⁸¹ El Hadj Yoro Faye and Maïssa Sow, interview by the author, notes, Thiès, Senegal, 1 May 2007.

any kind during the strike, and that the strikers and their families remained in their homes all day until union morale meetings every day at five o'clock.¹⁸² Historians, on a whole, are adamant about the peaceful nature of the strike and that the strikers renounced “classique” strike techniques, such as picketing, marches, and sit-ins, relying solely on mobilization.¹⁸³ Historical truth is a difficult thing, and it is possible that the truth lies somewhere in the middle of historians’, Sembene’s, and ex-strikers’ accounts: none of these forms of information can be deemed free of bias or of revision.

The “complex web of affiliation” that offered food, money, and support was of a makeup that meant that each contributor could give a little here and there,¹⁸⁴ and the community included more than just families: merchants, other unions, newspapers, and even some French played a role in sustaining the movement. In Bamako, a merchant’s union and political parties donated money. In Tambacounda, local elites donated money and a merchant donated sheep. Senegalese merchants “appear to have played a particularly important role” by giving money, transportation, and food. Some Lebanese and Syrians helped by employing strikers.¹⁸⁵ Rural ties were also very important, since families in villages could supply food. The union even encouraged strikers with rural relatives to return to their villages in order to reduce the burden in the towns.¹⁸⁶ Railway communities at Thiès and Kayes were the backbone of the movement, and the concentration of *cheminots* and their families, which first created the solidarities and connections that led to a new militancy, now helped sustain the strikers.

The union’s preparative measures were not in vain either. The indigène cooperative in Thiès, which was originally created by the railroad administration, offered bulk goods for the *cheminots*, and the strike’s timing at the end of the harvest meant full granaries. The cooperative, which supplied food on credit to the strikers, was 1,560,000 Francs in debt at the end of the strike.¹⁸⁷ According to El Hadj Yoro Faye and Maïssa Sow, the *cheminots*, in preparation for the strike, all contributed by giving half of their daily rations to the cooperative. Furthermore, during the strike “no one touched any money (*personne n’a touché un franc*),”¹⁸⁸ which meant that the strike funds, cooperative, and community support contributed to the *cheminots* were even more vital. Strike funds were also given out to

¹⁸² Cissé, interview.

¹⁸³ Sow, 90.

¹⁸⁴ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 94.

¹⁸⁵ Jones, 61.

¹⁸⁶ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 94.

¹⁸⁷ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 96.

¹⁸⁸ Yoro and Faye, interview.

cheminots with families. Single men were not given money since it was thought that they "could improvise more easily."¹⁸⁹ The length of the strike was more than even the long preparations of the union could handle, however. The cooperative in Thiès was completely empty and out of funds in three months. A few men went back to work in Senegal, just under thirty, in late December. Sene attributes this to the fact that they were of Soudanese origin and did not have families to support them.¹⁹⁰

Newspapers also helped the strike movement. The newspaper *L'AOF* became "la voix du prolétariat noir," according to Mor Sene, expressing solidarity and announcing meetings and tam-tams benefiting the strike effort.¹⁹¹ For Suret-Canale, however, *L'AOF*, which was affiliated with SFIO was anti-communist "bordering on hysteria (allant...à l'hysterie)," but also included articles from militants associated with the strike who defended the *cheminot* cause while remaining against the socialism of RDA. An article by Obèye Dioup in *L'AOF* in December called for the *cheminots* to return to work, so as to "preserver l'économie du pays qui est le leur...Ce ne sera pas du défaitisme. Mais l'acceptation libre d'un sacrifice, au profit de la collectivité africaine." In March of 1948, however, AK Sow wrote in *L'AOF* that it was time to stop the anti-communist and anti-imperialist rhetoric because "Nous desservons notre proper cause en nous écartant du véritable problème qui se resume dans cette formule si humaine: égalité sociale, politique, et économique."¹⁹² The RDA-associated newspaper *Le Réveil*, wrote often in support of the strikers and even sold three issues at a higher price to donate the extra revenue to the strikers.¹⁹³ The notable aspect of the media's role in the strike was the obvious political maneuvering going on behind the stories. Each party or each political movement had something to say about the strike, even in silence.

Since November 1947, members of other unions tried to get their organizations to join the strike. Advocates for joining the strike expressed fears that if the *cheminots* failed or were repressed by the administration, it could mean the end of all union activity in AOF or even Africa.¹⁹⁴ These attempts to rally other unions all failed. The reasons, according to Cooper, could have come from three factors: it was retaliation for the *cheminot's* non-involvement in 1946, the *cheminot* union was autonomous while most others were with the CGT, or the other unions were still in negotiations from the 1946 strike and did not want to jeopardize their

¹⁸⁹ Cooper, "Our Strike," 94.

¹⁹⁰ Sene, 82.

¹⁹¹ Sene, 83.

¹⁹² Suret-Canale, 111-114.

¹⁹³ Jones, 61.

¹⁹⁴ Sene, 85-86.

settlement.¹⁹⁵ The strikers did receive monetary support from unions and other organizations. The CGT gave 500,000 francs, *L'AOF*'s donation almost matched the CGT's, and more than a million francs came from other sources.¹⁹⁶ The Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer de France, des Colonies et des Pays de Protectorat sent a letter of support to the FSCA that said they had been trying to communicate with the Minister of Overseas Territories on their behalf.¹⁹⁷ To give an idea of the scale of the strike, CGT's large donation ran out in a week.¹⁹⁸ French and African sources contributed to the strike movement, and even though CGT was rebuffed by the FSCA before the strike, it still gave money. The strike took on a significance outside of AOF that brought solidarity from varied groups.

Colonial Action and Inaction

The strike came at a very bad time for the colonial export economy. It occurred right at the end of the harvest, when "Senegalese peanuts, Soudanese cotton, Guinean bananas, and Ivorian cocoa and coffee travelled [sic] on a combination of [...transportation to...] the coast. While a railroad strike could not completely shut down the export economy...it increased costs and delays...For products that deteriorated slowly in storage--that delay was a concern." The wharf and port strikes in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and Dahomey increased the problem by curtailing the export from the coast as well.¹⁹⁹ The timing of the strike was not deliberate, according to Suret-Canale, who wrote that this "coincidence," however, explained the "tension in the administration and colonial interests (raidissement de l'administration et des intérêts coloniaux)."²⁰⁰ The strike's timing could not have been better, and despite Suret-Canale's assertion that the timing was unintentional, given the amount of preparation put into the strike, Sarr's delay of one month, and the length of time it took to reach the decision to strike (over a year), this could very well have been a consideration, one meant to cripple the AOF economy and push the colonial administration into quick action.

According to French colonial law, the strike was technically illegal. The only legally-recognized strikes had to go through conciliatory meetings, an arbitration committee to hear the grievances from both sides and make a ruling on the labor dispute, then a sub-arbitrary committee—if no conciliation could be reached after these steps, the strike was legal.²⁰¹ The

¹⁹⁵ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 233.

¹⁹⁶ Jones, 60-61.

¹⁹⁷ Sene, 86.

¹⁹⁸ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 232.

¹⁹⁹ Jones, 57.

²⁰⁰ Suret-Canale, 118.

²⁰¹ Sene, 61.

administration took 32 days to respond to the demands, and Sarr used this delay as justification for a legal strike.²⁰² On October 9, the administration tried to set up an arbitration committee. Sarr and other union leaders met with the Régie leadership, Director Cunéo and Secretary-General Blanchot. There was no accord, however, which the union took as a legal end to the conciliation proceedings. In a letter, Sarr wrote “Time for us is too precious. We still have thousands of comrades with miserable salaries. Since August 1946, the expected improvements have remained unresolved (Le temps pour nous est trop précieux. Nous avons encore des milliers de camarades avec des salaires de misère. Depuis Août 1946, les améliorations attendues demeurent en suspens).”²⁰³ The sub-arbitration committee formed after the strike. The October 20th official ruling had only one difference from the original conciliation ruling with the first arbitration committee: auxiliary integration would retroactively begin from July 15, instead of the 1st of October. All of the strikers’ demands were rejected. Subsequent appeals led to more rulings in favor of the Régie.²⁰⁴ Since the arbitration committee was a colonial product, these rulings were not too surprising. According to James Jones, “administration officials were confident that an illegal strike would collapse within a few days.”²⁰⁵

Colonial action to upset the strike was slow to come and less repressive than earlier actions against strikes. There was not too much action to stop the strike before it began, but as strike date neared, the administration took some measures. In Bamako, the mayor made it illegal to post public notices, and the railroad administration rescheduled the Bamako-Dakar express so that it would run one more time between the cities until the moratorium four days later. During the strike, extra police were deployed. At the end of the second week, fuel rationing and requirements for all visitors to have identity cards on Soudanese public property were put into place. On October 26, Bamako and Kati were put under martial law. Special police patrolled the train stations and military checkpoints blocked all roads into the area.²⁰⁶ Besides that, the government and the Régie waited for the sub-arbitrational committee ruling, which the administration believed would stop the strike: Cooper called this attitude “self-deception,”²⁰⁷ which led to inaction on the part of the *colons*. The administration greatly underestimated the preparation, unity, and resolve that supported the strike movement.

²⁰² Sene, 66.

²⁰³ Sene, 67-68.

²⁰⁴ Sene, 72.

²⁰⁵ Jones, 56.

²⁰⁶ Jones, 59.

²⁰⁷ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 103.

Confident in their superiority, they could not imagine that the strike could last as long as it did.

When the union did not resume work on October 31, the date designated after the sub-arbitrational decision, pressure increased. The administration announced the hiring of strike breakers and charged Sarr and Fiankan with starting an illegal strike. "For a few days, it appeared that the strike might collapse, but when Sarr attended a meeting at Kayes on 10 November, the police reported that his presence restored the confidence of the striking workers."²⁰⁸ The Régie's confidence in a quick strike collapse was foundering. In mid-November, Sarr was taken to court and sentenced to 20 days and a 1,200-franc fine. In April after the strike, an appeals court dropped his sentence to a 100F fine, but he never served. Fiankan was sentenced to three months, but also he was not jailed. Appeals overturned the ruling. After the strike, the administration again pressed charges, but his sentence of six months, which was dropped to two months and fine, ended in a pardon.²⁰⁹ Sarr and Fiankan's convictions and evasions of jail time illustrated the administration's fear of creating a broader and perhaps more violent confrontation, as Mor Sene put it: "The administration avoided throwing oil on the fire (L'administration évitait de verser de l'huile dans le feu)."²¹⁰ It was clear that, from the administration's inaction, this strike had something different about it. Instead of giving in immediately or using repressive techniques, both past tactics for ending strikes, the colonial government and the Régie instead avoided a costly settlement and angering the populace, which was clearly enmeshed in the strike movement by doing very little at all.

The administration tried to get *cheminots* back on the job by putting up flyers that threatened consequences for the broken contracts resulting from the illegality of the strike and promised satisfaction for those who returned to work.²¹¹ When this did not work, they funded the rival Syndicat Libre des Cheminots Africains du Dakar-Niger, headed by Gning, and provided it with a "fully stocked food cooperative."²¹² The leaders of the Syndicat Libre and other unions that broke the strike worked with elected officials and politicians who were "hostile" to the strike, including politicians from the anti-RDA Parti Progressiste and the SFIO.²¹³ The Régie then tried to use "scabs" or *défaillants*. These strikebreakers were either one-time applicants rejected for incompetence or lack of qualifications or *cheminots* fired for

²⁰⁸ Jones, 60.

²⁰⁹ Cooper "Our Strike," 105.

²¹⁰ Sene, 62.

²¹¹ Sene, 75.

²¹² Jones, 63.

²¹³ Suret-Canale, 106.

errors on the job. At the end of January 1948, French *cheminots* were imported at doubled salaries.²¹⁴ The 300 French railway workers sent to Dakar as skilled labor, experienced pressured from the CGT and anticolonial press to show solidarity. Some asked to go home, others said that the equipment was faulty in an attempt to get out of working.²¹⁵ Other metropolitan *cheminots* refused to come to AOF at all if it meant breaking the strike.²¹⁶ In 1948, the administration started operating diesel trains, which ex-strikers later interpreted as an attempt to end the strike, since diesel requires fewer workers and the temperatures were bearable for Europeans.²¹⁷ This shift to diesel would later prove to be one of the downfalls of *cheminots* as a powerhouse union in the politics and happenings of Senegal.

The administration also turned to community leaders, such as marabouts, *assimilés*, and *notables* to weaken the resolve of the striking communities. The Grand Marabout of Tivouane, the leader of the Senegalese Tijanyya movement was one of those collaborators, as was Racine Mademba, from the Council of the French Union. Strike participants testified, however, and police reports confirmed that many lesser religious leaders supported the strikers.²¹⁸ According to police informants, marabouts would remain silent in public but privately, they supported or at least remained neutral towards the strike.²¹⁹

Newspapers were also used as propaganda tools for the colonial administration. They often printed stories meant to dishearten strikers, question their credibility, and link them with political movements that the administration thought would be unattractive to strike supporters. The paper *Climats* accused the RDA of using the strike as a tool to damage the SFIO. Interestingly, this accusation of political manipulation would later be echoed against the RDA and again once Senghor left the SFIO to form his own party. The newspaper *Paris-Dakar* accused the strike of being run behind-the-scenes by “meneurs,” in other words, communists, which reflected the red-scare tactics and sentiments of the administration.²²⁰ *Paris-Dakar* went even farther when it claimed that African *cheminots* were actually better paid than Europeans and that the shortage of vegetable oils caused by the strike would spark a global health emergency.²²¹ Once again, the media, when not resorting to outright lies, focused on

²¹⁴ Suret-Canale, 101-102.

²¹⁵ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 107

²¹⁶ Sene, 87.

²¹⁷ Jones, 63.

²¹⁸ Jones, 60.

²¹⁹ Cooper “*Our Strike*,” 94.

²²⁰ Suret-Canale, 108.

²²¹ Jones, 60.

the political ties that lurked behind the strike. Whether or not these politics were really there, the administration was fearful enough about them to make them a reality for at least half of the parties involved in the strike. The media, even in attempting to influence public opinion through propaganda, still managed to hit upon a vein or two that would later plague politicians, *cheminots*, and historians.

Colonial responses varied and none were very successful to ending the strike. The administration was fearful of exposing its hypocrisy in rescinding its postwar ideology of ending forced labor, building up industrial infrastructure, and encouraging unionism. Robert Delavignette, who was head of the Ministry of Political Affairs exemplified this sentiment when he said: “the strong style directed at the strikers will not itself resolve the problem (one has seen this in the recent past, even in AOF), if the government gives the impression of going back, after a detour, on trade union freedom and on the abolition of forced labor.”²²² Suret-Canale interpreted events in another way, writing that the reluctance of the government to give into the striker’s demands had to do with Cold War hysteria. Fears of Communist takeovers led the French government to engage in “une politique de reaction.” This led to a desire to break unions, which were seen as nurseries for Communism.²²³ Thus, the strike was essentially a stalemate of over five months, and could have been avoided if the *cheminots* had been given what they had been promised back in 1946. For Abdoulaye Cissé, the *cheminots* would have been right to strike even earlier, back in April of 1947.²²⁴ The use of community leaders, strike breakers in a skeleton crew, newspaper propaganda, and the like all pointed to the exceptionalism of this strike. It was not a bunch of violent *cheminots* that needed to be put down, nor was giving in an option. The Régie and the administration, once they discovered their underestimation of the strength of the strikers, turned to tactics that put the strikers’ credibility into question. Accusations of communist ties was a manifestation of this tactic. The use of religious and political leaders to restore a sense of hierarchical order to the community was another, but this reliance on elites proved unhelpful. The strikers and their communities were beyond listening to the leadership that had so often proved itself to be the puppet of the colonialists. The use of a strikebreaking crew seemed almost like an attempt to prove that the strikers were not even needed on the line. All of these responses attempted to diminish and discredit a movement that in actuality was putting the colonial system into question and proving how unnecessary it was.

²²² Cooper, *Our Strike*,” 104.

²²³ Suret-Canale, 96.

²²⁴ Cissé, interview.

Politics and Politicians

The most complex aspect of the strike was and still is the connections between politics and the *cheminots*. Although politicians did try and succeed to play an active role in the strike, whether or not they can be tied to the *cheminots* is another story. According to Cooper, there was an “uneasy relationship” between the union and political movements and politicians like Houphuët-Boigny and Senghor “did not make the cause of the strikers their own.”²²⁵ Furthermore, African political parties and politicians were very slow to recognize the “enormous political and economic importance” of the strike.²²⁶ The reality of the situation was most likely not far from these assertions: every interviewed informant, ex-striker or no, was insistent upon the fact that there was absolutely no connection between the *cheminots* and the politicians. El Hadj Yoro Faye said that the strikers were “citoyens rëkk (citizens only)” and that all *cheminots* were “libre (free)” to support Senghor, Guèye, or any other politician. At the same time, he as well as Maïssa Sow acknowledged the support given to Senghor after the strike, saying that Senghor “a vécu avec les Sénégalais (lived with the Senegalese),” unlike the Quatre Communes elite, who were “considérés comme toubabs, (considered to be white people),” made worse by the fact that during African military conscription, Quatre Communes *tirailleurs* were housed in separate bunks and ate at separate tables. For Faye, the strike finished this discrimination.²²⁷ For Abdoulaye Cissé, who was a technical school graduate and an upper-*cadre* agent, like many members of the UJT, the *cheminots* “ne comptaient pas sur les politiques, (did not depend on politics)” and that “la politique n’a rien avec le syndicat (politics have nothing to do with the union).” He said that the union had even rebuffed Senghor when he tried to attend an early strike meeting, when he was told to “fout le calabas (loosely translated, get the hell out).” Cissé echoed Faye in saying that the *cheminots* were free to adhere to any party and that the strikers were “cheminots rëkk (*cheminots* only).” After the strike, politicians began to “revendiquer les mêmes choses (demand the same things)” that the *cheminot* union had been struggling for all along.²²⁸ Frederick Cooper wrote that from his interviews, strikers reported that there was a fear that they would become the “auxiliaires” of political parties.²²⁹ The patterns of behavior that followed the strike seemed to prove that fear correct.

What the politicians *did* do, however, was discuss the strike in legislative assemblies and

²²⁵ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 82.

²²⁶ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 93.

²²⁷ Faye and Sow, interview.

²²⁸ Cissé, interview.

²²⁹ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 82.

meetings. At the creation of the Fourth Republic, Africans were permitted to elect representatives in the three legislative bodies: the Chamber of Deputies, the Council of the Republic, and The Assembly of the French Union, which was a kind of parliament for France and the overseas territories.²³⁰ Félix Houphuët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire and Gabriel d'Arboussier of Gabon started the strike debate in the legislative bodies. Both were in the Chamber of Deputies and the RDA and both were considered to be colonial adversaries. D'Arboussier was a Marxist, and Houphuët-Boigny had led the Ivorian cocoa union's confrontation with the administration during the war and was still allied with the French Communist Party (PCF). He was also famous among Africans for authoring the law that ended forced labor in 1946. The two brought the debate to the *Grand Conseil de l'AOF*, an advisory body of the representatives of each territorial council in December of 1947, but the council president, Lamine Guèye, was opposed to the strike. The Senegalese delegation, therefore, refused to enter discussions and boycotted a meeting between the union leaders and Houphuët-Boigny and d'Arboussier, where the two pledged support "in their struggle against colonialism."²³¹ In his 1996 article, Cooper blasted the *Grand Conseil de l'AOF* for its inaction, especially since the committee included West African political heavyweights such as Senghor and Guèye: "French West Africa's most powerful political actors had failed even to express a collective opinion on the most salient issue of the day."²³² Despite a later resolution calling on the government to end the strike in favor of the *cheminots*, politicians as a group remained largely removed from the strike movement and ineffectual at creating any sort of change. Parties did not fare much better. The RDA "did not play any role (ne joua aucun rôle)," and its newspaper even went so far as to say "Sarr n'est pas RDA." The politicians did not want to mix politics with a professional conflict, according to Cooper.²³³ Jones, however, wrote that "Strike participants thought that the RDA leaders tried to use the situation to increase their own influence, but believed that after the RDA leaders realized that they could not control the strikers, they offered support as a means to discredit the colonial administration."²³⁴ Houphuët-Boigny of the RDA did initially align with the strike, but even his role in the caving in of the Abidjan-Niger line is up for debate among historians. The position of the SFIO was that of feeling "embarrassée" because it did not want to destroy its voter pool by going against the strike but it also wanted to stay in the good graces of the

²³⁰ Jones, 61.

²³¹ Jones, 62.

²³² Cooper, "Our Strike," 99-100.

²³³ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 233.

²³⁴ Jones, 62.

colonial government.²³⁵ Overall, the actions of parties and governing bodies in AOF revealed an unwillingness to align with the strike, to help strikers, or to say anything that would discredit their privileged position with the colonial administration, just as François Gning had done as union leader. Although this led to some later voter retaliations, many the politicians and parties went on to become the leaders their newly-independent nations.

Individual politicians, however, did have some effect on the strike. Houphuët-Boigny was one such figure. He promised money and support, but he was the cause of the Abidjan-Niger's break from the strike movement, according to Mor Sene²³⁶ and Frederick Cooper.²³⁷ On January 5, 1948, most of the Abidjan-Niger *cheminots* returned to work, though Suret-Canale points out that only 60% of workers actually returned.²³⁸ The *Inspecteur-Général du Travail* in Dakar credited Houphuët-Boigny's "intervention" with spurring the Ivorian collapse. 1947 police reports "suggested that [Houphuët-Boigny] was privately at odds with the strikers. Certainly, his Communist allies in the Chamber of Deputies considered him suspect, since his primary occupation as a cocoa planter made him dependent on the railroad...Years later several strike participants hinted that [Houphuët-Boigny] was more interested in expanding his own power base during the strike than in promoting the workers' grievances."²³⁹ This accusation of manipulation of events for political advancement was not only reserved to Houphuët-Boigny, but even more reviled by *cheminots* were total inaction and treachery.

Lamine Guèye managed to remain completely inactive during the strike. Guèye, "anxious to preserve [his] relationship with [his] metropolitan allies," stayed silent in public,²⁴⁰ but he met privately with strikers to dissuade them from continuing the work moratorium.²⁴¹ He is attributed with saying: "This time I will not occupy myself with the strike (Cette fois je ne m'occuperai pas de la grève)."²⁴² According to Cooper, however, he did not take part in any strike, having also avoided the General Strike of 1946, and that he "had 'disappointed the strikers' in avoiding all situations in which he could have pronounced [an opinion] (avait 'déçue les grévistes' en évitant toute situation dans laquelle il pouvait avoir à se prononcer)."²⁴³ Guèye resorted to silence and evasion, but other politicians actively

²³⁵ Suret-Canale, 110.

²³⁶ Sene, 89-89.

²³⁷ Cooper, "Our Strike," 100.

²³⁸ Suret-Canale, 98.

²³⁹ Jones, 63.

²⁴⁰ Jones, 62.

²⁴¹ Cooper, "Our Strike," 92-3.

²⁴² Sene, 89.

²⁴³ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 219.

attempted to put a stop to the strike.

Deputy Fily Dabo Sissoko was one of these when he tried end the strike in Soudan. He met with Sarr, who was convinced enough by his promises to prompt the union Comité Directeur at Thiès to order him to reject Sissoko's initiatives, telegraphing: "A scalded cat fears cold water...and we cannot base our return to work on a promise, above all when that promise is stripped of any guarantee." Despite Sissoko's maneuverings, only seven Soudanese workers went back to work on his requested day, February 2.²⁴⁴ In the end, Sissoko "lost all credibility" and in elections after the strike, he repeatedly lost out to his rivals.²⁴⁵ The *cheminots* were a powerful voting bloc.

The most difficult politician to study is Senghor, who is loved and disliked by many *cheminots*. Senghor never publicly backed the strike or the *cheminots*, according to Cooper, who nonetheless mentions that Senghor did meet with the union leadership in private to express support,²⁴⁶ and that furthermore, "In Senegal, Senghor is said to have helped settle the strike."²⁴⁷ Mor Sene asserted that Senghor especially remained supportive of the strike movement during the entirety of the strike, writing a letter to the Minister of Overseas Territories in June of 1947 on behalf of the strikers.²⁴⁸ Enclosed were also the union's demands and a written piece by Sarr called "The History of the Situation." Senghor appealed for a settlement free of discrimination, in the "spirit" of the French Constitution.²⁴⁹ Suret-Canale examined Senghor's writings to illustrate his opinions on the politician. *La Condition Humaine*, a bimonthly paper created by Senghor, made no mention of the strike until the 26th of April, over a month after the strike had ended. In this article, "Les Leçons de la grève du rail," Senghor stated that he had not written about the strike in the hopes of achieving "une solution de compromis" an action justified by the end of the strike. He went on to praise the Minister of Overseas Territories with having promoted Bécharde to Haut-Commissaire because he stopped the strike. Senghor then praised the strikers as well.²⁵⁰ For Senghor, the wishy-washy position seemed the best, and such a stance not only made him a non-threatening leadership option for the colonial administration, it made him a hero of sorts with the *cheminots*, or at least their leaders.

²⁴⁴ Cooper, "Our Strike," 101-102.

²⁴⁵ Jones, 63.

²⁴⁶ Cooper, "Our Strike," 93.

²⁴⁷ Cooper, "Our Strike," 102.

²⁴⁸ Sene, 88.

²⁴⁹ Cooper, "Our Strike," 100.

²⁵⁰ Suret-Canale, 111.

The Strike Settlement

On January second, there were 836 strikers back to work, and 2,416 hired strikebreakers. The Dakar-Niger remained the most “solid” line: there were 1,125 workers (of both races) for a job of 6,765 workers. The Conakry-Niger had 1,196 for the work of 2,014 and the Abidjan-Niger had 1,424 or 3,111. On Feb 1st, 1948, the Dakar-Niger was at 32% for the number of workers theoretically needed on the line, the Conakry-Niger at 54% and the Benin-Niger at 16%. The Abidjan-Niger had already broken the strike. In total, the Régie's numbers were at 34% staff for theoretical staffing capacity. The strikebreakers were also new and inexperienced, lowering production levels.²⁵¹ As for passenger traffic, in mid-February on the Dakar-Niger, it was at 12% of its recent average and merchandise at 43%, on the Conakry-Niger passengers were at 20%, goods at 48%. On the Benin-Niger: passengers were at 10% capacity, goods at 30%. This hurt the metropolitan supply system as well as West Africa's. The strike also coincided with the launch of a 1946 “development” initiative, making it harder to get farmers to produce what the administration had been trying to get them produce and to get workers to work: “the railway strike served to both undermine its economic goals and take the luster off its ideological intervention.”²⁵²

On the 22nd of February, Paul Béchard was named the new Haut-Commissaire, replacing Barthes. He was expected to carry out the desire of the Métropole, which was to end the strike as soon as possible.²⁵³ Béchard was “moins radical et plus conciliateur que son prédécesseur.”²⁵⁴ This can be seen in the ANS documents written by Barthes and Béchard's offices in consecutive years called “Instructions relatives à la sécurité intérieur de l'AOF” in 1947 and 1948. Although the text of both documents is very similar, the men's philosophies can be seen in linguistic differences such as Barthes's use of “repression” as a technique to avoid and to end internal conflict in the colonies (including strikes)²⁵⁵ and Béchard's concentration on how any “mesures d'intervention” should come “en dernier recours (as a last resort).” Béchard also dedicated significantly more time to “mesures preventatives,”²⁵⁶ though both men approved the use of grenades in quelling internal security crises. These alterations, however, could also signal a more concerted effort on the part of colonialists to mask their true ideology behind the rhetoric of equality and compromise.

From the 26th of February onward, Béchard met on separate with the Régie, the FSCA,

²⁵¹ Cooper, “Our Strike,” 106.

²⁵² Cooper, “Our Strike,” 107.

²⁵³ Sene, 93.

²⁵⁴ Sow, 94.

²⁵⁵ “Instructions Relatives à la Sécurité,” Series 21G (102) (ANS, 1947-1949).

²⁵⁶ “Instructions Relatives à la Sécurité,” ANS.

and local politicians. In early March, he took a tour of AOF and announced that he would put an end to the strike that had contributed to “the economic meltdown of the AOF (l’effondrement économique de l’AOF).”²⁵⁷ Béchard put in new proposals varied slightly from the arbitration ruling, including no punishment for striking (since the Régie had threatened sanctions), the Régie would take back all *cadre* personnel, strikebreakers would get to keep their jobs, and auxiliaries would be hired back from highest to lowest seniority until all staff levels were at capacity. The union approved on March 15, 1948, with one stipulation: all auxiliaries must get their jobs back.²⁵⁸ The concessions were:

- Auxiliaries would get retroactive integration: May 1, 1947, for pay and January 1 for seniority (The union had demanded January 1 for both, the Régie: Oct 1 for both, the arbitration ruling: 15July)
- Certain agents in the *cadre* secondaire would be reclassified according to the Régie’s original interpretation, but they would also receive extra seniority.
- The exam required to move between was compromised between Union and Régie levels.
- Workers would get 15 days of leave per year (as demanded by Union, rejected by the Régie and reduced to 10 days by the arbitration committee, but only for family events and if the service could handle the absence).
- Housing and indemnities could not be guaranteed, which kept with the Régie and arbitration ruling decisions (the Union wanted both increased).
- The Union demand for uniform housing indemnities that were equal to the highest pay scale was rejected, with Béchard holding to the Régie and arbitrational incorporation of the old hierarchy into the wage scale and adding indemnities to areas with a high cost of living.

Béchard then compromised with the union on its stipulation: strikers would be protected but auxiliaries would be taken back “in principle.” Striking auxiliaries who were eligible for integration before the strike kept the benefits of transition, exam barriers were eased, strike days were not paid, a raise in wages would occur to offset the rise in the cost of living, there would be expatriate and displacement benefits, management benefits were increased by 20%, and indemnities were increased in Dakar, Abdijan, and other cities. The date to return to work was fixed for March 19. A month later, the Régie cut jobs and the auxiliaries lost their jobs based on seniority and competence.²⁵⁹ According to James Jones, “the strikers settled for

²⁵⁷ Sene, 98.

²⁵⁸ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 109-110.

²⁵⁹ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 109-111.

an agreement that was essentially identical to the terms offered by the arbitration appeals committee on 31 October 1947. The agreement failed to prevent worker layoffs, but it established the principle that workers should be paid the same regardless of race.” Workers who were not laid off also got pay increases but “it took another six years before they obtained ‘equal work for equal pay’.”²⁶⁰ The protocol was presented to the *cheminots* as a victory, but according to Suret-Canale, it was only “partially” one. The administration had to recognize the legitimacy of the strike by retracting threats of punishment for illegal striking, had to instate the *cadre unique*, but “for the rest, except for a few small details, it was the Régie’s viewpoint (affirmed by the sub-arbitrational ruling) that prevailed (pour la reste, à quelques détails près, c’est le point-de-vue de la Régie (repris par la sentence surarbitrale) qui prévaut).”²⁶¹ Haut-Commissaire Bécharde said of the strike: “There are no vanquishers or vanquished, there are only losers: the AOF economy, the *cheminots*, and the Régie (Il n’y a ni vainqueurs, ni vaincus, il n’y a que perdants: l’économie de l’AOF, les cheminots, et le Régie).”²⁶² On the question of the economy, according to Mor Sene, the strike cost the Régie “several” million francs in lost revenue and from money spent trying to restart work. For the AOF and metropolitan economies, the strike created “a serious disturbance in the exchange system...Many products rotted in the interior...The strike would pulverize the AOF economy (une grave perturbation du système des échanges...Beaucoup de produits pourrissaient à l’intérieur...La grève allait pulvériser l’économie de l’AOF).”²⁶³ Furthermore, the strike was not a losing situation for everyone: According to AK Sow, some of the auxiliaries integrated into the new *cadre unique*, had their salaries quadruple.²⁶⁴

Cooper called the strike a power struggle that was about whether or not “workers would or would not have a say in professional structure that was theoretically non-racial (les travailleurs auraient ou non leur mot à dire dans une structure professionnelle théoriquement non raciale).”²⁶⁵ The Régie *cadre* system, for Cooper, was rather a “a French structure than a backward colonial organization based on race. But the question of the manner in which this power would be exerted *inside* the structure would be the real reason for the strike (une structure française q’une organisation coloniale arriérée basée sur la race. Mais la question de la manière dont ce pouvoir était exercé à *l’intérieur* de la structure allait être la raison même

²⁶⁰ Jones, 64.

²⁶¹ Suret-Canale, 120.

²⁶² De Benoist, 135.

²⁶³ Sene, 112.

²⁶⁴ Sene, 111.

²⁶⁵ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 230.

de la grève).”²⁶⁶ Cooper, however, overlooks the fact that despite whatever language or structure the Régie had used, despite its parallels to a French structure, the *cadre* system was carried out with the knowledge that it was a racially-discriminatory system, one meant to divide African technician from African auxiliary, and above all, European management from African worker. This system worked for a time, which is best exemplified by the strike of 1938, but in rejecting *cadre* privilege for the deeper bonds of community and work solidarity, the West African *cheminot* managed to stand up to the colonial presence.

In the late 1940s, there were many strikes in French and British Africa, all of which were significant for their length, the fact that they occurred across industrial or regional borders, and because they attacked the vulnerabilities of the colonial state, especially the transport sector.²⁶⁷ The railroad strike of 1947-1948 was one of the better known of these strikes. It “destroyed all African trust”²⁶⁸ in the French and their ideologies as well as pointing out parallel hypocrisies among the elite *évolués* and *assimilés* who played up their African origins or their “reformed” ways when needed. Politicians could be useful tools for some, but they were not to be trusted, and the old Quatre Communes elite that took power at independence might have held leadership positions, but they could also be as easily challenged as the French colonial system. As African workers moved into the wage system and embraced industrialization and all of the rights that went with it, they proved, through the strike, that they “remained linked to their society in ways that could oppose French assimilation. After the strike ended, those links were even stronger because railroad workers felt indebted to the community that had sustained them. They continued to make payments on that debt all the way to independence.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, a new generation of unionists that opposed complacency and evolution exerted itself, punishing older establishment figures and demanding action and change. If, in the end that change did not come in tangible ways, it still existed, as empowerment and confidence, as unification and strength.

After the Strike

After the strike was over, after the lay-offs of about a thousand *cheminots*²⁷⁰ and the numerous discussions and struggles between the strikers and the Régie over the terms of the strike, politics enveloped the *cheminot* movement. Senghor jumped on the strike movement

²⁶⁶ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 236.

²⁶⁷ Cooper, *Décolonisation et Travail*, 212.

²⁶⁸ Jones, 64.

²⁶⁹ Jones, 64.

²⁷⁰ Sene, 118.

after it was over, bringing Ibrahima Sarr and other *cheminot* leaders into his fold. Mamadou Dia, the first prime minister of Senegal and one-time ally of Senghor, was one of the greatest advocates for the recognition of the *cheminots* and particularly of Sarr in his memoirs: “It was the *cheminots* in that time that were the best political recruiting agents, the best members of the parties (C’étaient les cheminots, en ce temps-là, qui étaient les meilleurs agents de recrutement politique, les meilleurs agents des parties).”²⁷¹

When Senghor left SFIO in September of 1948 to create le Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais (BDS), he said that SFIO was “in Africa, at least, not democratic or socialist in its action (en Afrique, du moins, ni démocratique, ni socialiste dans son action),” and that it “no longer defended the interests of overseas workers but [instead] its own electoral interests (ne défend plus les intérêts des travailleurs d’outre-mer mais ses intérêts électoraux).”²⁷² Senghor’s rhetoric immediately pointed to his concern over the worker, and his subsequent actions pointed to his concentration on winning over the *cheminots* to his side. Senghor’s SFIO break occurred because he knew the *cheminots* would follow him, according to Mor Sene. Abdoulaye Ba, in an interview with Mor Sene, said: “In effect, we all took our vacations and canvassed [literally, ‘furrowed’] the country, campaigning for BDS (En effet...nous avons tous pris nos congés et avons sillonné tout le pays pour faire la campagne en faveur du BDS.” The first BDS convention was at Thiès, the center of the *cheminot* labor movement for as long as the movement had existed.²⁷³ According to Cooper, Senghor “is remembered in Thiès for having incorporated the railway workers’ union into his political movement, but with more than a hint that the workers did more for him than he for them.”²⁷⁴ Overall, it was Sarr, said Mamadou Dia, who really put Senghor on the map among the *cheminots*. In his memoirs he recollected a public gathering with Sarr and Senghor: “On all the route, the people were crying ‘Long live Sarr!’ They were not crying ‘Long live Senghor!’ This is important for the good reason that no one knew Senghor...It was Sarr they knew (Sur tout le parcours, les gens criaient ‘vivre Sarr!’ Ils ne criaient pas ‘Vive Senghor!’ Ceci est important. Pour la bonne raison qu’on ne connaissait pas Senghor...C’est Sarr que l’on connaissait).”²⁷⁵ In 1956, a new youth movement, the third generation of militant unionists, accused Sarr and his erstwhile UJT upstarts of focusing on their political careers

²⁷¹ Dia, 56.

²⁷² Sow, 106-107.

²⁷³ Sene, 115-116.

²⁷⁴ Cooper, “*Our Strike*,” 102.

²⁷⁵ Dia, 56.

and not the workers.²⁷⁶ Sarr moved into the left wing of BDS, and aligned himself with Mamadou Dia. In the political crisis of 1962 in which Senghor and Dia broke relations, Sarr was imprisoned.

The Dakar-Niger was reduced to two lines in 1960. It “no longer controlled the flow of external trade and the union was no longer decisive in the formation of public opinion.” The Mali Federation, which formed an alliance between Senegal and the Soudan at independence, broke down just a few months later. The breakdown closed the borders and in the interval until they reopened in 1963, trucks had taken over as the main transportation option.²⁷⁷ The Dakar-Niger faced the same economic struggles as Senegal throughout the latter half of the 20th Century. The train, according to a policeman from the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer du Sénégal (SNCS), the rail was bought out and was run by a private company.²⁷⁸ Abdoulaye Cissé confirmed this, saying that it was bought out by Canadians in 2003, who bought the entire line, from Dakar to Bamako.²⁷⁹ Participant observation at the Dakar and Thiès *gares* as well as on the train from Dakar to Thiès confirmed the lowered status of the train as a commercial and transportation enterprise: “it’s no longer the ‘artery’ of AOF/Senegalese/Malian economic export. That was taken over by trucks long ago. Now, however, it’s the small vendors, shaking food, dish towels, used clothing, etc. Manufactured goods being sold along the line, much as the colonial export economy worked.”²⁸⁰ The documentary *Dakar-Bamako* (1991) includes extensive footage of the retail that occurred around the Dakar-Niger in the 1990s, when the train ran twice a week between Dakar and Bamako: the line seemed to have formed an entirely specialized form of trade designed around rail traffic.²⁸¹ *Chemino* union presence definitely diminished over the years after independence, a fact made clear by the May Day workers’ march in Thiès in 2007, where there was no observed *cheminot* presence.²⁸² Furthermore, according to two ex-*cheminots* interviewed at the Thiès *gare*, Pappa Madiaye Seck and Abdoulaye Tall, who made careers as a switchman and a mechanic, respectively, there are still problems with auxiliary integration: neither of them had been integrated, despite over thirty years of service each. To get into the *cadre*, they said, a *cheminot* has to hire a lawyer.²⁸³

²⁷⁶ Sow, 103.

²⁷⁷ Jones, 74.

²⁷⁸ Julia Robinson, *Field Journal II* (2 May 2007), 98.

²⁷⁹ Cissé, interview.

²⁸⁰ Robinson, *Field Journal II* (30 April 2007), 68.

²⁸¹ Julia Robinson, *Field Journal I* (18 April 2007), 100.

²⁸² Robinson, *Field Journal II*, (1 May 2007), 83.

²⁸³ Pappa Madiaye Seck and Abdoulaye Tall, interview by the author, Thiès, Senegal, notes, 2 May 2007.

V. Conclusion

Implications of analysis, refer back to thesis/summary/broaden out

The *cheminot* strike of 1947-1948 could not have happened without the previous history of coercion, resistance, and community that had marked each stage of the development of the railroad. From the earliest conception of the railroad, Faïdherbe's dream of conquering the unknown but Eldorado-like political and economic resources that lay east of the strip of Senegalese land occupied by the French, the Dakar-Niger played a central role in the changes that would come to Senegal and would reflect the overall policies of the colonial government. Forced labor, the racialization of the work force, and strong West African resistance to colonial presence were all born or grew beside the train line. The economic problems that plagued the railroad as well as an early revelation of colonial hypocrisy would carry all the way through the colonial period and would greatly effect the policies and actions on the part of the administration and of colonized peoples. The limits on the colonial budget meant that conquest, construction, and control had to be cost-effective. In attempting this, the cheap and dirty methods used by the colonial state actually ended up being more time-consuming and leaving bad results in its wake. Even as colonial practice divided the labor force into skilled and unskilled, based on a racial hierarchy that saw Africans as inferior peasants incapable of European work, these economic constraints made the state to take on Africans as skilled wage laborers. This complex dichotomy of peasant and worker, of citizen and subject, of white and black, would suffer a third division once the administration realized the benefits of splitting Africans into two categories: the intermediary *évolués* and the majority *indigènes*. This schism would inspire the Thiès 1938 action and would force Africans to reevaluate the status of being a Quatre Commune *assimilé*: this category, once the black leadership of the colonies, would have to prove its dedication to the mainstream in order to function. This was the fatal mistake that Gning made: he depended too heavily on support from the top, when he should have been looking to the numbers underneath him.

The ingenuity of the 1947 strike was its insistence on *African* unity, on turning away from the class distinctions to fight against the management. That this management was European is not unimportant: despite the fact that the union members who led the strike insisted that theirs was not a struggle about anticolonialism, they were demanding equality in a system that required inequality. The very action of using the rhetoric of the French was not

a way to follow the French, but to break from them. The reality for colonized peoples was not the life of a metropolitan citizen, and it was made clear after Brazzaville, labor law after labor law, and colonial discriminatory action that the colonial state had no intention of extending equality, which was merely a buzzword meant to dampen threatening militancy.

The resistance to the forced labor practices of military leaders during rail construction, which was often an individual act that nonetheless damaged the system was a constant phenomenon throughout the colonial period. That resistance would expand over time, from desertions and work delays on a one-person scale to desertions and work delays on a massive scale. The techniques did not change but the numbers of resisters did. Although early desertions frustrated colonial administrators, once West African labor banded together, the administration could do little to stop it from, at the very least, being recognized. The actions of the colonial state towards strikers and resisters, from increased punishments for deserters and the bloody repression of the 1938 strike to the increase of individual wages to encourage volunteering and the massive reorganization of pay scales to appease angry workers, proved to fall on two opposite sides. Reactions were of total repression or of complete surrender. These contrasting actions served to encourage and mobilize workers by proving their power to demand change and by angering the populace so that policies would be put into question. In the 1947 strike, when the administration did not cave immediately or resort to violence, since the strikers remained calm, the tactic became that the waiting game, which would prove that the strikers would withstand huge hardships to challenge the administration, and that even if their demands were not entirely met, they could maintain and they could unite.

The relationship of the union and of politics is a complex one, pointing in many directions. The *cheminot* union, at the strike of 1947, stayed away from politicians officially, but they could not escape them. Politics were at the center of union affiliation and action from the beginning, when Gning aligned with SFIO and the colonial administration, to the end, when Senghor harnessed the voter potential of the union for his political victory. Even if the *cheminots* were “citoyens rêkk,” they were still a part of the political process.

The reluctance of ex-strikers to adamant to deny the relationship between politicians and the union marks an interesting turn in the revision of historical fact. For the ex-strikers today, *cheminots* were citizens free to chose their own parties, to be politically-active or inactive, but in their hearts, they were *cheminots*, which was not a label but “une race.”²⁸⁴ The events that would follow the strike were painful. Politicians broke down the union,

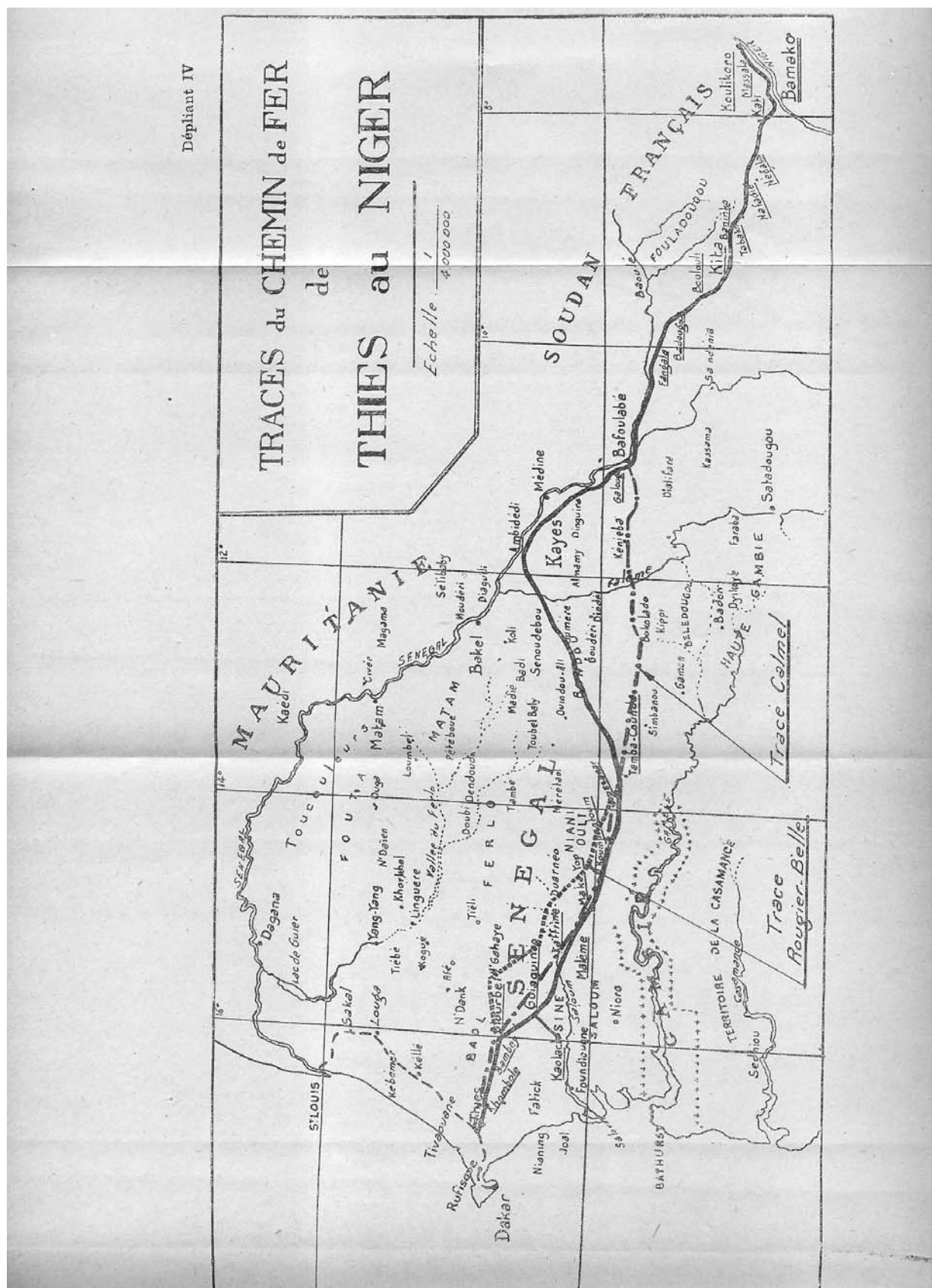
²⁸⁴ Cissé, interview.

splitting the Mali Federation and the *cheminot's* geographical strength in two. Senghor and even perhaps Sarr turned their backs on the union once they had established political careers, and Senghor would even imprison the man that had helped propel him to the leadership of Senegal. Furthermore, historians and writers would co-opt the movement for their own ends as well. The contempt that Abdoulaye Cissé showed for what he called the “théâtre” of *God's Bits of Wood* by Ousmane Sembene and for this author's attempts to draw connections between politicians and strikers²⁸⁵ could demonstrate a frustration with the various parties that used the strike to fulfill a preconceived vision. Ex-striker oral histories are not free of bias, and neither is this account. The “true” history of the strike can probably no longer be discovered, since the witnesses themselves have mixed fact with fiction, have changed events in their minds to reflect the dissatisfaction they felt due to events that took place long after the strike, historians have read each others' accounts, and almost everyone having anything to do with the strike or the study of it has heard of or read *God's Bits of Wood*. To echo Pelisson, perhaps there is no truth, there is no untruth, there is only the strike. For this study, however, certain patterns and events, when analyzed, point to the radical nature of the strike in its time, for its break with past conciliatory leaderships, its challenge to the administration, for its use of the language of the oppressor to attempt to silence the false rhetoric of equality and dispose of the practice of inequality that kept the colonial state in charge. Despite what would come after, the mess of political drama and the diminishment of the union and of the railroad, the history of the Dakar-Niger is that of coercion and of resistance that culminated in the 1947-1948 strike of the *cheminots*. For the strikers and resisters of each *cheminot* generation, “Tout travail doit nourrir son home, (all work must nourish its man),”²⁸⁶ and their struggles against the labor systems that did not sustain them economically, politically, or spiritually, allowed them to assert their demands and their rights over the whole history of the Dakar-Niger.

²⁸⁵ Cissé, interview.

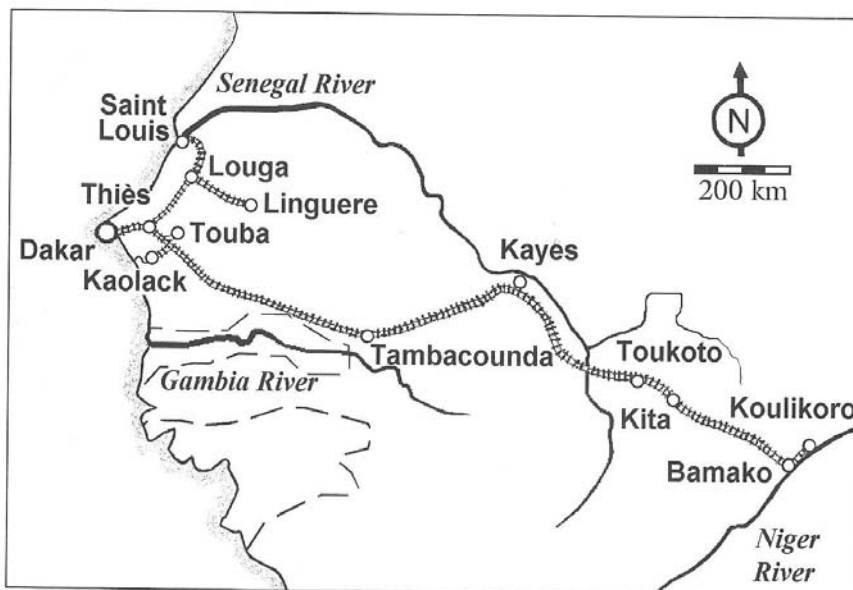
²⁸⁶ Sene, 46.

VI. APPENDIX



Map 1: 1931 Map of the Thiès-Niger (Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, Plate IV).

Map 4.2
The Dakar-Niger Railroad, 1933



Map 2: The Dakar-Niger, 1933 (Jones 39).

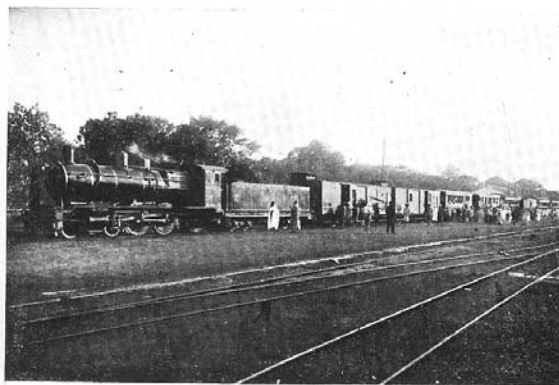


Fig. 24. — Thiès. Départ de l'express du Soudan (Dakar-Bamako en 42 heures)

Image 1: The Dakar-Bamako Express Stopped at Thiès, 1931 (Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, Plate XII).

Pl. XI

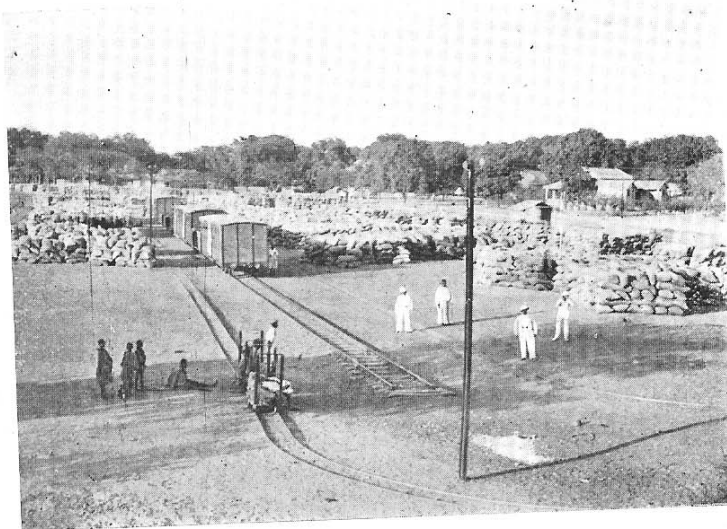


Fig. 21. — Gare de Kaolack. Quai aux arachides



Fig. 22. — La gare de Kaolack à l'époque de la traite des arachides

Image 2a and 2b: The Senegalese Peanut Export Economy at Kaolack, 1931.
(Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, Plate IX).

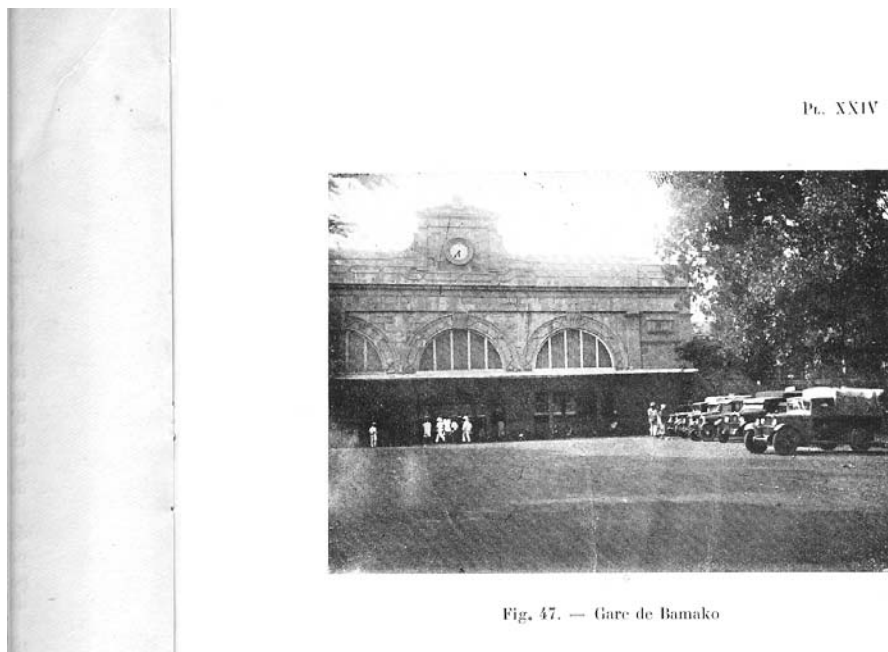


Image 3 : The Bamako *Gare*, 1931. (Gouvernement Général de l'AOF, Plate XXIV).

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Industrial Labor in the Colonial World

Figure 2.2
The Bafing River Railroad Bridge at Mahina



Image 4: The Bafing River Bridge, postcard. (Jones, 18).

VII. List of Acronyms

- AOF: Afrique Occidentale Française
- ANS: Archives Nationales du Sénégal
- CGT: Confédération Générale du Travail
- FSCA: Fédération des Syndicats des Cheminots Africains
- FSM: Fédération Syndicale Mondiale
- GEC: Groupes d'Etudes Communistes
- PCF: Parti Communiste Français
- RDA: Rassemblement Démocratique Africain
- SFIO: Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière
- SNCS: Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer du Sénégal
- STIDN: Syndicat des Travailleurs Indigènes du Dakar-Niger
- UCAD: Université Cheikh Anta Diop
- UJT: Union des Jeunes de Thiès

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