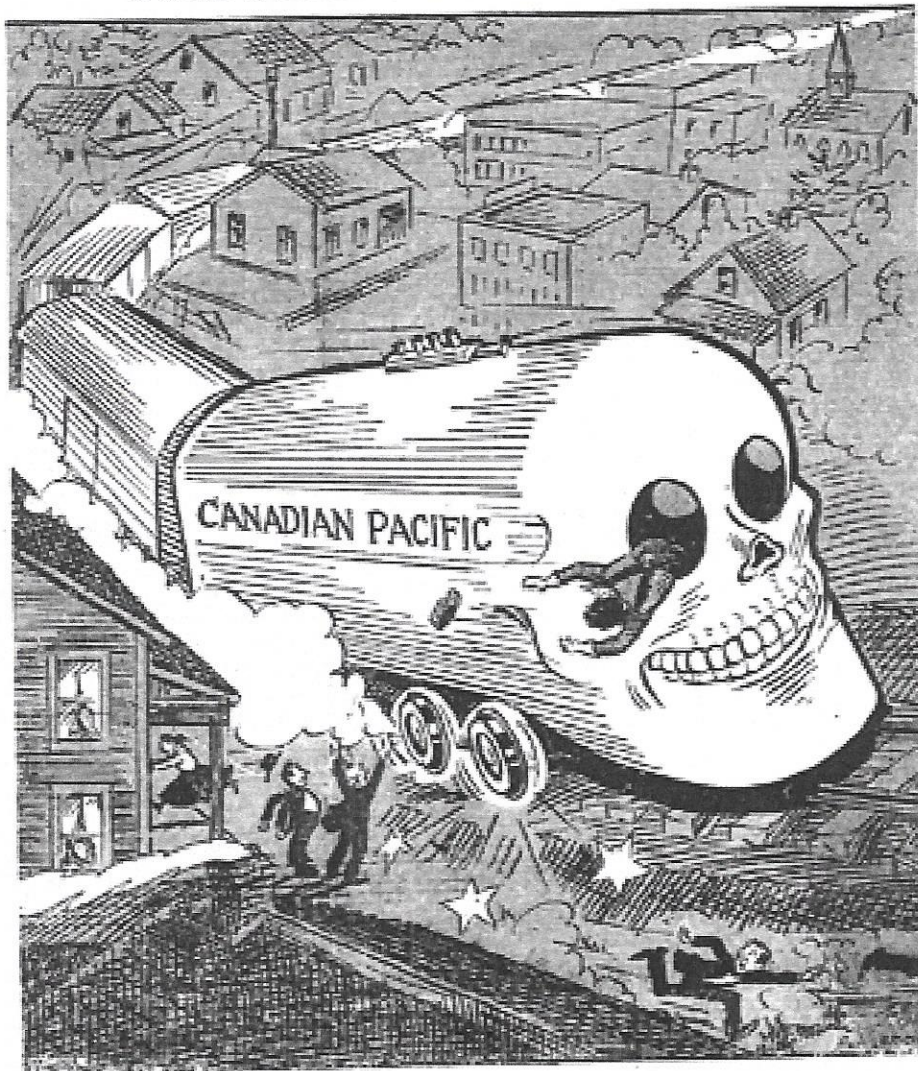


Firemen's strike at the CPR

For nine days in January 1957, a walk-out by the Canadian Pacific Railway's firemen paralysed transportation on one of the country's major railways. In Saint John, New Brunswick, City Council declared a state of emergency. With ninety per cent of the city's port traffic dependent on the CPR, Mayor W.W. Macaulay feared that a lengthy strike would turn Saint John into "a ghost city." Sixty-five thousand railway workers were off the job. In Northern Ontario, one thousand workers were laid off at the Lakehead ports. Calgary reported 1,500 men idle. British Columbia miners, Saskatchewan farmers and several thousand other Canadians were directly affected by the confrontation between CPR management and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen. The issue was technological change.

John Boer's cartoon illustrates the union's fear that engineers will ride alone in Canadian locomotives. Labor, January 5, 1957, Canadian Labour Congress records. (C-170880)

WILL DEATH RIDE THE RAILS?



The "diesel issue," as the dispute became known, started with the CPR's plan to introduce diesel locomotives on all trains and to eliminate the firemen's job on all yard and freight service. For the 2,800 firemen on the CPR, this plan struck directly at their jobs and their union. As union spokesman W.E. Gamble stated before the federal conciliation board reviewing the issue, the plan would mean that "firemen are to give up their jobs, see their craft die and their organization disappear." The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen claimed that the firemen were essential to public safety because, as apprentice engineers, they were the engineer's "co-pilot." The CPR was equally determined to take full advantage of the lower operating costs offered by the new technology. With the introduction of diesel locomotives on all trains, the company could save an estimated \$11.5 million per year. The CPR argued that the firemen, who were once required to stoke the engine by hand, had been made redundant by changing technology. Hand-fired locomotives gave way to automatic stokers, oil-fired steam engines and finally the diesel. The company offered to find other jobs for most of the firemen, but their long history with the railways of Canada had come to an end.

With both union and management adamant in these positions, a long disruptive strike was feared. Through the efforts of the Canadian Labour Congress and the federal minister of Labour, however, a temporary solution was found. The firemen would return to work, the CPR would delay its plan and the federal government would establish a Royal Commission under Supreme Court Justice R.L. Kellock to examine the "diesel issue" and its effect on public safety.

The Royal Commission on Employment of Firemen on Diesel Locomotives in Freight and Yard Service on the Canadian Pacific Railway conducted an extensive investigation from January to November 1957, hearing the testimony of 119 witnesses and visiting European countries to examine their experience with diesel locomotives. Although the decision of the Royal Commission was not binding on either party, its decision did shape public opinion. On February 4, 1958, Kellock issued his report. The firemen, the Commission concluded, were not necessary on the diesel locomotive and the CPR plan would not endanger public safety. The company offer to find other jobs on

the CPR for the current firemen was judged to be fair compensation for the employees.

The decision was a severe blow to the union. Unable to accept its demise without a fight, the Brotherhood launched a second strike in May 1958. With public opinion against the firemen and the trade union movement offering only weak support, the CPR kept its lines operating. After three days, the union called off its strike. The failure of this strike was important, since the CPR example was soon followed on other North American railways.

The archival record created by this dispute provides a good source for the historical study of technological change. The union case is found in the records of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, now part of the United Transportation Union records (MG 28 I 219) and of the Canadian Labour Congress records (MG 28 I 103). The government records relating to the "diesel issue" are found in the Department of Labour (RG 27) and in the transcripts and exhibits of Kellock's Royal Commission on the Employment of Firemen on Diesel Locomotives (RG 33/37).

For many Canadians in the 1950s, the "diesel issue" illustrated the problems surrounding



the introduction of new technology. Thirty years later, technological change has taken a new form, but the social debate about its implications remains constant.

*Brotherhood of Locomotive
Firemen and Enginemen
members picket outside of
Montreal's Windsor Station.
(Montreal Gazette, January
1957.) (C-160808)*

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