

THE 1890–91 SCOTTISH RAILWAY STRIKE IN DUMFRIES

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‘A student of transport needs no *leftish* bias to appreciate the almost feudal powers exercised over their wages staff by mid- and even late-Victorian railway companies.’ Hamilton Ellis, *British Railway History, 1877–1947* (1959), p203.

In his analysis of the 1890/1 Scottish Railway Strike, James Mavor suggests it was ‘[p]erhaps the most serious labour struggle which Scotland ... experienced in this generation’.² Such a judgement certainly seems to have been the case for Dumfries, despite the fact that the strike lasted less than a fortnight in the town. Both local papers gave large amounts of space to the strike, although the local railway workers employed by the Caledonian and the Glasgow & South-Western Railway (G&SWR) companies, were less unionised – in the Scottish Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (SASRS) – but also apparently less exploited, and certainly less militant, than colleagues further north in central Scotland, and further south in Carlisle, where the strike continued to the end of January. Reports in the Dumfries newspapers (the Dumfries & Galloway Standard & Advertiser – hereafter the Standard, and the Dumfries & Galloway Courier & Herald – hereafter the Courier) regularly ran to several columns, and the drama of the strike, its impact on local rail services, and railway worker meetings were all covered in great detail. At this time, while both newspapers were independent of any political party, the Standard had Radical/Liberal leanings, in contrast to the Courier with its Conservative/Unionist sympathies.

In fact, so far as one can judge, the strike, which began in Dumfries on 22 December 1890, and ended by early January, was perhaps the single most significant industrial dispute the town experienced in the nineteenth century. As such it merits a consideration it has not yet had, and highlights the problems of forming effective trade unions in a town and political culture where the commitment to trade unionism amongst working people was often inconsistent, and where the numbers of active unionists in individual workforces was often a challenge to successful action.³

The Scottish railway companies and trade unionism

The attempts by the SASRS, from its inception in 1872, to engage in effective collective bargaining with the Scottish railway companies were frustrated by the wholly negative and hostile attitude of the companies to organised labour. Established on semi-military lines, the companies refused to recognise unions, and treated their workforces with more or less complete disdain. According to John Holford, the two principal Scottish railway

¹ Member of the Society. We regret to record that Ian Gasse died suddenly on the 4 September 2024. His obituary is in this volume.

² Mavor (1891a).

³ Examples of these elements feature in two Dumfries bakers’ strikes in 1889 and 1905; see Gasse (2022).

companies, the Caledonian and the North British, were amongst the largest companies in Scottish capitalism. As such, they had enormous power and influence, not only as employers, but as businesses in the Scottish economy and in the wider British economy, and they had representatives in a highly organised group of MPs protecting the railway interest in the House of Commons, where they defended the companies from legislation that might interfere with their activities or limit their monopolistic powers.⁴ Holford suggests the companies were based on ‘a military model’, such that:

Basic work-disciplines had to be instilled, basic standards set: a process very similar to mobilising an army ... Not just the structural, but the moral, elements of the military model were taken over: company uniform and livery, the language of going on ‘duty’, ‘absence without leave’, being put on a ‘charge’, ‘loss of rank’; unquestioning obedience to ‘officers’ and ‘superior officers’.⁵

Indeed, from as early as 1866, the three leading Scottish railway companies, the Caledonian, the G&SWR and the North British, combined to deny their workforces any opportunity to participate in effective trade union activity, as made clear in a joint statement signed by the general managers of all three companies in September of that year:

It having been reported to the directors of several railway companies in Scotland that certain meetings have been held, and that others are in contemplation, for the express purpose of attainment of our (railway servants’) rights, etc., the directors hereby give notice to the engine drivers, firemen and passenger and goods guards, passenger and goods porters, and pointsmen, that while they, with their several officers, are most desirous of meeting the legitimate demands of their employees, they will most firmly withstand all dictation by the men; and they give notice that any attempt at combination by the respective employees, will be met by the directors in such a manner as may to them seem fit. The directors take this opportunity of cautioning the men in their employ against combination, or joining any union for the avowed purpose of dictating to the employers.⁶

The grievances of railway workers were many: long hours, often punishing work schedules, inadequate rest periods, low pay, no overtime rates, no annual holidays, and a propensity to serious and life-threatening accidents were the more obvious, most of which were ignored by the managements when raised by the men in the procedures laid down by the companies. After years of frustration, the ASRS (Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants) and SASRS launched a movement for reduced hours in 1881, with the *Standard* suggesting this was something the travelling public would support. The newspaper quoted from the ASRS Nine Hours Movement ‘manifesto’, which, accepting

⁴ In the debate on Channing’s motion on railway workers’ hours in the House of Commons in January 1891, the Mid-Durham ‘Lib-Lab’ MP, John Wilson, in seconding the motion, estimated there were ‘248 gentlemen interested in railways’ in the House of Commons; ‘Doings in Parliament’, *Dumfries & Galloway Courier & Herald* (hereafter *Courier*), 24 January 1891, p8. The first working class representatives in Parliament were identified as ‘Lib-Lab’ MPs, who, while taking the Liberal whip, spoke independently on labour issues.

⁵ Holford (1988), pp80–81.

⁶ Bagwell (1963), p43.

‘[r]ailway servants, in a few favoured instances, work 10 hours per day’, claimed the majority worked ‘11, 12 and even a greater number of continuous hours for a day’s work’:

But besides these long hours, they are also called upon to work many hours beyond the limit of the ordinary day; and sometimes to perform two days’ duty right off without any interval for rest. It thus frequently occurs that men continue on duty for periods of from 14 to 24 hours, to the danger of their own and the public’s safety, to the certain injury of health, and, we may add, demoralising them for social duties and the enjoyment of rational recreation.

In making its case, the committee stressed the reasonableness of seeking to bring railway workers’ conditions in line with those of other workers in the wider economy:

In brief, the time and strength of railway servants are improperly applied to satisfy a greed for illegitimate profit, and as a substitute for sufficient capital or efficient management. Railway labour is not less fatiguing than that of artisans, of the factory operative, or of the ordinary day labourer. Much of it is carried on at night-time, under exposure and conditions of personal peril, and from its nature is more responsible and exacting than the labour of other classes of workmen. We have said that operatives and artisans have obtained a recognised custom limiting each day’s work to nine hours, and every week’s work to fifty-four hours. Railway companies respect the custom in so far as mechanics are affected. The short hours system has operated with immense advantage to the British workmen, and it is not even alleged that employers have suffered any corresponding disadvantage. We simply seek to extend this custom to all railway workmen.⁷

The committee sought an overtime rate for hours worked ‘beyond nine in each twenty-four’, and a six-day week, with ‘Sunday duty ... overwork ... and paid for as such’. At this stage, both the ASRS and SASRS – unions based on the ‘new model’ formation of mid nineteenth-century trade unionism, offering friendly benefits on a subscription beyond lower-paid railway workers – had a ‘no-strike’ policy and moderate ambitions, seeking merely to bring the railways into line with the conditions won by other artisan unions.

SASRS action and the prelude to the strike

The English society’s ‘Nine Hours Movement’ ended in summer 1882, but the SASRS, at its 1882 AGM in Dumfries, commended ‘the short hour movement’ in Scotland, which had been ‘vigorously carried on in the winter by public meeting and otherwise’. Perhaps as a result, the Scottish union’s membership had risen over the previous year by 542, a 25% increase, to almost 2,000, spread across 18 branches, from Carlisle to Forfar.⁸ Out of a total workforce of railwaymen across the three companies, estimated by

⁷ ‘The Working Hours of Railway Servants’, *Dumfries & Galloway Standard & Advertiser* (hereafter *Standard*), 23 April 1881, p3.

⁸ ‘Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants: Conference at Dumfries’, *Standard*, 2 September 1882, p2.

Mavor to be about 8,000,⁹ this was well below a majority, indicating the success of the companies' negative, intimidatory behaviour, which was restricting the union's ability to take effective action.¹⁰

Although the 'short hour movement' was debated at the SASRS AGM in Dumfries, with some delegates suggesting an approach to the Board of Trade or Parliament and some an approach to the companies, the discussion was inconclusive and 'the matter was allowed to drop'.¹¹ Early in the new year, however, the *Standard* was reporting a series of SASRS meetings across Scotland, at which the 'movement' was raised again, leading to a strike against the Caledonian Company in 1883, an action which achieved some modest improvements for some drivers and signalmen. However, the overall position of railwaymen remained weak. As long as the companies were hostile to the union – often dismissing members who raised grievances¹² – the membership remained insufficient to impose a wide-ranging paralysis, through striking, on the whole railway network or an individual company's operations. The long delays in deciding how to respond to management prevarications over their petitions reflected this weakness, and, whilst large numbers of railwaymen remained bitter about their working conditions, they were unable to do much about it in the short term, other than try to recruit more people to the union.¹³

But there was also a geographical aspect to the union's weakness, as the leading role in the 1883 Caledonian strike taken by workers in Glasgow, Hamilton, and Edinburgh indicated. The same degree of militancy of these well-populated districts, where railway employment was more concentrated, could not be relied on everywhere, and in Dumfries solidarity with the Caledonian strikers in 1883 was not much in evidence. Whilst a Dumfries SASRS branch had existed from at least the early 1880s,¹⁴ and a Dumfries delegate attended the 1882 AGM,¹⁵ the local branch met only half-yearly, and no reports of its activities featured in the local press. The only thing we learn about the branch prior to

⁹ Mavor (1891b), p23; however, the industry newspaper, the *Railway News*, estimated that the Caledonian Railway alone employed 15,000 railwaymen in 1883 at the time of the strike, a figure that would make the SASRS membership an even smaller proportion of the overall workforce; 'The Caledonian Strike', *Railway News*, 27 January 1883, p7.

¹⁰ Philip Bagwell says there were 'about 35,000 railwaymen in Scotland' at this time, but that would include clerical workers, as well as the employees of the Highland Railway and Great North of Scotland Railway, the two smallest Scottish companies; Bagwell, (1963), p144.

¹¹ 'Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants: Conference at Dumfries', *Standard*, 2 September 1882, p2.

¹² The men suspected the 'delegates' meeting heads of department would become 'marked men' and 'degraded or dismissed at the first opportunity', hence the advantage of being represented by the union, whose officials were not railway company employees; Mavor (1891b), p8.

¹³ 'Work and Wages', *Standard*, 19 September 1883, p2; 'Work and Wages', *Standard*, 6 October 1883, p2; 'Work and Wages', *Standard*, 21 November 1883, p2; and 'Work and Wages', *Standard*, 5 December 1883, p2.

¹⁴ 'Notice to Railway Servants', *Standard*, 2 July 1881, p1, and 'Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants for Scotland (Dumfries Branch)', *Standard*, 30 December 1882, p1.

¹⁵ 'Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants – Conference at Dumfries', *Standard*, 2 September 1882, p2.

1890 is that a Mr W. Forteith was branch delegate to the 1885 SASRS AGM in Dundee.¹⁶

However, one encouraging local development, in early 1890, was the establishment of an SASRS branch in Stranraer, an indication that the policy of recruiting more railwaymen to the union was having some success. The meeting was attended by SASRS president William Milne, who, with his colleague, Mr D. McPherson, ‘addressed the men on the benefits to be gained from trade combination’. Arrangements for the new branch were completed, with 60 railwaymen signing up and electing office-bearers and a committee.¹⁷

But, as working conditions at the companies failed to improve during the later 1880s, an ‘hours movement’ was again promulgated in 1890. In January meetings took place across Scotland to assess support and decide on action. Eight thousand voting cards were issued with 6,207 returned: 3,329 in favour of meeting company directors, and 2,868 supporting ‘a cessation of labour’ to enforce the men’s demands. The union executive was cautious about what to do, but recommended meeting the company directors, ‘pointing out that in the event of the reply ... being unsatisfactory, they could consider whether the more extreme step should be taken’.¹⁸

Meetings to increase the membership and promote the ‘movement’ continued, and in May one took place in Dumfries, attended by SASRS general secretary, Henry Tait. The former Dumfries railwayman, William Forteith, presided, regretting the men could not meet on a weekday, when attendance would be larger, because of ‘the conditions surrounding railway work’. He expressed the rather eccentric view that membership of the union was ‘a purely commercial transaction, similar ... to a person investing in railways’, but stressed the friendly benefits offered, and noted that, since inauguration, the union had paid out £15,000 in benefits. Forteith was pleased to hear of the union’s progress and ‘hoped that the men in Dumfries and district would all give it their entire sympathy and practical support’. His emphasis on benefits may indicate that Dumfries railwaymen joined the union as much for themselves as for attempts to improve working conditions through collective bargaining, and this may in part explain the branch’s lack of ‘militancy’.

Tait spoke at length about the union’s aims, the demand for shorter hours and payment for overtime and Sunday working. He argued that ten hours was a long enough working day for anyone, and that the nature of railway work made it dangerous to work longer than this. Other factors, like the amount of night work, meant men often became fatigued and more susceptible to accidents, thus endangering the public. However, he ended on a positive note – about the union’s overall ambitions, urging any of his audience who were not yet members to join. The SASRS membership nationally had risen by this time to almost 7,000 and he hoped that in a few weeks another 1,000 would have joined.¹⁹

¹⁶ ‘Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants’, *Standard*, 27 June 1885, p3.

¹⁷ ‘Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants at Stranraer’, *Standard*, 1 January 1890, p5; reporting to the SASRS executive’s AGM in March 1890, Milne said eleven new branches had been created over the past year; Bagwell (1963) p141.

¹⁸ ‘The Railway Employees’, *Standard*, 8 January 1890, p2.

¹⁹ ‘Meeting of Railway Servants’, *Standard*, 7 May 1890, p2.

Further meetings during the year garnered more support for the shorter hours campaign, and by mid-November the *Standard* was speculating on a ‘Threatened Railway Strike’. The companies had failed to acknowledge the men’s grievances and rejected their attempt to submit the issue to arbitration.²⁰ This prompted the union executive to suggest that:

it seems the railway companies of Scotland are not amenable to reason, when they decline to submit their case from an employer’s standpoint before an arbitration board. The statement is made that the Caledonian Board have had no difference or questions with their staff. Such a reply may be sufficient to allay the conscience of a board of directors, but certainly is not a sufficient reason to the public, and especially their workmen, who are working 12 to 18 and 20 hours per day, why they should refuse to submit the fair claims of their men to arbitration.²¹

At a mass meeting in Glasgow in early November, union president William Milne insisted union demands would cost the companies a ‘less than 1 per cent dividend’. Moreover, he believed ‘The men had the full support and sympathy of Trades Unionists and the ... public’. He suggested the companies were ignoring the warnings given them by the Board of Trade, and argued the Board needed greater powers before its warnings would be heeded. He also claimed that firemen, over the previous two months, had been ‘working longer hours than ever was known before’, and a resolution was carried regretting ‘the overtures to secure a settlement by arbitration had not been accepted’ leaving only ‘one course for the men to secure their demands – a cessation of labour.’²² The executive was instructed ‘to arrange to bring [this] about at once throughout the various railway systems, on a date to be fixed by the committee’. Meanwhile, a meeting of 60 local railwaymen in Dumfries, attended by SASRS assistant general secretary Ballantyne, agreed the same line as the Glasgow meeting ‘and a solution in terms similar to the above was unanimously adopted’.²³

The origins of the strike

The greater pressure on the firemen, and, indeed, on railwaymen more generally, was a result, according to Mavor, of ‘the congestion of traffic on the North British system, following upon the opening of the Forth Bridge’,²⁴ and, according to Philip Bagwell, the historian of the National Union of Railwaymen:

the six weeks’ strike of December 1890 and January 1891 might never have occurred had it not been for the exceptional circumstances on the North British Railway. The opening of the Tay Bridge in June 1887, and the Forth Bridge in

²⁰ ‘Railway Servants’, *Standard*, 22 October 1890, p2.

²¹ ‘Threatened Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 12 November 1890, p3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Mavor (1891b), p9.

March 1890, greatly increased the volume of goods traffic on the line and created an intolerable congestion in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh.²⁵

Indeed, contemporary criticism of the company stated it had been ‘notoriously mis-managed for some time’, and that ‘[t]he block of traffic at Edinburgh since the Forth Bridge was opened [was] disgraceful’.²⁶

The increased pressure on the North British railwaymen fed through into the working conditions of railwaymen across much of the system, as attempts were made to reduce the bottleneck at Edinburgh by re-distribution throughout the rest of the country. According to Bagwell:

The consequence of this gross mismanagement was the placing of an intolerable burden on the staff. In August 1890, many drivers, firemen and guards were employed for 19, 22, 23 or even 25 hours at a stretch. Working weeks of 96 and 97 hours were reported.²⁷

As a result, the union decided on a major relaunch of the ten hours’ campaign in Glasgow in August. Its demands comprised a universal ten-hours day; hours to be calculated by the day, not the fortnight; time and a quarter for overtime; time and a half for Sundays; an eight hours maximum for yardsmen, shunters, ground pointsmen, locomotive men and some signalmen; universal annual holidays; abolition of the ‘trip’ system for running trains; a mileage system for passenger and goods trains; a guaranteed week’s work, and a full day’s pay when men were called out for duty or awaiting orders.²⁸

Replying to the union in November, the Caledonian general manager, James Thompson, rejected the arbitration appeal, referred again to company grievance procedures, and said his directors saw ‘no reason for departing from that practice which has hitherto worked satisfactorily’. The union response to this was a series of mass meetings on 9 November, urging the SASRS executive to prepare for a strike. The reply from the North British Company, later in November, insisted ‘there was no question at issue between the directors and their workmen’ and that ‘the whole subject had been thoroughly gone into in 1883 [!] and a satisfactory adjustment effected’.²⁹ But the North British general manager, Walker, added a clear threat to employees, should they decide to strike – the company had a waiting list of applicants for any vacancies so caused.³⁰

A further round of SASRS meetings a fortnight later considered the executive’s proposal that ‘a general strike should take place on 24 December’ over the Caledonian, G&SWR and North British systems, ‘in order to secure a maximum working day of ten hours’. A ‘well filled’ meeting of Dumfries railwaymen in Dickson’s Hall was addressed by the vice-president of ‘Glasgow Trades Congress’, Mr Brodie, of the Glassmakers Society. Two resolutions were passed, the first supporting the strike call; the second urging men to join the union. It was noted the strike would only happen if the union execu-

²⁵ Bagwell (1963), p140.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mavor (1891b), p10.

²⁹ ‘Threatened Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 26 November 1890, p4.

³⁰ Ibid.

tive believed there was enough support for its success and Brodie spoke for the resolution:

He believed the Dumfries branch was not one of the strongest in the society and that many present were not members of it; but he submitted that the reasons were equally strong why they should join the strike. The position taken up by the executive was entirely justified; no other course indeed was open to them. They had gone into this question with a great deal more patience and perseverance, he ventured to say, than had been exhibited by any other trades organisation.

According to the *Standard*, the show of hands supporting the resolution, comprised ‘a comparatively small response; but none were held up against’.³¹

Although the *Standard* believed the strike might yet not happen, as ‘a considerable proportion of even those present ... indicated by abstinence from voting that they were not prepared personally to resort to the extreme step recommended’, it also noted that:

[a]t Dumfries, where the Trade Union branch embraces only a fraction of the employees, this apathy was very marked. ... Many of those who are asked to risk their situations, we understand, already enjoy a working day of ten hours or less; and a man requires to be strongly imbued with the spirit of Trades Unionism, and also to possess some experimental knowledge of the resources of the organisation, before he is prepared to face such a sacrifice in order to extend the same advantages to others.³²

Nevertheless, the newspaper’s sympathies lay with the men:

It is a pity, therefore, that the directors have declined the overtures of the Trades Union to submit the general question of hours to a conference or arbitration. The offer to deal with the men directly, according to ... grades, is ... specious;³³

adding:

The time has gone past when employers can affect to ignore the existence or the position of Trades Unions. This was made sufficiently plain in ... the London Dock strikes. And there is no ground for regarding the officials of a Union with jealousy, as outsiders offering an impertinent interference. They are the duly chosen and accredited representatives of the men; and nothing is to be gained by refusing to treat with them on that footing.³⁴

At meetings across the country on 14 December, the SASRS executive urged that, as insufficient strike notices had been returned, more ‘effort should be made to get a larger proportion of the men to agree to strike’. However, the Glasgow meeting rejected this, passing an amendment calling for a strike to begin on 21 December. The same amend-

³¹ Ibid.

³² ‘The Railway Dispute’, *Standard*, 26 November 1890, p4.

³³ ‘A Real Grievance’, *Standard*, 26 November 1890, p4.

³⁴ Ibid.

ment was carried in Arbroath, Ayr, Bathgate, Coatbridge, Dundee, Hamilton and Motherwell, whilst at Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Forfar, Greenock and Kilmarnock, the executive resolution was adopted, highlighting once again a lack of unanimity. In Dumfries, however, antipathy to strike action was even more pronounced, as a meeting of ‘about two dozen employees’ rejected both executive recommendation and Glasgow amendment, thus indicating the likely response to any call for strike action.³⁵

The onset of the strike

Reports of the start of the strike appeared in both Dumfries newspapers on 24 December, with the *Courier* announcing that ‘The railway men’s agitation for the purpose of securing for themselves a ten-hours day has culminated in a strike’,³⁶ and the *Standard* highlighting the emotionally charged Glasgow meeting.

At a crowded meeting of the railway servants in the employment of the Caledonian, North British, and Glasgow & South-Western companies held in Glasgow on Sabbath, it was agreed, amidst great enthusiasm, to resort at once to a strike, in order to establish a maximum working day of ten hours. A second meeting took place in the evening, at which arrangements were made for picketing all the principal depots ... and delegates were despatched to every important railway centre in Scotland to persuade the men to join in the strike.³⁷

Indeed, according to Bagwell, ‘There was no mistaking the feeling of the monster meeting in the Albion Halls’ and the fact that ‘the men were much influenced by the recent success of the movement on the North Eastern [Railway]’ in England, where several concessions had included direct negotiations with the English union.³⁸

Nationally, the strike seemed to begin fairly decisively, with action over the first two days – principally, according to Bagwell, by goods guards, drivers, firemen, signalmen and examiners³⁹ – paralysing much of the network, causing the English ASRS journal, the *Railway Review*, to assume the strike would be over – and victorious – very quickly:

The men have struck, and we sincerely trust that before this journal is published they will be victors. ... To appeal to other railwaymen to refuse to assist the companies in this strike is, we presume, useless, because it will be over before we could reach them.⁴⁰

³⁵ ‘The Proposed Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 17 December 1890, p3, and ‘Railway Servants Meeting in Dumfries’, *Courier* 20 December 1890, p4.

³⁶ ‘Strike of Scotch Railway Servants’, *Courier*, 24 December 1890.

³⁷ ‘Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p5.

³⁸ The vote for the strike in Glasgow was 660 for to 81 against; Bagwell (1963), p143. Of meetings on the same day as the Glasgow meeting, at Ayr, Coatbridge, Dundee, Falkirk, Hamilton and Motherwell, only Ayr voted against strike action and that by only two votes; ‘Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p5.

³⁹ Bagwell (1963), p144.

⁴⁰ ‘The Scotch Strike’, *Railway Review*, 26 December 1890, No 646, p618.

The Dumfries press was more focussed on the practical effects nationally and locally. According to the *Courier*:

The strike on Tuesday morning [the 23rd] assumed alarming proportions. ... Throughout Monday, on the three lines of railway affected, the passenger traffic was carried on in a partial and irregular pattern, but of the staff that enabled the companies to do so, many have now joined the strikers, and the outlook, so far as the running of passenger trains is concerned, is not by any means cheering. The goods and mineral traffic may be said to be completely stopped, and the accumulation at some of the principal centres is reported to be enormous. ... It is estimated that about 5000 men ... are idle at the present time.⁴¹

The *Standard* likewise highlighted the impact nationally:

On Monday [the 22nd] the strike was greatly extended, and that evening, according to the estimate of the executive of the Railway Servants' Society, 4500 had stopped work. The effect was to bring to a standstill the goods traffic of the west of Scotland. ... The men in the employment of the North British Company struck in larger numbers than those on the other lines. ... The strike extended considerably yesterday, it being estimated by the men that about seven thousand had ceased work. The North British is feeling the effect most severely. Out of a usual service of 54 trains to and from Queen Street passenger station, Glasgow, yesterday, only eight went out and three arrived.⁴²

The *Standard*'s first editorial on the strike 'deplored' the action, but it was at least as critical of the companies as it was of the men, believing it was the companies' 'duty to meet the men in conference and endeavour to effect a satisfactory compromise'. On the other hand, it did observe that:

the strikers [were] acting in opposition to the advice of their Union officials, and, by failing to give the usual notice to their employers, in direct breach of contract.⁴³

The *Courier*'s first editorial about the strike concentrated on the impact in Dumfries, where:

the strike has not been general, nor has it been entered into heartily by the servants, and consequently both railways have been able with some little delay to clear off goods in their yards. Today the passenger trains are arriving in Dumfries very late, and no goods trains have been run to this place during the forenoon.⁴⁴

⁴¹ 'Strike of Scotch Railway Servants', *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p7.

⁴² 'Railway Strike', *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p5.

⁴³ 'The Railway Strike', *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p4.

⁴⁴ Untitled, *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p4.

Both papers had long reports about developments in Dumfries. The *Courier*'s assessment was that 'everything [was] working smoothly', but it acknowledged that pickets from Glasgow were active, endeavouring to persuade men to join the strike:

Dumfries has not been seriously affected by the strike, and goods traffic has been going as usual with very little delay. The position up till Monday afternoon was exactly as if no strike had been proceeding, but all day three pickets, who were posted at different parts of the town so as to catch the railway servants coming from their work, were busy trying to induce the men to join the movement and support their fellow-workmen in the Northern sections. The direct result of this was that the yardmen at the Glasgow & South-Western goods yard came out on strike, but in all the other departments the men remained firm.⁴⁵

The *Standard* also noted the role of the pickets, saying 'They succeeded ... only in a very few instances, and that with Glasgow and South-Western men'. The number of strikers at this stage, it stated, was nine, 'these being entirely goods guards and shunters';⁴⁶ but its report acknowledged three Portpatrick line Caledonian goods guards were on strike, though not yet any Dumfries locomotive men. By the morning of the 24th the number of strikers was 16, and to deal with this, the G&SWR transferred men from other duties,⁴⁷ the *Courier* reporting on their action thus:

Acting upon the warning given by the general manager of the G&SW Railway, the traffic inspector yesterday filled up permanently the places of two of the strikers in the goods yard, four today, and by Friday it is expected that the whole of the places will be filled. There are plenty of applications for the vacant situations, 16 applications for the dozen vacancies in the Goods yard of the G&SW being received, and eight applications refused.⁴⁸

Both newspapers reported a meeting of local railwaymen on Monday evening, the 22nd, at St Mary's Hall. Coincidentally, the AGM of Dumfries SASRS was scheduled for the same evening and the branch president, Mr D. Thom, was present, although unwilling to chair the strike meeting. In the event, one of the Glasgow pickets, a Caledonian fireman, Mr D. Thomson, was elected to do this, and, opening the meeting, attended, the *Standard* said, by 'nearly forty persons', he thought they had 'a good majority of the Glasgow and South-Western Railway guards' in attendance – though there was disappointment there were no locomotive men present. During the meeting 'several others ... arrived from the yards of both companies, as they left off work, and were greeted with cheers'. Emphasising the overwhelming support for the strike in Glasgow, a second Glasgow-based Caledonian picket, noted that 60 men had been despatched as pickets across Scotland to ensure all railway centres joined the strike, and a telegram duly arrived from the SASRS general secretary, stating that two more delegates would be leav-

⁴⁵ 'The Position in Dumfries', *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p7.

⁴⁶ 'Dumfries', *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Untitled, *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p4.

ing for Dumfries, arriving later that evening. The telegram concluded by saying that ‘All centres are now out’.⁴⁹

One of the Dumfries G&SWR men moved a resolution supporting the strike, urging that:

they should endeavour to keep out all those who were out. There were a good many there who should have been at work. He hoped they would stick together, and not resume work until a settlement was made.⁵⁰

In the ensuing debate various views were put. The Dumfries SASRS branch secretary, Robert Carlyle, acknowledged he had agreed to work as a relief guard the following morning, but after that, inspired by general secretary Tait, he said he would join the strike. A Caledonian pointsman, Mr D. Syme, opposed the strike, believing it was not a good time to strike because of the level of unemployment, with unemployed men keen to take strikers’ jobs. Much of the discussion then centred on the question of solidarity with the strikers:

The mover of the motion said ... many men had no grievance, and for this reason they would not come out. He had no grievance, and he should have been ... on duty that night ... He was out on strike, and was going to stand by his fellow-workmen who had too long hours. He thought it was the duty of every railway servant to come out and stand by their fellows until they got their rights.⁵¹

The chairman asked for a show of hands by the G&SWR guards willing to remain out ‘and ten held up their hands’, but one of the few Caledonian men ‘said it was no use their small number coming out, for their places would be filled next day’. Despite this, further efforts were made to persuade them to strike.

At this point the Dumfries SASRS branch members withdrew for their AGM, but before doing so they indicated that the local branch, over its sixteen or more years, had often not been well supported. Branch president Thom said that throughout that time, though probably meeting only quarterly or half-yearly for much of it, ‘he could count thirty or forty nights when they could not raise a quorum of five’, and the pointsman Syme agreed that ordinary meetings were often poorly attended, whereas, when the branch was started, as many as 80 would be present. Branch secretary Carlyle concurred, acknowledging that:

When he went into the secretaryship of the local branch of the Society last year, he found that things were moving very slowly, but he might say that he had done more for and received more members into the branch in the twelve months he had been secretary than there had been admitted to it for the last ten years.⁵²

⁴⁹ ‘The Meeting’, *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p5, and ‘Meeting of the Men in Dumfries’, *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p7.

⁵⁰ ‘The Meeting’, *Standard*, 24 December 1890, p5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² ‘Meeting of the Men in Dumfries’, *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p7.

The general meeting reconvened later, with the two additional delegates from Glasgow: one a G&SWR railwayman, one a North British employee. The latter reported that 130 Carlisle men were on strike, but a local G&SWR fireman said that:

... at Dumfries there was not a fireman or a locomotive man who would come out. Only 4 out of the 59 were prepared to leave work. Any picketing that had been done had not influenced one driver or fireman a bit, nor would do. The first thing to do would be to influence the coaching department, and get them to come out more fully, and if that was done the movement would be a success in Dumfries.

Neither newspaper indicated whether his suggestion was acted upon.⁵³

National and local developments

Across Scotland as a whole, there were signs the withdrawal of labour was having a considerable impact. On Saturday, 27 December, the *Standard* reported that, although the passenger service in the south had been ‘fairly well maintained’, further north ‘it has been seriously interrupted’. Both papers agreed the collapse of the goods and mineral traffic was causing widespread inconvenience, and had led to early closing of mines and public works for the New Year holidays.⁵⁴ Goods trains on the G&SWR line through Dumfries were badly affected on Wednesday 24th and Thursday 25th, and the company was refusing to transport livestock. Caledonian goods traffic was ‘very irregular’ and the overall effect on local trade had seen ‘traders ... put to a good deal of inconvenience’, through non-delivery of Christmas stock, with coal in short supply, its price rising from 10d per cwt to 1s 2d per cwt. The *Courier* highlighted the effects of the strike earlier in the week:

On Wednesday traffic on the Glasgow and South-Western Railway became very much disorganised from the North end especially, and the severity of the strike was beginning to be felt very much. Few goods trains passed Dumfries, and the passenger traffic was considerably impeded.

However, by late Thursday and Friday, the situation had improved, with the G&SWR able to send trains to Ayrshire to secure coal supplies for Dumfries.

The public began calling for negotiations between the two sides, and meetings were held to put pressure on both companies and union. Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce urged the railway directors and men to work for an ‘amicable settlement’, and a public meeting was arranged in Dumfries for Friday 2 January, to be chaired by the Provost.⁵⁵ Several offers of national mediation were made, but the union said it had been willing to negotiate for fifteen months, and had had its request for arbitration rejected by the companies, who remained obdurate. The *Standard* reported that the Caledonian Company had taken on 36 ‘blackleg’ English drivers to fill striker vacancies, with the *Courier* reporting that the G&SWR had sent men from Dumfries to the congested districts to bring traffic back to Dumfries. Meanwhile, the Caledonian and North British Companies, al-

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 27 December 1890, p4.

⁵⁵ ‘Public Meeting’, *Courier*, 27 December 1890, p1.

leging strikers were no longer employees, were threatening to evict strikers' families from houses the companies owned.

By this time both newspapers were reporting an increase in the numbers on strike in Dumfries:

Picketing was [being] carried on actively, and as the result they claimed that they had brought out six firemen and six cleaners from the G&SW locomotive department that morning [the 25th]. One of the latter, however, returned to work, but the strikers were joined by the pointsman from Closeburn station.⁵⁶

According to the *Standard*, this brought the number on strike to twenty-five, but the *Courier* said the G&SWR had filled the firemen's and cleaners' places straightaway, and 'they have yet on hand five more men offering for vacant situations'. It also reported that:

The G&SW line has been picketed from Gretna Green to Dumfries without success as yet, but the pickets report that the men are wavering. On the same evening the pickets tried to induce the porters at the passenger station at Dumfries to leave their employment, but although several ... men attended the meeting of the strikers in St Mary's Hall, they all returned to their posts next morning.⁵⁷

The pickets were trying to induce men in the locomotive department to strike, and the report stated that locomotive men had met the strikers late on Wednesday evening, the 24th, but had subsequently returned to work.⁵⁸ The Caledonian men in Dumfries were reported as all remaining at work, enabling that company's passenger trains to leave Dumfries 'with ordinary regularity', although arrivals were delayed. The *Courier* concluded its report by observing both sides were confident of success, but that 'in the southern division of the G&SW line, Dumfries holds the key ... and will do so as long as the drivers remain firm'. The outcome of the strike thus remained very uncertain.⁵⁹

The next major event for the papers was a 'hastily convened' public meeting in St Mary's Hall on Thursday, 26 December, at which former Mid-Lanark 'independent labour' candidate, and adopted West Ham candidate, James Keir Hardie, was to be the main speaker.⁶⁰ The chairman, Robert Carlyle, rejected the companies' claim the strike was about pay, insisting it was about hours. Whilst acknowledging the legal point made by the strikers' critics – the men not giving the required notice – he argued the union had been attempting to negotiate for fifteen months and had made it clear the men would strike if there was no movement by the companies: 'If they had given the Company a fortnight's warning ... they would simply have cut their own throats'.⁶¹ The men wanted the day as the basis for employment, so as to ensure they got a full day's pay for each

⁵⁶ 'The Position in Dumfries', *Courier*, 27 December 1890, p3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Meeting in Dumfries – Speech by Mr Keir Hardie', *Standard*, 27 December 1890, p4, and 'Meeting of the Men Last Night', *Courier*, 27 December 1890, p3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

day worked; having a 60-hour week could be manipulated by the companies. Indeed, the men wanted to end overtime, and ‘give work to those who could not get it’. Carlyle also believed they were striking for union recognition, and after being cheered at several points, moved a resolution of solidarity.⁶²

It was then Hardie’s turn to speak. He endorsed the resolution and took up the point about the strike’s alleged ‘illegality’:

He admitted frankly that their notices should have been worked out, but for fourteen months they had been carrying on this crusade legitimately, and as they had failed to carry their agitation legally, they were justified by every law known to humanity to carry it through by means of rebellion. He assured them that every civil and religious liberty possessed by the people of this country had been obtained and maintained by rebellion and the breaking of a law that was bad.⁶³

He then quoted the Scottish Labour Party railway policy – public ownership – for which he was soundly cheered:

The electors could ... aid in this matter [he said] by insisting that where railway companies did not work their lines fairly and treat their servants reasonably that it should become the duty of the State to take over the lines with or without payment for them and work them in the interests of the community at large and of the servants who performed their duties so faithfully.⁶⁴

Hardie challenged the companies’ claim they could not afford the men’s demands, and pointed to railway profits of £33,500,000. This equated to ‘an average on the capital invested of 4½ per cent’, whereas, if the men’s demands were met it would reduce the dividend by less than ¼ per cent, so it was not true the companies could not afford it.⁶⁵ The real reason was because the companies:

knew that if the men got a ten hours’ day, not twelve months hence they would want a nine hours’ day, and again twelve months afterwards they would want an eight hours’ day, and so the directors knew it was better to begin and fight the battle now, and break up the union of the men and disorganise them before they began to feel their strength.⁶⁶

He questioned the idea that ‘capital would leave the country’ and suggested they consider what ‘capital’ was. In doing this, he caused some amusement through imagining directors carrying off locomotives, bridges and rails.⁶⁷ At the same time, he hoped there would be no violence. There had been none yet, and ‘he did not believe trumped up

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ ‘Meeting of the Men Last Night’, *Courier*, 27 December 1890, p3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ ‘Meeting in Dumfries – Speech by Mr Keir Hardie’, *Standard*, 27 December 1890, p4.

stories about violence ... manufactured for the occasion'.⁶⁸ He concluded by hoping that the following day 'the number on strike in Dumfries would be very largely increased'.⁶⁹

Local trade unionist and Scottish Labour Party member Samuel McGowan then moved a second resolution, that the meeting support the strikers and that, if the companies did not 'act fairly', it was 'the duty of the State to take over the lines and work them in the interests of the railway servants and the general community'. Greeted with cheers, the resolution was carried without dissent. Hardie, thanking the chairman, said he was going on to Carlisle, 'where he hoped to find matters progressing'. Ayrshire, he said, was with them, but he wondered where local Members of Parliament and parliamentary candidates were.

The second week of the strike

The *Courier* began its reports of the strike's second week by claiming the companies had substantially 'recovered from the confusion ... [caused] by the sudden desertion of ... working staff' when the strike began:

Passenger trains [it suggested], if somewhat fewer in number than ordinary, were run with some approach to regularity, and in various districts goods and mineral trains were also worked. The companies were enabled to do this mainly by the aid of old and retired servants who again agreed to take duty, the defections from the ranks of the strikers being very trifling, the men as a rule remaining firm in the position they have taken up.⁷⁰

Despite the improvement, the men also claimed there were few desertions among the strikers, and they remained determined to win, with the *Courier* noting that:

Meetings of the men were held ... at most of the important railway centres, and there did not appear to be anything in the tone of these meetings to indicate that the strikers were meditating an immediate return to work.⁷¹

Strike pay was distributed from Monday 29th, and public subscriptions had begun for the strikers in some districts. Financial support was also offered to the SASRS by other unions. The Boilermakers Society and the ASRS in Newcastle both committed £3,000 to the Scottish union's funds.⁷²

According to the *Courier*, the G&SWR had filled all vacancies caused by the strike, sending drivers to Glasgow to help reduce congestion there and carry goods to Ayr and Dumfries. On Sunday evening, the 28th, and Monday morning, the 29th, the company sent men to learn the Carlisle route. In Dumfries it said the locomotive men remained loyal, and goods traffic had been despatched to the G&SWR yard in Carlisle. The company had managed to relieve the 'block' there, so that on Tuesday evening, the 30th, G&SWR goods trains from the north had been able to pass through Dumfries without

⁶⁸ 'Meeting of the Men Last Night', *Courier*, 27 December 1890, p3.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ 'Strike of the Scotch Railway Servants', *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² 'The Railway Strike', *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

stopping. The company also announced all passenger trains would be running on the 31st. The Dumfries Caledonian goods yard, where there was little or no strike action, had also cleared its goods.⁷³ The *Standard*, however, whilst recognising the improvement in passenger services, suggested that goods traffic was still ‘somewhat disorganised’.⁷⁴

Both papers reported on the steps taken by the G&SWR to discipline and/or take legal action against their striking employees. The *Courier* suggested:

that inquiries have been made from headquarters for the names and addresses of the men on strike in Dumfries, and that they have been forwarded by the local officials. The presumption is that the Railway Company mean to prosecute the men or the ringleaders for leaving their work without warning. The wages due to the men out on strike have up to the present been withheld;⁷⁵

and the *Standard* reported that:

Like the other companies, the South-Western are taking legal proceedings against some of their employees, fifty-five summonses having been taken out under the Employers and Workmen Acts for damages amounting to £10 for contravention of signed contracts.⁷⁶

The outcome of the strike now looked as though it would depend on two factors: the amount of public support, and the solidarity amongst the workforce. Encouraging the first of these aspects in Dumfries, it was reported that the Dumfries Burghs Liberal MP, Robert Reid, had attended the meeting at St Mary’s Hall and supported the men:

On Saturday evening Mr R.T. Reid MP, and Mr Thos McKie, the Gladstonian candidate for Dumfriesshire, along with Mr James H. McGowan, the Gladstonian agent, visited the men out on strike in St Mary’s Hall, and in the course of an informal conversation expressed themselves in sympathy with the men. Mr Reid delivered a short speech, stating that he hoped the men would win.⁷⁷

An attempt to build greater solidarity took the form of:

a hurriedly arranged meeting of the railway servants in the Dumfries centre ... when Mr Keir Hardie was present, with three delegates representing each of the Scottish Railway Companies having their termini in Carlisle.⁷⁸

According to the *Standard*, ‘there was an attendance of about sixty, a good few of those who have not seen their way to join in the strike being present’.⁷⁹ Once again,

⁷³ ‘The Position in Dumfries’, *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁷⁴ ‘Dumfries and the South’, *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

⁷⁵ ‘The Position in Dumfries’, *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁷⁶ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6; according to Bagwell, the cases were subsequently dropped by the court; Bagwell (1963), p145.

⁷⁷ ‘The Position in Dumfries’, *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁷⁸ ‘Mass Meeting of the Men’, *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁷⁹ ‘Sunday Meeting in Dumfries’, *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

SASRS branch secretary Robert Carlyle presided, saying he was pleased to do so, ‘especially as there were so many present who had not joined ... the strike’. Some Dumfries trade unionists attended, but there were few locomotive men from either company.

Hardie began by saying he was glad so many workmen had turned out for the meeting:

Speaking at Carlisle on Saturday night [he said], he tried to get some of their friends to come with him to Dumfries, for he was certain that if they could be brought together face to face to talk over the present situation, and come to a common understanding one with another, they would not be behind hand in doing what they believed to be their duty.⁸⁰

To allay fears about the companies filling strikers’ jobs, he observed, to a mixture of cheers and laughter, that:

stokers, drivers and guards did not grow upon trees, they did not spring up from the ground or fall down from the clouds. Could they conceive such a thing [he asked] as the railway companies going out into our streets and gathering in 8500 men to take the places of those on strike?⁸¹

Moving to the resolution of grievances, he asked if people thought ‘the ... companies were going to remedy the grievances and put them right without pressure being brought to bear upon them.’ Moreover, if the companies were not going to remedy them:

what other means of putting pressure upon them had they than by withdrawing their labour? Those of them who were on strike had taken that course. They had certain grievances, and they had tried for fifteen months ... to get these grievances remedied. They had not succeeded in their pacific attempts to settle the question in dispute, and having failed by pacific means, there was no other course left open to them than to withdraw their labour until the railway companies were compelled not only to consider their terms, but to concede their claims as far as they were reasonable. These claims, he contended, were reasonable.⁸²

Hardie said that he was struck by the ‘moderation’ of the claims:

If they had wanted a six-hours day instead of a ten-hours day he could have understood the opposition, but the idea of requiring to strike for ten hours seemed to him so altogether strange as to carry with it the conviction that there must be something wrong somewhere.⁸³

He acknowledged that if the strike failed, ‘the leaders would be sacrificed’, but:

It would be those who remained in who would be responsible for the failure. It was not the railway companies the men were fighting just now, but those who

⁸⁰ ‘Mass Meeting of the Men’, *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁸¹ ‘Sunday Meeting in Dumfries’, *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

⁸² ‘Mass Meeting of the Men’, *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

continued at work. He pointed out that although by taking cleaners, fitters, and boilermakers, the companies were making a fair show with the passenger traffic, the mineral traffic was at a standstill. If they only succeeded in getting the men who were still at work to cast in their lot with those on strike, the dispute would be over before the middle of next week.⁸⁴

He knew from experience, as a former miner and miners' representative, the risks of striking, but believed that now the strike had become so widespread it could not possibly fail, 'unless it were through the action of the men in work'.⁸⁵ In conclusion:

he hoped they would all help in getting this 10 hours' day, and be prepared to still further declare for a 9 and then an 8 hours' day, for the intelligence that the Dumfries men had come out would strengthen the hands and hearts of those who were out.⁸⁶

The chairman appealed once more to every railway servant in the hall to 'join them in the struggle', and he agreed with Hardie that:

if the strike failed it would be at the hands of the Dumfries men alone, as there was not another engine shed of any importance standing in the same position in relation to the strike as Dumfries.⁸⁷

There followed a discussion about whether the Dumfries men still working should join the strike. A local fireman claimed that the G&SWR men had no reason to strike as they already had a ten-hours day – though this was challenged – and that the ten-hour claim was more relevant to the Caledonian and North British employees. Hardie asked those who had not joined the strike to explain why not and one goods driver said 'his reason was the want of unanimity amongst the 59 men in the locomotive department'.⁸⁸

The G&SWR delegate insisted colleagues in Carlisle were standing firm, and one of the Glasgow delegates proposed the 'drivers, firemen and brakesmen and others ... on the G&SWR in Dumfries [should] strike'. Only 20 hands were raised in support.⁸⁹ The driver who had spoken earlier said he would not strike unless 25 of the 59 locomotive men did so, even though:

since August, the railway company had three days off him in overtime for which he was not paid, and for the last fortnight he worked 140 instead of 120 hours, ... Another driver (not on strike) said he felt for his brethren very much, but he was not going to act on the advice given. He would not deceive them.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ 'Sunday Meeting in Dumfries', *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

⁸⁵ 'Mass Meeting of the Men', *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ 'Sunday Meeting in Dumfries', *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ 'Mass Meeting in Dumfries', *Courier*, 31 December 1890, p5.

⁹⁰ 'Sunday Meeting in Dumfries', *Standard*, 31 December 1890, p6.

At this point, Hardie said ‘he would not prolong the meeting’ further, and, after a final appeal by the chairman for men to join the strike, Hardie wondered if any of them had been asked to take the place of strikers in Glasgow, provoking cheers for a driver who had refused to do this. Finally, said the *Standard*, ‘The understanding come to ... was that those on strike should remain out, while the others were to return to their work’.⁹¹

The collapse of the strike in Dumfries

The failure to persuade more Dumfries railwaymen, particularly drivers, to join the strike contributed to what the *Standard* called ‘the virtual collapse of the strike on the Glasgow & South-Western railway’ on Wednesday night. However, this was not the main cause, as the paper explained, the ‘collapse’:

was precipitated by the return of the Hurlford employees under the threat of immediate eviction from homes which they occupy as tenants of the company. This had been one of the strikers’ strongest points, and when it became known along the line that they had yielded their example was generally followed.⁹²

The report then described how:

The Dumfries men presented themselves before the local heads of departments on Wednesday night or Thursday morning, and asked to be re-instated, as well as for payment of the fortnight’s wages which had been earned except for one working day at the time of the strike. They were told that their places had been filled, but the circumstances would be communicated to the central offices in Glasgow, from which instructions must emanate.⁹³

But the paper also stated that:

The result, up till last night, was that of twenty-three men on strike only one had been re-engaged, and that with a considerable reduction of wage and lowering of position. Formerly he acted as a goods guard; but now he has been taken on as a yardsman, with a wage of 20s per week in place of 26s as formerly.⁹⁴

The general picture was, according to the *Standard*, that:

All along the line the strike hands have had to submit to a lowering of their wages, varying in extent we are told from three to ten shillings per week; and those who remained in the company’s employment are reaping the advantage to some extent in an increase of payment and acquiring a priority of position. In the meantime also, payment is withheld of the wages which had been earned by those who broke their engagements. A good deal of chagrin is naturally felt at the drastic treatment meted out to them.⁹⁵

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² ‘The Railway Strike – Collapse on the South Western System’, *Standard*, 3 January 1891, p4.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

The paper attempted to soften its reporting of G&SWR retribution by suggesting most employees would soon be reinstated ‘when the warning is thought to have served its purpose’.⁹⁶ But it also stated that six Dumfries firemen had left for Glasgow to seek employment with the Caledonian company, thus contributing to undermining the strike they had been actively supporting until the previous day. By contrast, the *Courier* was unremitting in highlighting the ‘lesson’ for defeated strikers, with an, at best, naive, and more likely, disingenuous, expression of trust in the companies to put things right:

Now the men are besieging the heads of the various departments begging to be taken back, and most of them who have discovered that their places are filled find themselves in the ranks of the unemployed. The lesson they have learned is a severe one; yet it will teach them and others in future to place their fortunes in abler hands than those of the wrong-headed agitators who have practically been their ruin. There is good reason to believe that if they had returned to work when first invited by their employers their case would have been carefully considered, and it is more than probable that most of the concessions they asked for would have been conceded.⁹⁷

On the state of local rail services, the *Courier* reported that:

There is now little or no block on the line, which is open from end to end, and passenger and railway traffic has been carried ... expeditiously and regularly from both North and South. Passenger traffic was exceedingly heavy during Wednesday and Thursday, there being a large increase of travellers.⁹⁸

The end of the strike by G&SWR workers meant the company was at an advantage as regards freight business, since it could take custom from the Caledonian and North British companies, whose goods and mineral services were still disorganised. For the last few days, the *Courier* reported on 3 January:

the [G&SWR] Company have augmented their ordinary goods traffic by working the North British goods traffic via Glasgow and Dumfries to the South and vice versa.⁹⁹

This fact was not lost on the Caledonian and North British strikers who believed this would put more pressure on those companies to make a settlement:

The Caledonian and North British men still stand out firmly with few exceptions; and their leaders express the opinion that the surrender on the South-Western system – on which, it is said, the conditions of work are more favourable – so far from weakening their position, will tend to strengthen it, as that company will now secure much of the traffic naturally pertaining to the others, who will thus be threatened with a permanent loss of revenue.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ ‘End of the Strike’, *Courier*, 7 January 1891, p2.

⁹⁸ ‘The Position in Dumfries – Collapse of the Strike’, *Courier*, 3 January 1891, p3.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ ‘The Railway Strike – Collapse on the South Western System’, *Standard*, 3 January 1890, p4.

The *Courier* confirmed this, reporting that:

In Glasgow on Wednesday, the South-Western were indeed called upon to carry goods which had been consigned by the other routes to such a large extent that they had in the end to close their gates upon it.¹⁰¹

Other national developments affecting the G&SWR included an announcement by its general manager thanking employees who had stayed loyal and ‘intimating that the timetable service of trains is now in full operation’,¹⁰² with the *Courier* reporting that:

The [G&SWR] Company have very liberally recognised the services of those who remained loyal during the strike, and have also dealt handsomely with them for their extra labours during the extra work of the past week.¹⁰³

This return to something like ‘normal’ in Dumfries substantially reduced interest in the dispute and undermined attendance at the public meeting scheduled for 2 January. At a stroke public concern about the strike, the railwaymen, and passenger safety, seemed considerably diminished. According to the *Standard*, ‘less than thirty persons put in an appearance’ for the meeting, which the Provost cancelled.¹⁰⁴ The *Courier* confirmed this, observing that:

Although the advertisement calling the meeting requested all those interested to be present there was only a very poor attendance, the public showing little or no sympathy in the matter. None of the pickets were present, they having returned to their homes, and only the secretary of the local branch of ... Railway Servants and another striker were in attendance as representing the men.¹⁰⁵

This change was reflected in subsequent reports, the *Courier* stating that:

All interest in the strike in the district has now dropped, and matters on both the Glasgow and South-Western and Caledonian are being carried on as usual, goods and passenger trains being despatched and received with almost the normal regularity.¹⁰⁶

An attempt to resurrect the strike in Dumfries, with pickets from Carlisle, failed, with the *Courier* commending:

The wise policy of the directors of the Company in granting a gratuity of a week’s pay at the next fortnightly payment to all those who stuck to their work during the crisis.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ ‘The Railway Strike – Marked Improvement in Traffic’, *Courier*, 3 January 1891, p3.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ ‘The Position in Dumfries – Collapse of the Strike’, *Courier*, 3 January 1891, p3.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ ‘The Dumfries Public and the Strike’, *Courier*, 3 January 1891, p3.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Dumfries’, *Courier*, 10 January 1891, p3.

¹⁰⁷ ‘The Railway Strike – Dumfries’, *Courier* 17 January 1891, p3; and ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 24 January 1891, p4.

The *Standard* likewise reported there was no resumption of the strike, though there were still problems with goods and mineral services, but it noted that, whilst the Caledonian Company locally was ‘able to maintain a fairly efficient goods traffic ... [its] trains were arriving with great irregularity’. Mineral traffic was ‘at a complete standstill’ and coal in short supply, principally because of a shortage of engines.¹⁰⁸ But by 17 January, the *Courier* was reporting coal supplies restored and praising local railway company officials:

On both systems great tact and ability have been displayed by the railway officials in coping with the crisis, even when it was at its most acute state, and traders and others in the district have reaped the benefit of the admirable arrangements made, more especially on the G & S-W Railway, where the force of the strike was the most severely felt, to facilitate the transport and reception of goods and minerals.¹⁰⁹

The continuing strike

Both papers continued reporting the strike until its conclusion at the end of January. Prominent amongst events in early January was a riot at Motherwell, when the Caledonian Company served eviction notices on striking employees and their families from houses belonging to the company. In an editorial the *Standard* criticised this, rejecting the argument that strikers were no longer employees:

[A] strike is not a cessation of service in the ordinary sense. It is suspension of it, until the questions at issue are settled one way or the other and during its continuance it is cruel and causeless.¹¹⁰

The *Courier*, however, particularly in its editorials, regarded the strike as destined to fail:

The strike of Scottish railway servants, which was begun in a half-hearted fashion, has practically collapsed, and defeat lies not so much with the men as with their self-constituted leaders.¹¹¹

Adopting a more progressive position, the *Standard* urged the companies, and industry generally, to accept unions as part of the country’s industrial relations:

Trade Unions are as much a fact in the industry system of the country as railway companies are. Both are combinations – one of capital, the other of labour. The managers, though themselves servants, are the representatives of the shareholders. The Union leaders are equally so the representatives of the men. It is worse than absurd, therefore, for the salaried representatives of the Companies to put on airs of superiority and decline to treat with the salaried representatives of the Union.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ ‘The Railway Strike – Dumfries’, *Standard*, 14 January 1891, p4.

¹⁰⁹ ‘The Railway Strike – Dumfries’, *Courier*, 17 January 1891, p3.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 7 January 1891, p4.

¹¹¹ ‘End of the Strike’, *Courier*, 3 January 1891, p2.

¹¹² ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 7 January 1891, p4.

The *Courier*, meanwhile, attempting to have things both ways, indicated sympathy for some of the men, while denouncing the union:

Nobody denies that the great bulk of the employees upon one, at least, of our railway systems have a genuine grievance. But their case was placed in the hands of injudicious advocates, who pushed matters to a crisis in order to serve their own personal ends.¹¹³

What these ‘personal ends’ were, the paper failed to say, but, its view of contemporary industrial relations was that the railway strike was part of a larger struggle:

The fight is now, as it has been from the first, confined to the Directors and the New Unionism,¹¹⁴ and in the interests of the trade of the country it is to be hoped that the firebrands who are responsible for all the mischief will be utterly and entirely discredited.¹¹⁵

More important, however, was the increasing concern about railwaymen’s hours shown by members of Parliament, and this was featured in the *Standard* on 17 January:

A return has just been issued [it stated] regarding the hours worked by railway servants, as obtained from the companies by order of Parliament, in two selected months – September, 1889, and March, 1890. On the Glasgow & South-Western line during these two months 74 goods guards, 518 engine drivers and firemen, and 17 signalmen were employed for more than thirteen hours at a time; and in a number of cases engine drivers and firemen were required to resume work with less than eight hours rest.¹¹⁶

Indeed, further developments indicated growing support for the men amongst some MPs. Firstly, speaking in Coatbridge on 17 January, the Stirling Burghs MP and future Liberal prime minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, stressed that support for the railway companies in the House of Commons was conditional:

[T]he privileges which railway companies received from Parliament [he said] had been conceded on condition that they maintain for the use of the public a sufficient and regular means of transport and communication. The companies were the servants of the public and they were bound at whatever cost to themselves to fulfil their obligations. He maintained that the claims of the men on strike were reasonable and might well be granted, subject to such modifications and variations as the peculiar exigencies of railway service might require.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ ‘End of the Strike’, *Courier*, 3 January 1891, p2.

¹¹⁴ The ‘New Unionism’ was the name given to unions of unskilled workers formed in the late 1880s, including dockers, gasworkers and, famously, the ‘match girls’ at Bryant and May’s east London factory.

¹¹⁵ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 7 January 1891, p4.

¹¹⁶ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 17 January 1891, p4.

¹¹⁷ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 21 January 1891, p5; and ‘Echoes of the Strike – The Strike of Sympathy’, *Courier*, 21 January 1891, p6.

Secondly, East Northamptonshire MP Francis Channing, tabled a motion on railway-men's hours for debate in the Commons on 23 January:

That in the opinion of this House the excessive hours of labour imposed on railway servants by existing arrangements of railway companies of the United Kingdom constitute a grave social injustice and are a constant source of danger both to themselves and the travelling public, and that it is expedient that the Board of Trade should obtain powers by legislation to issue orders where necessary directing a railway company to limit the hours of special classes of their servants or to make such reasonable increase in any class of their servants as will obviate the necessity of overtime work.¹¹⁸

Thirdly, Dundee Liberal MP, John Leng, introduced a bill for a ten-hour day for guards, signalmen and shunters, and for eight-hour rest periods between shifts. Although defeated, this was a further expression of the concern amongst some parliamentarians, and despite Channing's motion also being defeated – though only by 17 votes – the Conservative Government felt compelled to establish a Select Committee to examine the whole issue.¹¹⁹ Whilst Channing initially opposed this, insisting there was enough evidence on which to base legislation, he became a leading member of the committee, whose report led, in July 1893, to the Railway Regulation Act,¹²⁰ showing the strike had not been in vain.

On Wednesday, 4 February, the end of the strike was reported in both newspapers, the *Courier* in a single paragraph;¹²¹ the *Standard*, in more detail, including the Caledonian Company settlement.¹²² The *Standard* also noted a 'considerable feeling of dissatisfaction at the settlement' in Motherwell and Hamilton, although, 'after meeting with Mr Tait and Mr John Burns on Sabbath, the men there agreed to acquiesce'. Tait attended a meeting of strikers in Glasgow to explain the settlement, hoping it would be accepted across the country. At the meeting:

A resolution was unanimously passed thanking trades unionists and others all over the country for the generous manner in which they had helped the men on strike by their subscriptions. It is said the sum subscribed from all sources to the strike fund amounts to the handsome total of £12,000, and that of that sum there is yet between £3000 and £4000 on hand.¹²³

The men's reinstatement was problematic, with them having to wait to be called as places became available. Once again, '[a] good deal of dissatisfaction was exhibited among the men at their not being taken on at once',¹²⁴ and the *Standard* concluded that:

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Similar concern was being explored in the House of Lords, led by Earl de la Warr; 'Doings in Parliament – The Hours of Railway Servants', *Courier*, 28 January 1891, p8.

¹²⁰ Bagwell (1963), p170.

¹²¹ 'Close of the Railway Strike', *Courier*, 4 February 1891, p7.

¹²² 'End of the Railway Strike', *Standard*, 4 February 1891, p3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

A large number of the men will not get employment for some time in consequence of the engines being scattered about the country; but it is hoped that by and by the greater part of them will get back to their old employment.¹²⁵

Learning the lessons

The failure of the strike, nationally and in Dumfries, can be put down, in the end, to a lack of the necessary levels of unity and solidarity amongst railway employees, if not union members, combined with a shortage of the numbers necessary to paralyse the network for long enough for the companies to realise they could not continue to function. With 8,000 men solidly on strike from the outset, and the paralysis this would cause – indeed, according to James Mavor,¹²⁶ did initially cause – there can be no doubt that the men would have won – assuming, of course, the State did not intervene – imposing not only the ten-hour day and other improved terms and conditions, but also recognition of the union. Why was this not achieved?

The answer is probably that the strike was called too early, before the union was fully prepared, and perhaps before a full realisation of what was necessary for it to succeed was entirely clear. The SASRS executive was proved right in believing there needed to be more men ready to strike than was reflected in the numbers registered by 21 December. The overwhelming vote for action at the Glasgow meeting – by 660 to 81 – clearly reflected the feeling of that meeting – and of centres like Glasgow, Hamilton and Motherwell – but it did not reflect the feelings of railwaymen throughout the country. That required what may have felt like endless patience for the preparatory work to be done to enable the union to know it could rely on the strike being overwhelmingly supported for what could have been, as the *Railway Review* expected, a very rapid victory. Had this been achieved, the ‘illegality’ issue of the strike would have had little impact, as the absence of a functioning rail network would have shown where real power lay, largely reducing, or even removing, the need for the support of ‘public opinion’.

However, securing a degree of united purpose and solidarity amongst the 8,000 or 9,000 men who were on strike by the middle of the first week would also have required a degree of organisational efficiency which the union at that stage did not have. For whilst it could rely on Glasgow, Hamilton, Motherwell and Edinburgh to be solid, as shown by their earlier militancy; other places, like Dumfries, away from the centres where railway employment and union membership were high, were another matter entirely. Indeed, James Mavor makes two telling points about this, the first being that:

... while the men in Glasgow and Edinburgh were enthusiastic in favour of a strike, the men in the country districts were apathetic. Work is less severe in the country than the town. The country men live in small groups thinly scattered over a large area.¹²⁷

Perhaps even more pertinent is Mavor’s second point:

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ ‘The result,’ he says, ‘was utter chaos’; Mavor (1891b), p15.

¹²⁷ Mavor (1891b), p12.

The magnetism of a crowd counts for something in a strike. When men are broken into small groups it is supremely difficult to sustain concerted action.¹²⁸

The result of this lack of solidarity was shown by the apparent inconsistency of strike action in various places, as men struck and, harried by anxiety about family and home, as well as railway company threats, returned to work, no matter how tireless the efforts of the SASRS executive and its pickets, and supporters like trade unionist John Burns who toured Scotland urging the men to ‘stick shoulder to shoulder’.¹²⁹ To be effective, strikes had to show a degree of power such that the withdrawal of labour was impossible to resist. Had there been such action, the companies would have been defeated at an early stage.

The creation of the necessary solidarity at all three companies was subject to employees seeing all three companies as equally uncompromising in their attitudes to the grievances. Significantly, the conditions on the G&SWR seem not to have been as harsh, or the management – before the strike – as vindictive as the North British and Caledonian companies, as the *Standard* observed after the ‘collapse’ of the local strike:

There does not seem to have been much of a grievance **acutely felt** [emphasis added] on the Glasgow and South-Western system, and on that system the movement of the employees has collapsed.¹³⁰

In Dumfries, as we have seen, union membership was low and the branch comparatively weak, though, on the other hand, the creation of a new branch in Stranraer a year earlier, suggests an eagerness to improve working conditions amongst rank-and-file railwaymen, and a belief this could be achieved through the union. If in Stranraer, why not in Dumfries?

But as we have also seen, the meetings of Dumfries railwaymen, both before and during the strike, showed a workforce much divided about strike action. Although by 1890, Dumfries had become a more industrial town, with large-scale tweed and hosiery mills and factories, it remained a market town with traditional ‘power relations’ between its ‘ruling’ establishment and its working class. Whilst craft unions had been established in building and domestic trades, achieving some pay increases and shorter working hours, the limits to successful trade union action was demonstrated in 1889 in the stalemate during the national Scottish bakers’ strike, with some employers, like the Co-operative Provision Society, agreeing the men’s demands immediately, and others run by local businessmen, like Chicken’s Maxwelltown bakery, refusing to negotiate with the union, and using ‘blacklegs’ to defeat the strike. Deference to employers and ‘masters’ thus continued, and was clearly a factor in the attitudes of many employees towards the railway companies, both of which, it must be said, provided largely secure and relatively well-paid employment.

But the absence of drivers, and local Caledonian employees in general, from the meetings in St Mary’s Hall, reflect what can be seen as a lack of ‘class-consciousness’ amongst some of the better-paid Dumfries railway employees, as well as, perhaps, an understandable concern to retain their jobs and security in the unknown circumstances of

¹²⁸ Ibid, p53.

¹²⁹ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 7 January 1891, p4.

¹³⁰ ‘The Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 7 January 1891, p4.

what might be a prolonged industrial dispute, at a time when there had been little experience of long-running strikes in Dumfries, and when there was no local trades council to provide co-ordinated support for the strike.¹³¹ Indeed, two letters in the *Standard*'s January correspondence columns, from an 'Old Railway Servant', who described himself as 'a non-striker', provide an example of this deferential attitude.¹³² On one level, the letters are a spiteful personal attack on the Dumfries SASRS secretary Robert Carlyle, presumably based on past quarrels, and the first was written at a time when coal supplies in and around Dumfries had been reduced by the strike, perhaps affecting 'Old Railway Servant's' coal agency business. The main thrust of his letters as regards the strike was that a ten-hour day would not represent 'fair play betwixt master and man'. The author was a past G&SWR railwayman and his 'career', from railway service to coal agent, suggests a trajectory with little or no awareness of or commitment to trade unionism. Indeed, one of the replies to his attack on Carlyle criticised him for failing to understand the purpose of trade unionism.¹³³ However, the engrained deference of 'Old Railway Servant', alongside the low level of support for the SASRS branch, reveal the limited amount of likely support for the strike, which the arrival of a handful of pickets on the day of the strike decision was unlikely to counteract. Dumfries required an extended amount of 'trade union education' before enough local railwaymen would grasp what was at stake.

Deference was, however, noticeably absent from another letter to the *Standard* about the dispute, which was highly critical of railway company managers and directors:

Would you allow me [the writer asked] to draw the attention of the shareholders of the various railway companies to the great loss that they are bound to sustain through the mismanagement of their business at the present moment, all through the obstinacy of their respective managers?

Believing 'it is granted on all sides that the men's demands are reasonable', he asked:

Why should the managers be allowed ... to stifle the men by compelling them to meet them through heads of departments? Are the managers not servants themselves of the companies?

He accused managers of 'trying to crush' the men 'as if they were as many slaves', and went on to assert that 'there is far too much officialism' in railway management, with 'each acting like a little despot'. He continued:

the manager and sub-managers do little or nothing but draw their enormous salaries. They all have under-paid clerks, who do the work, while they, the managers, know nothing about it.

He also claimed there was:

¹³¹ The longest-running recent dispute in Dumfries was the month-long bakers' strike of 1889; see Gasse (2002), pp239–274.

¹³² The letters were 'A Non-Striker', *Standard*, 3 January 1891, p7, and 'The Railway Strike', *Standard*, 17 January 1891, p3.

¹³³ A second letter, from a striking Caledonian guard, defended him as 'a good practical workman, which the man who makes the ungenerous attack ... never was'; 'The Railway Strike', *Standard*, 17 January 1891, p3.

no need for one third of the officialism that has crept into the railway system. ... Level them down a bit; give them all to understand that they are all servants; ... pay the hard-working man a good day's wage; and I warrant it will be a long time before there will be another strike.¹³⁴

However, the balancing of a commitment to the union and the strike with personal responsibilities for family often made decision-making about striking difficult, a predicament acknowledged by SASRS branch secretary, Robert Carlyle, at the meeting on 22 December. As he did not strike straightaway because of a previous agreement to act as relief guard on a mail train on the first day of the strike, he was vulnerable to criticism from both strikers and non-strikers. The dilemma was not lost on him as he debated what to do, but having completed the mail train duty, he joined the strike next day,¹³⁵ and in his reply to 'Old Railway Servant' he was firm in his commitment to the strike:

I leave the matter now to those who are able to judge between my accuser and myself, and, in conclusion, add: It was for the oppressed and not for myself that I sacrificed my position. I am at home today without employment for the part I took in the unfortunate strike, but I stand before my fellow-men with a clear conscience and having this comfort, that I have taken an honourable part in our endeavour to break down a system of oppression which was insidiously sapping the strength and manhood of a large number of Scotland's bravest men.¹³⁶

Picking up the pieces

As early as Wednesday 7 January, when the final outcome of the strike remained weeks away, a Caledonian Railway Company advert appeared on the front page of the *Courier*, seeking 'active young men ... to act as yardsmen and brakemen in the mineral districts near Glasgow'. Offering 'permanent employment to competent men ... wages beginning at 24s per week, ... good prospects of promotion' and free travel to Glasgow, the company was aiming to recruit former G&SWR railwaymen from Dumfries to rebuild its own operations further north, where the strike was still effective. The advert, which didn't appear in the *Standard*, was repeated the following week,¹³⁷ after which it disappeared, suggesting the company had been able, within little more than a week, to find sufficient 'new' employees for this area of its work.

A report in the same edition provided further details of the Caledonian Company's recruitment drive in Dumfries:

Five firemen have been engaged by Mr Smellie, of the Caledonian Railway, and left for Glasgow on Saturday ... to be drafted out to various centres. In the course of the same day other four brakemen and firemen were engaged for the Caledonian Railway, and have since gone to Glasgow to await orders. Others have also left the town in search of employment. Two or three additional men

¹³⁴ 'The Railway Strike', *Standard*, 3 January 1891, p7.

¹³⁵ 'Meeting of the Men in Dumfries', *Courier*, 24 December 1890, p7.

¹³⁶ 'The Railway Strike', *Standard*, 10 January 1891, p4.

¹³⁷ 'Caledonian Railway Company', *Courier*, 7 January 1891, p1, and 10 January 1891, p1.

left Dumfries yesterday for Glasgow under engagement to the Caledonian Railway Company.¹³⁸

Other redeployments of railwaymen were noted, with almost half the Dumfries G&SWR strikers – eleven out of twenty-five – finding new employment as a result of this process, ‘transferring’ from the G&SWR to the Caledonian, with the latter company presumably confident this would not increase militancy in its workforce further north. More generally, as regards finding employment, Bagwell notes that as late as May, three months after the strike, 265 SASRS members were still receiving union aliment payments, with ‘a large proportion of them ... from outlying centres where alternative employment was difficult to find’. Some migrated overseas to railways in Argentina and India, but, says Bagwell, ‘for hundreds of others the first six months of 1891 were a period of great privation’.¹³⁹

For the SASRS the end of the strike was, because of its financial predicament, a major turning point, compelling amalgamation with the English society, despite the generosity of other unions, trade unionists and members of the public contributing to strike funds. Talk of amalgamation had, in fact, begun in 1887. A sharp fall in membership after the strike was a further factor, and a ballot in 1892 resulted in ‘a large majority’ for merger.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, despite defeat and a return to work on the companies’ terms, the union, according to Bagwell, was ‘proud’ of its ‘determined stand for better working conditions’, and in March 1891 it ‘ordered the striking of bronze, silver and gold medallions’, to be sold at 9d, 3s and 21s to ‘those qualified to wear them’ and inscribed on one side with ‘Scotch Railway Strike 1890–1’, and on the other with ‘ASRS for Scotland’.¹⁴¹ At a June executive meeting, Tait claimed the strike had been justified:

... if only to place before the public (who are after all the masters of the railway companies) the degrading and demoralising conditions which they forced upon their servants.¹⁴²

In addition, following the strike, the companies did concede some of the men’s demands, reducing hours in some cases, and starting to pay Sunday overtime rates. There were also the moves to regulate railwaymen’s hours in the House of Commons, leading to the 1893 Railway Regulation Act, and perhaps, most significantly, a curb on railway company exceptionalism.

The *Standard* published little about the railways after the strike, though it noted the addition of a ‘labour’ representative to the Select Committee, which initially comprised

¹³⁸ ‘Dumfries – Exodus of Strikers’, *Courier*, 7 January 1891, p8; information about steps taken by defeated strikers to find new employment is unusual in Dumfries newspaper reports at this time, when, it should be noted, a twelve-month residency was necessary to retain the right to vote. The risk of losing a position as a result of strike action meant this was a constant threat to many working-class men.

¹³⁹ Bagwell (1963), p148.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp148–9; by 1895 the ASRS had 38,000 members; Clegg, Fox and Thompson (1964), p234

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p147.

¹⁴² *Ibid*.

mainly railway company appointees.¹⁴³ The *Courier*, on the other hand, in its editorials, saw the dispute as part of a ‘class war’ – a sustained assault on British capitalism by the ‘Labour Caucus’ of ‘New Unionism’, ‘which sought to establish itself as dictator of our railway systems’. It also maintained its support for the companies and virulent denunciation of the union, claiming:

... the directors have all along shown their readiness to discuss alleged grievances with the proper parties – the men themselves.¹⁴⁴

But, having rejected all criticism of the companies during the strike, it once again tried to have things both ways by saying that:

Now that the fray is over, we hope the victorious Companies will lose no time in making reductions in the working hours of their over-worked signalmen and drivers. This should be conceded [it said] in the public interest,¹⁴⁵

In the end, however, the *Courier* did seem to recognise that change in the railway industry had to come, and that this was only likely through Parliamentary or Board of Trade action.

Of the support for trade unionism amongst Dumfries railway employees in the aftermath of the strike, we learn nothing from the local press. However, twelve years later, in December 1903, the *Standard* did carry a report of ‘A Meeting of Railway Men’ in Dickson’s Hall, at which a Mr John G. Muir, ASRS organising secretary, was explaining the society’s overall objects to local railwaymen, focussing particularly, and in some detail, on the financial benefits of being a union member, in terms of support during periods of sickness, unemployment or suspension. At the end of the meeting, in which he referred to the union’s larger role in securing wage increases, shorter hours, fewer accidents and an increase in the number of railway employees, Muir concluded:

... with an earnest appeal to the railway men of Dumfries to consider the advisability of joining the society and **forming a branch at Dumfries** [emphasis added]. One recruit was enlisted, and a desire expressed that a branch should be formed.¹⁴⁶

It seems likely, therefore, that the Dumfries branch collapsed shortly after the strike. Many of the striking union members would have lost their jobs, and an already small membership undermined by the demoralisation of defeat would have likely made the branch unsustainable. In addition, for those employees more concerned with accessing ‘benefits’ during periods of sickness or unemployment than participating in collective bargaining, there were up to three railway friendly societies offering access to such benefits. A Scottish Railway Servants’ Friendly Society had been established in 1881, and was reported in the *Standard* in 1900 as being ‘in a healthy condition’, with a bank balance of almost £11,700, and a membership of over 3,500. It had paid out nearly £20,000

¹⁴³ ‘Last Night’s Parliament’, *Standard*, 25 February 1891, p4.

¹⁴⁴ ‘The Fruits of the Strike’, *Courier*, 4 February 1891, p4.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ ‘A Meeting of Railway Men’, *Standard*, 16 December 1903, p6.

in ‘sick alimant’ and almost £4,500 in death benefits over its twenty years.¹⁴⁷ There was a Glasgow & South-Western Railway Company Friendly Society which was flourishing in the later 1890s,¹⁴⁸ and it is likely the Caledonian Company had a similar society, as we know from a statement by the North British general manager during the strike that his company had one.¹⁴⁹

Final thoughts

It was left to the Dumfries trade unionist and local Scottish Labour Party branch secretary, Samuel McGowan, in a letter to the *Standard*, to draw what for him, at any rate, was the overarching lesson of the strike: that there needed to be a ‘more sweetly reasonable method of reducing excessive hours of labour than by the barbarous method of a strike’:

I venture to say that if this recent terrible strike but serves to enlighten the conscience of the nation upon the eternal justice of the demand to have the hours of labour reduced by legislation instead of strikes humanity will be the gainer. Is there an honest friend of the workers who will maintain, in view of the experience of the last six weeks, that it were better for railway workers to again resort to such a means of attempting (and, sad to say, failing) to shorten their hours of labour, rather than by means of such a bill as Mr Leng, MP for Dundee, has espoused?¹⁵⁰

Though agreeing that unions could win strikes and improve working conditions, he felt such victories, given the prevailing attitude of many employers, were always susceptible to reversal, as had recently happened, he noted, with London gasworkers.

In a period identified by trade union historians Clegg, Fox and Thompson as one of an employers’ ‘counter-attack’, leading to that more damaging railway dispute at Taff Vale, and the infamous House of Lords decision of 1901,¹⁵¹ this was perhaps as much as could be expected ahead of the Liberal ‘landslide’ of 1906, when a Parliamentary Labour Party of 29 MPs also emerged. Indeed, these political changes led to trade union legislation in 1906 and 1913, which seemed finally to guarantee the legal position of trade unions. But, as we also now know, enlightened trade union legislation can itself – like trade union collective bargaining success – be susceptible to challenge and reversal.

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¹⁴⁷ ‘Railway Servants’ Friendly Society’, *Standard*, 3 March 1900, p7.

¹⁴⁸ ‘Dumfries Branch of Railway Friendly Society’, *Standard*, 24 February 1897, p5 and ‘Railway Friendly Society: Dumfries Branch’, *Standard*, 17 November 1897, p5.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Threatened Railway Strike’, *Standard*, 26 November 1890, p4.

¹⁵⁰ ‘A Lesson of the Strike’, *Standard*, 4 February 1891, p3.

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