

The Wilkes-Barre Street Railway Strike of 1915

THE Wilkes-Barre streetcar strike of 1915-1916 presents a significant opportunity to study the problems of labor-management relations in early twentieth-century America with particular reference to the success of strikebreaking techniques. This strike lasted for fourteen months and involved a classic use of money in almost unlimited quantities and a waiting game to break the power of the union. The effect of the protracted conflict, while damaging to the company, was disastrous to the union, in spite of strong support for the strikers in the Wyoming Valley, an area of major union activity during the period.

The difficulties between the Wilkes-Barre Railway Company and the labor force began in 1914. Several issues were involved. These included working conditions, wages, job security and unionism. The organization of the disgruntled employees was carried out under the guidance of P. J. Shea, a long-time leader of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America who had been active in earlier labor disputes in Pennsylvania, notably in the Philadelphia strike of 1910.¹ Thomas A. Wright, general manager of the company, was unable to agree to the union's terms and a strike was threatened for January 1, 1915, which was postponed only through the intervention of Congressman John J. Casey and national and state mediators.² Under pressure from these and other forces a working agreement was concluded on January 9, 1915, which settled working conditions, and recognized the union. Job security was guaranteed in the new agreement by an understanding that any disputes concerning the discharge of an employee would be referred to the mediators who had acted in the

¹ "Wilkes-Barre Strike Settled," *Electric Railway Journal*, XLVIII (Dec. 23, 1916), 1312-1313.

² "Strike Averted," *ibid.*, XLV (Jan. 16, 1915), 151-152.

establishment of the agreement.³ Only one item could not be resolved—that of salary. The existing wage for conductors and motormen was then twenty-four cents an hour. The company, again under pressure, offered a one cent an hour increase even though business during the previous year had declined.⁴ The union rejected the offer and it was agreed that the issue should be submitted to a board of arbitration, both parties agreeing that the decision of the board of arbiters would be “final and without appeal, and . . . be binding and conclusive upon the said Wilkes-Barre Railway Company, and the said employees of the company.”⁵

The end result, unfortunately, was the creation of another problem. The company proposed that each party to the dispute should select one arbiter and that the third should be court appointed. The union refused and insisted that the third should be appointed by the other two, apparently feeling that this would give them a veto power over the selection of a hostile arbiter. The company finally yielded the point and the arbitration agreement was signed jointly with the working agreement which was supposed to run for three years.⁶

On January 14, the union selected Wilkes-Barre attorney Thomas D. Shea as its representative.⁷ The company followed on January 18, choosing Samuel D. Warriner, president of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company. The two agreed on a candidate for the third arbiter. However, their choice refused the job and they were unable to agree on a second man. The company once again proposed that the courts be allowed to make a new appointment. The union refused

³ H. B. Weatherwax to L. F. Loree, Dec. 16, 1915, Wilkes-Barre Railway MSS., Wilkes College Library (hereinafter cited as Ry. MSS.). Weatherwax, vice-president of the United Traction Company of Albany, New York, and Loree, president of the Delaware and Hudson Company, were deeply concerned with the Wilkes-Barre Railway strike from a technical standpoint. The Albany system, which was controlled by the Delaware and Hudson Company, suffered from problems similar to those of the Wilkes-Barre property and the two men named sought solutions to their own difficulties in the progress of the Wilkes-Barre affair.

⁴ *Electric Railway Journal*, XLV (Jan. 16, 1915), 151-152.

⁵ *The Wilkes-Barre Railway Company vs. The Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America, Division 164, Dennis J. McCauley, president of said division 164, et. al. In Equity*, No. 10, *January Term, 1916, Court of Common Pleas of Luzerne County, Pa. Plaintiffs Bill of Complaint*, 26. Ry. MSS. (hereinafter cited as *Railway vs. Amalgamated Assn.*

⁶ “Strike in Wilkes-Barre,” *Electric Railway Journal*, XLV (Apr. 10, 1915), 726.

⁷ *Times Leader* (Wilkes-Barre), Dec. 17, 1915.

and on February 12 it was agreed that the two arbiters already appointed would try to come to some agreement among themselves. By March 26 it became evident that no agreement could be reached; the arbiters announced failure. On the 30th Wright proposed a two cent an hour raise with a five day deadline for its acceptance. The union responded by calling a strike on April 1 which succeeded in tying up service for nine days, the deadlock being broken when the federal and state mediators secured the agreement of both parties to the appointment of the Pennsylvania State Commissioner of Labor, John Price Jackson, as the third arbitrator.⁸

On July 10, after hearing testimony from both sides, the arbiters made an award based upon a sliding scale ranging from twenty-four cents an hour for first-year employees up to twenty-six and three-quarters cents an hour for five-year men. The wages would be raised again in 1916 and 1917 in an amount commensurate with increases in the company revenues. Jackson and Warriner approved the award and wrote the decision. Shea wrote a dissenting opinion on behalf of the union. On July 20, the company notified the motor-men and conductors of the new wage scale and paid a special wage covering the adjustments in the scale back to January 1. All of the employees of the company accepted the payment without protest and it appeared that the difficulties had ended.⁹

Thomas Shea continued to attack the award. The basis of his argument was that it had not been made in accordance with the instructions and that the only award that could have been legally made by the board was a flat rate wage rather than a sliding scale. After three months, Shea succeeded in convincing Jackson of the validity of his position. Shea's opposition apparently was based on the fear that the sliding scale, which gave the older employees more than they would have gotten under the flat rate settlement, was designed to divide the union men and consequently to weaken their position. So on October 11, Jackson, who was the chairman of the group, reconvened the board to reconsider the award even though the original agreement had specified that there should be no appeal from the earlier decision. On the grounds that the reconsideration

⁸ *Electric Railway Journal*, XLV (Apr. 10, 1915), 726.

⁹ Weatherwax to Loree, Dec. 16, 1915, Ry. MSS.

was illegal, Warriner refused to participate. The rump board by a vote of two to nothing withdrew the original award, stating that they had had the power to suggest only a flat rate wage. They then withdrew from the proceedings and unofficially suggested that a wage of twenty-six and a half or twenty-seven cents an hour should be paid.¹⁰

Armed with this majority opinion, the union requested that the company confer. Wright, however, refused to negotiate with the national officials of the union and agreed to meet only with local union men. He was backed by the two chief men controlling the Railway Company, Abram Nesbitt, a millionaire with extensive interests in coal and the Lehigh Valley Railroad, and Fred Kirby, vice-president of F. W. Woolworth. Both flatly stated in board meetings that they would spend a million dollars of their own money to win a strike and that they were prepared to see it through to the end. The pledge of unlimited funds for support of the company in the ensuing battle was one of the major factors in the subsequent progress of the dispute since it is doubtful whether the company could have survived and continued to fight without massive infusions of money.¹¹

When the strike began on October 14, the Railway Company had little to look forward to. One observer estimated that the labor of the valley was about 95% organized, the strongest single group being the United Mine Workers. There had been considerable discussion of a mine strike for the following April and organized labor gave every indication of supporting the street railway workers in any manner possible. The traffic of the street railway was largely drawn from among union members and a hard core of these boycotted the railway system for the entire fourteen months until the strike was finally settled. One of the more conspicuous aspects of the strike was the failure of the company to build up patronage before the fall of 1916 on lines operated primarily through neighborhoods inhabited by laborers. Even after it had become evident to all concerned that the strike had failed and the only question remaining was when and on what basis the final settlement would be

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; *Times Leader*, Dec. 17, 1915.

¹¹ Weatherwax to Loree, Dec. 16, 1915, Ry. MSS.

made, the workers refused to ride the cars. During this period, the company furnished railway service averaging about 60% of normal but carried passenger loads averaging only about 10% of normal.¹²

There were wide variations around this average, the extreme cases being the Miners Mill and the Forty Fort-West Pittston services. The Miners Mill line served the east end of Wilkes-Barre City, an area of coal mines, company housing, and strong unionism. It was in this area that most of the overt violence against the company cars in the later months of the strike took place. The Miners Mill line was one of the last to be reopened (because of sewer construction along its route rather than local opposition). Once opened, the company, intent on demoralizing neighborhood opposition, concentrated on offering service on this line and succeeded throughout most of 1916 in giving service averaging 80% of normal, significantly above the level offered on most other lines before the strike. The Miners Mill line had averaged 3,000 passengers a day. During the strike this daily average dropped to 24. Between July and November, 1916, the lowest monthly total of riders was 695 and the highest 738, leaving one with the strong impression that the same 24 die-hards were riding each day and that outside of this small group the boycott of the service was nearly 100% effective.¹³

The West Pittston-Forty Fort service in contrast served the west side of the Susquehanna River running generally north from Wilkes-Barre. The area which it served was comparatively free from industry and characterized by middle- and upper-class housing. Prior to the strike the loads, which averaged 9,000 passengers daily, were among the heaviest on the entire system. Service was restored rapidly and reached 90% of normal in March, 1916, a level at which it was held for the remainder of the strike. During the summer of 1916, riding stabilized at 2,300 daily, slightly over 25% of normal, and as the union position deteriorated in the fall, passenger load increased much more rapidly than on most lines. At no time prior to the end of the strike, however, did riding on the line exceed 50% of normal.¹⁴

¹² Weatherwax to Loree, Jan. 3, 1917; Car Miles by Divisions, Wilkes-Barre Railway Company; Total Passengers by Divisions, Wilkes-Barre Railway Company, *ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In addition to union opposition and lack of popular support for the company, the Wilkes-Barre Railway was also confronted with other problems. Other companies had previously been able to break strikes because of their monopoly on transportation within a given area. But the Wilkes-Barre strike coincided with the appearance on the American scene of the jitney. Jitneys, or private automobiles and small buses used in competition with established street railway systems, were a source of major difficulty to all the older transportation systems during this period. Operating at times of maximum business over only those portions of established transit routes which carried the heaviest traffic, they skimmed the profit off the operations of the regulated companies and, where allowed to operate uncontrolled, worsened the precarious financial condition of many of these companies.¹⁵

In Wilkes-Barre, the jitneys appeared in force at about the time the strike began and provided an alternative means of transportation for those who boycotted the street cars. The company had to fight the jitney question through the courts at the same time that it was dealing with the strikers. This was doubly important in order for the firm to strengthen its attempts to outwait the strikers.¹⁶

In late October, therefore, the Railway had its work cut out for it. In order to win the strike it had to convert at least a portion of public opinion to its support and to neutralize the remainder, through court action if necessary. It was also necessary to restore and maintain a semblance of regular service and to eliminate competing jitney services. Finally, it was essential that the company maintain some semblance of financial stability and attempt to remain solvent during the entire proceedings.

With the number of problems which the company had to solve to secure itself from attack, it is easy to see why the union refused to accept the company position. (This position was established on

¹⁵ Extensive coverage of the problems of street railways created by jitney competition and the steps taken to counter these problems can be found in the *Electric Railway Journal* between 1915 and about 1921.

¹⁶ It should be noted that the appearance of the jitney in Wilkes-Barre at a time of labor troubles may well have aided the company in eliminating this nuisance at an early date. In many areas where there was no withdrawal of streetcar service due to strikes, companies were forced at a later date to suspend streetcar service in order to force the city authorities to regulate the jitneys.

October 19 when the board of directors of the Railway met and issued a formal statement declaring the arbiters' award of July 10 to be binding and refusing to negotiate the position further.¹⁷) The union seemed as strong as the company appeared weak. It was supported by an impressive array of talent. Congressman Casey, loudly proclaiming himself neutral, nevertheless delivered an address to the strikers at Union Hall which was hardly designed to cool things off. An organizer from the Garment Worker's Union also appeared at the same time. Seven mine worker locals in the region voted support of the strike and a similar action was taken by the Central Labor Union of Wilkes-Barre.¹⁸

On October 20 the company took the first step in breaking the strike and normalizing conditions when it published a notice giving strikers ten days to return to work at the wages fixed by the award of July 10. Jackson, the chairman of the original board of arbiters, now re-entered the crisis and suggested two proposals for ending the dispute. His first proposal was that a judicial body be allowed to determine whether the original award had been made legally by the board of arbiters or whether they should have been held to a flat rate scale in making their determination. If this was not acceptable, he suggested that a new company representative be appointed to replace Warriner and that the board sit down to a reconsideration of the entire case.¹⁹ The union, as it had originally done, refused to trust the local judiciary and rejected the first alternative. The company, equally distrustful of Jackson, refused the second and insisted that only a court could rule on the legality of the original award. Again an impasse was reached. On October 23, William Mahan, international president of the union, intervened and proposed a conference between himself and manager Wright to settle the wage question. Wright immediately answered standing squarely on the July 10 award, offering a court hearing on the award as the only alternative. Mahan then washed his hands of the entire affair and left for business on the West Coast.²⁰

Until this point, the company had given no indication of what actions it was prepared to take next. It appears that they were

¹⁷ *Record* (Wilkes-Barre), Oct. 19, 1915.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Oct. 20, 1915.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Oct. 27, 1915.

waiting to see how many union men could be shaken loose during the ten-day grace period. It soon became evident that they were waiting in vain. Virtually all of the unions in the area pledged moral and financial support to the railway union and were joined unexpectedly but logically by the local jitney owners. The jitney men, smelling long-term profit for a small immediate investment, offered to turn over their receipts for one day to the union treasury. The union for its part established very liberal support for its striking members—a benefit of five dollars a week paid from the national treasury for each striker, in addition to the funds locally available.²¹ As a result, only about 61 of the 324 motormen and conductors accepted the offer of the company to return. The company, considering this number to be insufficient to reopen the lines, told the returnees that they should stay away for their own safety until the strike was settled and immediately set to work to break the strike with outside assistance.²²

This assistance was secured from a firm of strikebreakers known as Bargoff Brothers and Waddell of New York. While this firm had been in business for a number of years, its approach to the question of strikes had been somewhat heavy handed in the past and in other transit cases it had been accused of endangering life and limb by using inexperienced labor in the operation of streetcars. James Waddell, who now took personal charge of the Wilkes-Barre situation, solved this problem in an unusual manner. The Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad, an independent line operating in Brooklyn, New York, and serving the Coney Island amusement area, carried very uneven traffic, extremely heavy in the summer but comparatively light in the winter season. Waddell hired employees laid off for the winter from this company and moved them to Wilkes-Barre to be used in reopening the local lines.²³ About 250 men were brought in and quartered at the Wood Street barn in South Wilkes-Barre. While some of the strikebreakers were brought into the Laurel Line terminal near the center of Wilkes-Barre, the majority were shipped by train from New York over the Lehigh Valley Railroad and unloaded on a spur track which ran right into the company property at Wood Street, thereby avoiding the possibilities for

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Weatherwax to Loree, Dec. 16, 1915, Ry. MSS.

²³ *Times Leader*, Nov. 1, 1915.

conflict which would have resulted if the men had been moved in a body through the middle of town.²⁴

The approach used to open the lines was systematic. As late as October 26 Wright had been uncertain whether or not to undertake on his own the instruction of various applicants for motorman positions. He finally decided to avoid the trouble which would be attendant to training new men and to trust to Waddell's men to open the lines. The violence which accompanied the reappearance of the first cars on the streets on November 3 confirmed the discretion of this view and the restoration of service was left entirely in the hands of Waddell. The various lines were opened one at a time by Waddell and his men and operated by them until the company could recruit and train new men. When sufficient men were hired locally to take over operation of a line, it was turned back to the company by Waddell and the Waddell men were transferred to other lines or removed from the city.²⁵

Waddell also took charge of the training of the men hired locally and, it is suspected, gave more thorough training than had been previously provided for Wilkes-Barre street railway workers. He partially dismantled one streetcar which he used to teach the mechanism and functions of the equipment. He laid a short track within the confines of the car barn property and used this to teach the new men to operate cars before they were sent out on the lines.²⁶ This system was satisfactory enough to enable the Waddell forces to be reduced to about 110 men by March 1, 1916.²⁷ The last two lines operated by Waddell men were turned over to the company about the middle of March, by which time twenty strikers had returned to work, six former employees had been rehired, and 171 new men had been hired.²⁸ This force was generally adequate to maintain the reduced schedules operated during most of the year 1916 until the December settlement. The method of restoring service was remarkably successful. No serious accident which occurred during the period of the strike was chargeable to inexper-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Nov. 2, 1915; *Record*, Nov. 2, 1915.

²⁵ Thomas A. Wright to Fred M. Kirby, Oct. 26, 1915; Wright to Kirby, Feb. 1 and 19, 1916; Newton B. Cass to H. B. Weatherwax, Mar. 1, 1916, Ry. MSS.

²⁶ Cass to Weatherwax, Mar. 1, 1916, *ibid.*

²⁷ Wright to Abram Nesbitt, Feb. 29, 1916, *ibid.*

²⁸ Wright to Nesbitt, Mar. 14, 1916, *ibid.*

ienced operation of the cars, an unusual circumstance which was seldom duplicated in similar strikes elsewhere.

One of the major problems which had to be met coincident with the restoration of the service was the elimination of competition. It has been noted previously that the jitney owners were quite active in the Wilkes-Barre area at the time the strike began and that they encouraged the strike by strong support of the dissident conductors and motormen. With organized trolley service suspended completely in late October and operating only spasmodically until March, 1916, the jitneys multiplied and soon covered the valley.

Fortunately for the Railway, this problem was in part resolved by forces brought to bear from other quarters. The Wilkes-Barre public soon discovered that jitneys gave erratic service and were a nuisance from other standpoints, such as cluttering the streets. Representatives of downtown merchants and the Wilkes-Barre Automobile Club were protesting by early March, 1916, the congestion of jitneys around Public Square and agitating for passage of a city ordinance regulating the buses.²⁹

The Railway Company did its part by publishing, in mid-March, a leaflet in which it reprinted every accident report it could find in the area newspapers concerning the jitneys. The materials were permitted to speak for themselves with no editorial comment at all except for a large statement on the back cover which asked the question, dramatically but not too accurately, "Do you realize that in no other community in the United States are these same conditions tolerated?" Since the newspaper clippings were chosen to emphasize gore and irresponsibility on the part of the jitney operators, no further comment was really necessary. The entire pamphlet was done in the rather oblique and surreptitious mode of approach to its problems which now characterized the railway's operations.³⁰

At the same time that agitation for local control over jitneys was growing, the Pennsylvania Public Service Commission handed down an important decision. In a case involving a suit of the Scranton Railways Company against a Carbondale jitney operator the commission declared that a jitney with a regular route was a public

²⁹ *Record*, Mar. 1, 1916.

³⁰ *The Jitney Problem in Wilkes-Barre* (n. p., n. d.), Ry. MSS.

carrier. In the resulting uncertainty over how all-inclusive this ruling was, the Waddell men were pressed into service as rumor mongers to scare the jitneys off the streets. They told many jitney-men that they were operating illegally and that if they continued they would be liable for fine and imprisonment. The Waddell men also occupied themselves by conspicuously noting the license numbers of jitneys presumably for future use as evidence. Despite the fact that the lawyer of the Wilkes-Barre Jitney Bus Association denied that the decision applied throughout the state and that the mayor and other city authorities stated that no information concerning the legalities of the matter had been received, the number of jitneys in operation dropped sharply on March 19, the day after the decision was handed down.³¹

The jitney-men's position deteriorated further on March 22 when the city solicitor ruled that all jitneys would require a certificate of public convenience from the Public Service Commission. Railway and Jitney Association now took their stands against each other, the company attempting to drive the jitneys out of business through expensive litigation and the jitney owners trying to make it so expensive for the railway that it would be forced to retreat. The railway had to bring a separate complaint against each jitneyman. Thus on June 13 the Public Service commissioners heard roughly 200 cases. The attorneys for the jitney-men demanded that the cases be heard individually and this was granted by the commissioners. The testimony in each case was virtually identical and the individual hearings were designed only to drag out the proceedings as long as possible. The commissioners, however, managed to dispose of more than 100 cases in nine hours, at which time the jitney-men capitulated and allowed fifty more to be heard as a bloc.³²

Despite the fact that the Jitney Association had made the job as difficult as possible, the company once again proved to its opponents that it was willing and able to take all of the time and money necessary to fight any opposition through the courts or, as in this case, through hearings before the appropriate state commission.

³¹ *Record*, Mar. 20, 1916.

³² *Ibid.*, June 14, 1916.

As a result of the Scranton decision and the subsequent ruling that the Wilkes-Barre jitney men were common carriers and subject to the control of the Public Service Commission, the Railway Company succeeded in removing the only alternative available to its own service.³³

The problems of the company were twofold. Not only must the Railway restore operations and eliminate competition, it also had to try to do something about its public image. Given the great strength of the labor movement in the area, this was difficult to do. The Wyoming Valley was broken up into a multitude of small political jurisdictions. Many of the districts through which the company operated were thus quite sensitive politically to the pressures of the laboring classes. Among the other difficulties which the company experienced in these outlying districts was an attempt to prohibit the operation of snow sweepers within the boroughs on the grounds that they were public nuisances and scared horses. Evidences of partisanship were demonstrated in Plymouth Borough where the strikers attempted to get the borough to search all strike-breaking streetcar motormen for weapons when they brought cars into the borough, and in Hanover Township where the local police refused initially to protect the strikebreakers and told them that they would have to defend themselves.³⁴ Other similar episodes were recorded in various labor strongholds around the valley. The company was also dissatisfied with the lack of backing from state authorities including Governor Brumbaugh, who was accused by Wright of "playing ball with the labor vote."³⁵

The approach which was used was timeless—that of law and order. The company hired a publicist to paint the strikers as lawless destroyers of property and to advertise the Railway's virtues. This was not a new idea. In eastern Pennsylvania, the most spectacular example of a traction company's using a public relations man had been that of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company, whose excursion into public relations had led to a general strike and bankruptcy of the company. Wilkes-Barre's publicist, however, was

³³ Wright to Kirby, Mar. 23, 1916, Ry. MSS.

³⁴ *Record*, Jan. 21 and 25, 1916.

³⁵ Wright to Kirby, Mar. 23, 1916, Ry. MSS.

somewhat more skilled in his profession. He was George Henry Payne who was secured for the Railway by Fred Kirby and who was given the title of assistant to the general manager.³⁶

Payne was a person of considerable talent. He had been an art and a drama critic, a writer of some note, a newspaperman with the New York *Evening Post* and a person of some influence in Republican political circles.³⁷ He had been secretary to Theodore Roosevelt, and subsequent to his tour of duty in Wilkes-Barre assisted in the campaign of Charles Evans Hughes for president in 1916.³⁸

Payne was a master of the indirect approach. He concentrated as much on creating a positive image of himself and the company as he did on creating the reverse for the union—not that he ignored the latter. Immediately upon his arrival in Wilkes-Barre, Payne set to the project of making himself a part of the community and was found at social functions and meetings throughout the area. It was his view that the representative of a corporation should be familiar to the local inhabitants in order to make the corporation itself seem more human and less of an abstract and usually undesirable force. Payne's campaign appears to have been reasonably successful not only in connection with himself but also with Wright. The latter gradually began to emerge as a sort of knight on horseback, the emergence being aided and abetted by the union men who attacked Wright's house.³⁹ Probably the most remarkable part of Payne's campaign was his ability to make himself a part of the valley. Within three months of his arrival on the scene, the local newspapers were publishing accounts of speeches made by him in New York with the pride usually reserved for the accomplishments of a native son who had made good.⁴⁰

Payne was responsible for the establishment of an advertising campaign shortly after his arrival which emphasized that the union members were engaging in unlawful picketing, force, violence and boycotting of cars.⁴¹ He concentrated on attacks or threats pre-

³⁶ Weatherwax to Loree, Jan. 21, 1916, *ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Weatherwax to Loree, July 19, 1916, *ibid.*

³⁹ Cass to Weatherwax, Mar. 1, 1916, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ For an example of the friendly approach to Payne's activities in New York, see *Record*, Mar. 18, 1916.

⁴¹ *Railway vs. Amalgamated Association, Plaintiffs Bill of Complaint*, Ry. MSS.

sumably made against women and doubtless had a hand in the injunction proceedings brought against the union and its members in January, 1916.⁴² It is interesting to note that certain passages in the preliminary injunction granted were worded similarly to paragraphs in some of Payne's articles.⁴³

When the main hearings on the injunction began, the company got as much mileage as possible out of the actions of the strikers. The immediate emphasis was on the adverse effect of the strike on the business interests and seems to have been aimed at stampeding the business community into a stand, motivated by self-interest, supporting the company. The testimony was quite favorable to the company position and the union, thoroughly alarmed, took steps to counter it.⁴⁴ P. J. Shea, the organizer, telephoned Jackson in Harrisburg and requested that some one be sent from the Department of Labor and Industry to intervene in the case and try to secure a settlement. James Steese, a representative of the department, accordingly appeared on January 31 to negotiate with the company lawyers for a settlement. Rebuffed, he then addressed a meeting of the strikers which was most conspicuous for its disorganization. Steese told the strikers that the people were not riding the cars because they were afraid of the strikers, not because they were in sympathy with them, and that this fear would soon wear off. He also noted that while the company was losing money, the strikers were losing the chance for re-employment. The chief union lawyer, Thomas Shea, then told the strikers that the suit was very serious and that he wished to withdraw as counsel because he did not have the time to give to the case. Pat Shea tried to stop the speech but was unsuccessful.⁴⁵

The union was now in an awkward position. The granting of a permanent injunction appeared a certainty. Therefore, the union lawyers stalled for time by instituting various time-consuming legal maneuvers. The company made no effort to stop them since the temporary injunction remained in effect; and the only practical

⁴² *Railway vs. Amalgamated Association, Opinion, ibid.*

⁴³ Weatherwax to Loree, Jan 21, 1916, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Record*, Jan. 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 28, 1916, Feb. 1, 1916; *Times Leader*, Jan. 18, 1916; *Evening News* (Wilkes-Barre), Jan. 19, 1916.

⁴⁵ Wright to Kirby, Feb. 2, 1916, Ry. MSS.

effect of the postponement was to avoid the stigma of a formal and permanent injunction being issued against the union.⁴⁶

The injunction hearings having been worked for all that could be secured from them, the company simultaneously opened up a new front under Payne's guidance. This was a contest for local school children in which twelve prizes up to fifty dollars were given for the best essay on the subject of "the evil effect on American character of unjust and illegal methods of enforcing strikes." In case there was any doubt as to the purpose of the contest, the announcement included another variation of Payne's standard theme:

The subject suggested is one that the younger generation must be taught to think about. There is no more cowardly weapon of attack than boycott. Nothing is more harmful to a community than violence, disorder and intimidation. During the years that character is being formed a due regard for law and order, for peaceful and legal adjustment of disputes, must be taught by example as well as precept. The boy and girl who sees another break the law and escape punishment loses respect for the law. The boy or girl who sees men use force or boycott to achieve their ends is weakened in his or her own ideas of rights and justice.⁴⁷

The winning essay was announced with fanfare on February 16 and published in its entirety in the local press. Both the first and second prize essays hammered away at the issue of the maintenance of order and were productions of which Payne himself would have been proud.⁴⁸

By the beginning of February, therefore, the company position had significantly improved. Before the end of the month it had succeeded in rehiring 24 of the former strikers and a total of 166 new men.⁴⁹ The labor union tried to bolster its position in different ways with indifferent success. The mine workers of Plymouth voted to impose a twenty-five-dollar fine upon their members for riding the cars, but the company, discovering this maneuver, publicized it widely and it is doubtful if the penalty was ever collected.⁵⁰ The purpose of the fine was probably not only to enforce the boycott against car riding but also to help replenish the union's rapidly

⁴⁶ *Record*, Feb. 1, 1916.

⁴⁷ *\$50.00 Prize for School Pupils*, undated leaflet, Ry. MSS.

⁴⁸ *Record*, Feb. 16, 1916.

⁴⁹ Wright to Nesbitt, Mar. 14, 1916, Ry. MSS.

⁵⁰ *Record*, Jan. 25, 1916.

dwindling treasury, but confirming evidence is lacking. In any case, by the end of February the union treasury was reported to be exhausted and the union was having difficulty in raising additional funds.⁵¹ The strikers received scant encouragement from the appearance in the city of John A. Moffitt, a federal mediator who had been one of the officials responsible for the original arbitration agreement. Moffitt informed the press that he was making a casual visit to the city which had nothing to do with the strike.⁵² However, he did visit both company and union officials and informed Wright that he emphatically supported the original arbitration award. There is no reason to believe that he told the union anything different.⁵³

On March 5 the union held a mass meeting of 3,000 at which Samuel Gompers appeared. Pat Shea then made what was considered in many quarters to be an invitation to the company to reopen negotiations.⁵⁴ The company countered with the publication of a small pamphlet of witty sayings, law and order homilies, and streetcar schedules created by Payne and entitled *The Optimist*.⁵⁵ By now there was so little to be done that Payne was becoming restless and looking for new fields to conquer. Wright, less optimistic, insisted that he stay for a little while longer until the situation was clearly in hand.⁵⁶

As might be expected, the next stage was violence. This had been largely absent from the strike after the initial attempt to restore service in November. Now a crowd, assembled at Public Square to hear returns from the Willard-Moran prize fight on March 26, was used as a cover to threaten the safety of passing streetcar crews. The local police dispersed the mob with the assistance of fire trucks but trouble spread throughout the area for the next two weeks. Cars were dynamited, rails soaped, and barricades placed across the tracks. This activity simply alienated more valley opinion.⁵⁷ The company muddled the waters further by establishing

⁵¹ Wright to Nesbitt, Mar. 14, 1916, Ry. MSS.

⁵² *Record*, Feb. 18, 1916.

⁵³ Wright to Nesbitt, Feb. 29, 1916, Ry. MSS.

⁵⁴ *Record*, Mar. 6, 1916.

⁵⁵ *The Optimist* (n.p., n.d.), Ry. MSS.

⁵⁶ Payne to Weatherwax, Mar. 4, 1916, *ibid*.

⁵⁷ *Record*, Mar. 27, 1916.

a company union for its new employees, which in time took advertisements in the newspapers complaining about the threat to life and limb.⁵⁸

At this point the only thing to do was to establish an agreement whereby the strike could be ended, something easier said than done. In May the state intervened again. James Steece and the state Attorney General Francis Shunk Brown appeared in Wilkes-Barre to try to mediate a conference between the union leadership represented by, among others, Thomas Shea who had reconsidered his intention to withdraw from the matter, and the company delegation led by Wright. The dispute shifted from the question of salary to the rights of the strikers to be rehired. The company refused to take back more men than were needed to fill out their operating staff. The union, on the other hand, insisted that all those who had originally worked for the company should be given their jobs back.⁵⁹ Conferences were unable to resolve the question and Wright finally decided to ignore the union until its leaders should come to terms.⁶⁰

The company, confident of its strength, was quite prepared to continue on this basis almost indefinitely. The union, however stubbornly it might hang on, was doomed to a slow but inexorable erosion of strength.

A break in the deadlock was finally forced by the mine workers. They apparently feared that the increasing hostility to labor which arose out of this strike would continue to grow until a settlement was reached and that the ill feeling toward the car men's union would also adversely affect the miners. The mine workers' union therefore forced a settlement on the strikers which was essentially that demanded by the company. The new settlement was brought to a vote in early December and rejected by the strikers. However, after minor face saving modifications, it was narrowly approved on December 16 by a vote of 111 to 108 with about 100 of the original strikers not voting.⁶¹

By the terms of the settlement the company agreed to take back 190 of the men immediately, 130 being given regular runs and the remainder being placed on the extra list. This represented a victory

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Mar. 28, 29, 1916.

⁵⁹ Wright to Kirby, May 20, 1916, Ry. MSS.

⁶⁰ Wright to Kirby, July 14, 1916, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Weatherwax to Loree, Jan. 3, 1917, *ibid.*

for the company since it required them to fire none of the new employees to whom it had promised job security at the time it organized the company union in March. All of the various court actions still pending were dropped, the union was again recognized by the company and the union members requested the public to return to riding the cars. Finally, the new agreement established a three-year wage settlement to begin on January 1, 1917.⁶²

The company had won almost every point. The sliding scale of wages which had precipitated the strike in the first place was continued and the union gained only in a slight increase in the wages paid, which now ranged from twenty-five cents an hour for first year men up to twenty-eight and a half cents for third year men. The increase thus varied between one and one and three-quarter cents an hour over the original arbitration award.⁶³

A question which remains to be answered is whether or not success in breaking the union position really represented a victory for the company. If victory is measured in terms of financial condition, it can be flatly stated that it did not. The Wilkes-Barre Railway Company prior to the strike had shown a modest income and in 1912, 1913, and 1914 had paid dividends on its stock totalling \$117,000. After 1914 it would never again pay a dividend until the company was taken over by a new corporate entity, the Wilkes-Barre Railway Corporation in July, 1924.⁶⁴

It is difficult under any circumstances to ascertain exactly how much a strike costs. An analysis of the Wilkes-Barre losses is even more difficult than might be expected. The Wilkes-Barre system was subject under the best of conditions to erratic changes in business brought about in large part by the ups and downs of the coal industry. Moreover, the end of the strike was followed almost immediately by the economic disruption of the First World War, which sharply raised operating expenses and forced most properties, including that of Wilkes-Barre, into fare increases.

However, a rough estimate can be made of the loss. The best basis for such an estimate is the amount of money which the company had to borrow to maintain operations during late 1915 and

⁶² "Wilkes-Barre Strike Settled," *Electric Railway Journal*, XLVIII (Dec. 23, 1916), 1312-1313.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Ledger, Wilkes-Barre Railway Company, Ry. MSS.

1916. This amounted in the long run to \$1,500,000 split equally between loans secured from Abram Nesbitt and the Chase Bank of New York. The loss on operations for 1915 and 1916 came approximately to the same amount, the total deficit on operations registered as being \$1,475,139.66. Of this sum about \$345,000 was directly charged to the expenses of the strike and the remainder represented the costs of maintaining lightly patronized services and meeting fixed charges and expenses during the strike period.⁶⁵

Nor were the expenses ended with the termination of the strike. The large floating debt which remained burdened the company with heavy annual interest payments. These began at \$34,007.19 during 1915 and rose to a peak of \$163,000 during 1921, the average being about \$90,000 annually. The interest charges climbed steadily as the short term notes which comprised the debt were repeatedly refinanced and the prevailing interest rates rose. The company was unable to show a profit on its operations until 1919, when two boosts in the zone fare of the system from five cents to six and finally to eight cents brought a profitable year. Since the company's financial statements indicate that it used much of this profit in the servicing of the strike debt, much of the financial burden of the company was shifted in the long run to its riders in fares which could otherwise have been at least one cent per zone lower.⁶⁶

The liquidation of the debt was another burden. Despite higher fares and generally favorable operating conditions after World War I, the company disposed of only half of the debt by mid-1924. At this point the major stockholders, despairing of ever getting the company sufficiently solvent to resume dividend payments, created a new corporation known as the Wilkes-Barre Railway Corporation. The new corporation acquired the capital stock and unfunded debt of the old company and assumed operation under lease of the underlying companies formerly operated by the Wilkes-Barre Railway Company. By this method the debt was funded and absorbed by the stockholders and the new company was able to resume the payment of dividends for a few more years.

From a personal standpoint, it is doubtful that the loans made by Nesbitt were any more damaging to that gentleman's financial

⁶⁵ Balance Sheets, Wilkes-Barre Railway Company, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

position than any similar investment would have been. Kirby, the other millionaire involved, did not contribute anything directly to the cause. The only person who seems to have suffered financially within the top management was the manager, Thomas Wright, who was reputed to have lost his entire fortune as a result of the affair. This cannot be checked from available records.⁶⁷ The strike did not affect Wright's position either within the community or the company, and he continued as manager of the property until September 28, 1921, when he died from injuries received in an automobile accident.⁶⁸

In the end, therefore, it would appear that the Railway won only a moral victory. It succeeded in securing the terms which Wright had proposed some fourteen months before but only at the expense of ultimate corporate collapse. As for labor, all unions were hurt. The labor movement in the Wyoming Valley suffered a severe setback and, as a result of the disorders associated with the strike, lost significantly in terms of public support.

The Wilkes-Barre strike therefore stands as a monument to the intransigence of all parties concerned. The company pursued a program of eroding away the union position which represented an outstanding example of strikebreaking. Yet while it made no noticeable error in its tactics in the entire fourteen months, the cost of its campaign was prohibitive and the victory Pyrrhic.

Wilkes College

HAROLD E. COX

⁶⁷ Weatherwax to Loree, Jan. 3, 1917, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ "Thomas A. Wright," *Electric Railway Journal*, LVIII (Oct. 8, 1921), 669.