

Esprit du corps. The case of the Norwegian State Railways.¹

Jon Gulowsen

Bodø College, Norway

Although the majority of the employees of the Norwegian State Railways have supported the Labour Party during most of the 20th century, and practically all were union members, their social identity departs from orthodox class theory. Lacking class-consciousness typical for subordinated workers in industry, without traditional and cultural bonds to the local communities were they served, as well as professional training and identity, the large majority of the railway men have identified themselves with the service and developed a profound esprit du corps. The practice of seniority is the core notion. This article is about the processes leading into, and possibly out of, this kind of corporate identity.

Introduction

The first railway in Norway from Eidsvoll to Oslo dates back to 1854. Entrepreneurs in the Oslo region invested private capital in order to develop cheaper ways to transport timber and forest products. Additional capital was imported from Britain, together with technology and principles of bureaucracy. In fact the Norwegian railways adopted a blue print of the organisation system from the North Staffordshire Railways. In the years which followed, a number of new and independent railroads were built. The State supplied most of the capital, but made it a policy to operate in joint ventures with local investors. From 1883 the government took command of both railway construction and operation, and transferred the activities into a state monopoly, the Norwegian State Railways, NSB, which soon became the largest enterprise in the country.² From that time, the railway system has operated as a formal hierarchy, headed by the politicians in Parliament and the Ministry of transport. For more than a century the Parliament has made the important decisions in laws, plans and budgets. The day-to-day operations were run by a hierarchy with a large number of steps down to the individual civil servant, the station master or the ticket collector, facing the public.

The original railway organisation

Although railway construction was initiated prior to industrialisation in most of Norway, it gradually became a major force transforming the country into an industrial society. The engineers who were in charge of the construction were considered pioneers of technology, and formed a professional association in 1891, The Norwegian College of Engineers was founded in 1910 and The National Association of Engineers two years later.

The railway system was adapted to the class structure of an early phase of industrialisation in Norway. From the very start the *top management* was recruited from the upper classes, with high

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salaries and close access to Government. The director general was by far the most highly paid civil servant in the country.

The *people in uniform* dominated the day-to-day activities of the service. From the porters to the station masters, from the ticket collectors to the engineers, they represented the railway toward the public. Although physically distributed over an area which soon covered half of the country: on different trains, and on stations of varying size, they were connected by tracks and time tables as well as by bureaucratic procedures focusing on punctuality and safety. The work was managed by means of an extensive number of written rules rather than by direct personal supervision. Many of these workers, especially the station masters, were prominent actors at the local level all over the country. They were civil servants and ensured lifetime employment, state salaries and pension in return for company loyalty.

To build bridges and tunnels and lay the tracks was heavy manual work. The job was done by *unskilled labour* working in large teams, and moving from one construction site to the next, also working for other employers building roads, factories, power stations and harbours etc. These construction workers were truly proletarians with a day-to-day relationship both to their work and to their employer. In Norway these people were often considered the backbone of the working class, and they established the National Union of General Workers in 1892, notorious for political radicalism and militancy. Nevertheless they were not fully integrated into the fellowship in the service, neither in the local communities nor in the railway system..

The working class identity was probably just as strong among the large number of *mechanics* who maintained the locomotives and wagons. Like their mates in private industries they worked in small or large workshops with ordinary factory discipline. The same class identity was also deeply founded among the people who maintained the tracks and were responsible for *safety inspection* along the lines. Unlike the construction workers their work had a permanent character, and their tasks were vital to the traffic. Nevertheless they were kept in the cold by the railway administration. Since much of the work took place in the summer season, the majority of these people were fired each autumn when the snow came and reemployed in the spring. It took almost a century before they were formally admitted the status of civil servants.

In sum, from the start the railways employed a variety of people in different occupations, spread over large parts of the country, and with highly different contracts with their employer. Internally they constituted a status hierarchy, with the station service on top, but locomotive drivers and ticket collectors were also highly respected by the public. The track personnel and the construction workers were in a sense under the bottom of the service hierarchy. They were even out of sight of those historians who have written the histories of the Norwegian railways and their unions!

Unionism and socialism

In 1873 the printers in Oslo formed the first labour union in Norway. Other crafts in different locations followed soon after. The first industrial unions for unskilled workers appeared during the 1880ies. Historically, trade unionism in the railways started in the 1880ies when employees from different branches of service located in different parts of the country organised separate associations. In 1892 a number of these unions agreed to unite and formed the National Union of Railway Workers. Some branches of service, among them the locomotive drivers, chose to stay

outside, but the true proletarians, the construction workers and the track personnel, were not asked to join.

The Norwegian Labour Party was founded in 1889 and worked on a number of different arenas in order to improve the conditions of the working class, but generally outside Parliament, where it was not represented. For ten years the Party co-ordinated the work of the different national unions, among them The National Union of General Workers. The Party involved itself in working place issues such as negotiations, decisions on strikes etc.

In 1899 the Trade Union Congress (LO) was founded along side the Labour Party, starting a history of partnership. Indeed the two national umbrella organisations have appeared as Siamese twins for generations. Thus in Norway unionism and socialism, at times challenged by communism, became very closely related. But the railway unions were reluctant to accept the political radicalism and militant attitudes of other unionists. As civil servants they were loyal to the state. Indeed the first paragraph of the statutes of the National Union of Railway Workers stated that it should serve the interest of the public railway service. Thus they chose to stay outside the LO.

The increase in class conflict following the Russian and German revolutions made it imperative for workers all over Europe to take a clear stand. This was a watershed, and the National Railway Union joined the LO in 1919. From that time the great majority of the union members supported the Labour Party and, in times of party struggle, the social democratic fraction. Formally the railway men were civil servants, but from now on, politically they defined themselves as working class people with a strong affiliation with the social democratic wing of the labour movement.

The 1920ies became a watershed also in another sense. So far the railroads had expanded continuously, although in leaps and bounds. For more than two generations railways and modernisation had been synonymous concepts. But from the start of the inter-war period the growing sales of automobiles and busses led to political consequences. Certainly a number of Parliamentary plans of railway construction were completed and a few new lines were built, but the expansion was no longer taken for given. And the centre of gravity inside the NSB gradually moved from construction to operations. Step by step the construction engineers became less influential in management, and the construction workers had to look for work elsewhere. This started the heydays of the traffic people. Instead of recruiting in the open labour market, the state railways offered career opportunities for ordinary railway men, especially from the station services, almost up to the very top of the system. Gradually the logic involved in operations took over. Another word for this logic is bureaucracy.

How is it possible to administer an organisation as large and diverse as a national railway system? How is it possible to manage and control activities so different in kind and geographically spread?⁵ Briefly stated, by timetables and rules, bureaucracy and discipline.

All organisations have rules. Some have more rules than others. In some places the members know the rules and follow them. In other, for instances at Universities, rules are often not known and frequently overlooked, even sabotaged. In the Norwegian railways the service has been run by rules and the service men have followed them minutely. Why? Safety regulations are the basis of railway bureaucracy. To know the rules and to practice them carefully is the basis for safety. Nobody questions this. The importance of following the safety rules needs no further

explanation. Knowing the rules, the service men also know that their superiors know them equally well, if not better. They are aware that mistakes will be followed up, and that neglecting rules will not be tolerated by their colleagues, (where as in other organisations such behaviour may give status.) The pattern is probably the same in all railway systems. There is no alternative. For a railway to function all employees must follow the rules. Aside from this, the service men are aware that their relatively independent work situation is based upon the existence and the functioning of rules. It may seem as a paradox, but a rigid system of organisation like the NSB makes it superfluous with close supervision. By acting according to the book, the service men can operate autonomously at work.

The principle of seniority

Unlike private industry where much of the union activity has focused on wage negotiations, in the civil service the salaries have traditionally been decided directly by the Government and sanctioned by the Parliament in the State budget.

With this important limitation on its scope of action the National Union of Railway Workers oriented its attention towards welfare and established a number of institutions such as health insurance, pensions etc. Many of these systems were later adopted by the Norwegian welfare state. Regarding wages, the union negotiated promotion ladders within the separate branches of the service. Some of these ladders were short, others had very many steps. The tallest ladder was the one that was negotiated for the prestigious station personnel. To become station master at a small station, a railway man had to climb four steps. But the stations were divided into eight classes according to the number of people who were employed at the station and the level of the traffic, thus adding considerably to the number of steps. On top of this came additional steps leading towards the top of the district- and head administrations.

From the 1920ies the union insisted on the principle of promotion according to seniority. The principle was not invented by the NSB or the National Union of Railway Workers. In fact it was well known both in other countries, and in other Norwegian branches of work, such as the merchant fleet. In NSB it developed as an informal but at the same time a very precise social contract. Although it was never negotiated or spelt out in written agreements, it was accepted by the management and practised in detail.

The principle of seniority expressed a common set of values in the public services: that loyalty should be rewarded, not only economically, but also in terms of position and status. The practice of seniority provided upward mobility, not only for the service men, but also for their families. Sons of employees have frequently entered more prestigious branches of service than their fathers. Many railway families had members both from manual work and supervisory positions. Every supervisor was aware that he would challenge the Union if he favoured somebody at the expense of others. The principle of seniority was simple to practice. The applicant to a position who had the highest seniority was systematically preferred. In principle skill and favourable mentioning by superiors, should count. In practice it meant little. One extra day of seniority was enough to settle the issue. This was accepted throughout the organisation. Where as bureaucracy was highly developed and could be very time consuming in some issues, in matters of personnel policy the principle of seniority simplified decision making considerably.⁴

Traditionally all Norwegian senior civil servants were granted life long employment, and with the passing of a law of civil servants in 1918 the same right was also granted to the rank and files. Since the 2nd World War practically all the servicemen were formally acknowledged as

civil servants and stayed with the railways “from cradle to grave”. Only very few have left the service voluntarily, and hardly anybody got sacked.

The statutes of recruitment stated that applicants for any position in the Railways had to be between 18-22 years old, to have good results from elementary school and to be Norwegian citizens. Nevertheless, a lot of even younger people were employed by the Railways as extra workers, as substitutes during vacations etc. Such people provided a sufficiently large basis for permanent recruitment to the service. Thus vacant jobs were generally advertised internally. As a result practically nobody with considerable work experience from outside the railway system, from industry or mining, from the military or the merchant fleet, experience which could challenge the system, have entered the organisation. In fact many recruits probably came from railway families, and knew all about the culture from their childhood. But they must have known correspondingly little about other arenas in society.

To sum up: Starting in the inter-war period, and getting even stronger after the Second World War the railways developed a peculiar social system with only two openings, or rather one entry and one exit. Entry was at the bottom, exit was somewhere higher up in the organisation, as retirement. Aside from this, the system was closed. As a labour market it was encapsulated and segmented. It operated according to deeply founded principles both formally and informally, and was protected against challenging ideas or practices. The fact that all the service men had similar starting conditions, has made it convenient to practice seniority.

Let us for a moment consider what it would be like to practice seniority in an organisation with high labour turnover? Most likely, both difficult and time consuming. It would be necessary to evaluate different kinds of competence and practice from a number of different kinds of activity. In such organisations the principle of seniority would most likely cause friction and conflict. In the railways, however, with hardly any labour turnover, it has created harmony. What was originally designed as a formal bureaucracy was strengthened by the service men themselves, with the National Union of Railway Workers as the major driving force.

Railway families and mobility

Strong family ties are well known in many parts of working life. In farming property, inheritance and family relations have been strongly interconnected. In some professions, recruitment and education, licensing and privileges have been connected with families. Among traditional artisans the workshops have often been located in the basement of the home of the master craftsman and apprentices have been part of the household. In Norway a number of families consider themselves to be railway families. Members of such families have worked in the service for generations, at the most five generations, although they have not been associated with the company through ownership, inheritance, privileges or household relations.

Why? Let us suggest a sociological argument. The principle of seniority has implied that those who dedicated their lives to the company were rewarded. Loyalty has been considered a virtue, by the railway corporation as well as by the service men. As civil servants they were certain to keep their jobs, to achieve salary increases and to advance into more prestigious jobs and higher responsibility, as long as they behaved according to accepted procedures. Close and intimate relations with the company have motivated many railway men to look for jobs for their children, preferably in the station service, where the career opportunities were the best, or as engineers on the locomotives, a service which has had strong appeal to young people. After the 2nd World

War, the railway has appeared as a multi generation company. Family ties have crossed the boundaries between different branches of service, and a large number of families have included members on different levels of status and responsibility. Thus many families have had members from both high and low status occupations, and consisted of superiors as well as subordinates. This may explain why railway people at the grass roots have not categorically rejected people of higher status, so common among the working classes.

The principles of seniority and life long employment have forced most categories of railway men to leave both their work place and their home in order to accept promotion. Some have moved with their families from one station to the next as much as 10 times. Although the railroad has played a dominant and stabilising role in a large number of communities, the ties have mostly been at the institutional level. Unlike most other Norwegians living in the countryside, only a very small number of railway employees have bought land and built homes. Although the stations have been the very foundation of a large number of small towns, as individuals the railway men have been “just passing through”. Looking for opportunities for advancements, the service men and their families have always been prepared to move on after a few years. Nevertheless, something has been permanent and reliable in their life situations: the colleagues, the union, the railway company and the opportunity for further advancement. It may seem as a paradox that the railway men and their union, in order to improve their status, have promoted a system that has denied them the opportunity to invest in homes and to establish themselves in a community. This opportunity has been taken for granted by most other categories of people.

The railways have played an ambiguous role in the countryside. For the larger part of the young people, working for the railroads was a very attractive opportunity. For those who were going to inherit the farm the situation was different. It was out of the question to combine responsibility for a farm, so much determined by season and weather, with the strongly disciplined work and routines at the railroad. Not so for road- and coastal traffic. Roads have mostly been built and maintained by people who have had their primary occupation in agriculture or in the forests, frequently using their own horses or tractors and other machinery. And coastal traffic has been integrated with the fisheries. This pattern of combined work roles, so important for the social structure in the Norwegian countryside, has been totally absent in the railways.

Corporate consciousness: *esprit du corps*

Compared with traditional maps of industrial society as a class system, the picture of the Norwegian railroads is unclear. Some categories of railway workers such as construction workers and workshop mechanics have been firmly established within the proletariat. Other categories have been on the way upwards and into supervisory positions, many playing a leading role in the local society and in political life, preferably the social democratic establishment. Although the majority has supported the Labour Party, and from the 1920ies practically all became union members, the social identity of the railway employees has departed from orthodox class theory. First, they have lacked the working class consciousness typical for subordinated workers in industry. Second, they neither have traditional and cultural bonds to their local communities, nor professional training and identity. The large majority of the railway men have identified themselves with the service and developed an *esprit du corps*, a core notion in the period from the 1920s to the 1990s.

The concept suggests not only duty and loyalty to the state, the service and the employer, but also pride, participation and political influence in a wider sense. On the one hand, the railway

corps has accepted a mission to do what was necessary in order to solve national transport demands, even if these demands went beyond what was considered a normal working day. Militant class struggle such as striking, would harm the transport system and be out of harmony with this mission.

On the other hand, the development of the *esprit du corps* is related to influence, in the workplace as well as in major transport decisions. When the Labour Party got into Government in 1935, starting an era of social democratic hegemony, the ground was prepared for a new union role. This role implied direct access between the union secretariat and the social democratic minister of transport, short cutting the rank and files of the railway establishment. Meetings between the Union and the Labour Party members in the Transport Committee in Parliament before the debates on the State budget became routine. These institutions were never formalised, nevertheless they were taken for granted both by members of the public and by everybody inside the system. This made it possible for the union to pull political strings and short cut formal decision procedures, in short to have a hand on the wheel in most issues, including major political ones, much to the satisfaction of the Corps. Such an option was not available for senior civil servants, neither in the Ministry of Transport, nor in the NSB, not even for the general director of the railway himself.

The social identity expressed in the term *esprit du corps* has developed step by step and been passed on from one generation to the next. Many, who grew up in railway families and later joined the service, lived with the railway culture from cradle to grave. The principle of seniority, public service, life long employment and family relations and *esprit du corps*, in sum it all formed the railways into an organisation different from most other organisations in Norwegian working life.

But how different? What is the scope of this kind of *esprit*? Has it been limited to the railways, or can it be traced in other parts of working life as well? People who have studied the Norwegian telegraph system⁶ and the postal service, have pointed at similar characterising features. Up until the 1980ies the three services responsible for the public infrastructure included more than 80000 employees, at a time when the total number of LO-members was between 600000 and 700000. Similar processes can also be identified in parts of the military and police services, possibly also in some other public services and in some large industrial corporations. This suggests that orthodox theories emphasising class conflict have been modified by processes pointing towards an *esprit du corps* in 5-10% of the working class.

Attempts to change the system

The railway system and the *esprit du corps* proved to be very resistant to change. The technology was heavy and very expensive, and the connections with the State were determined in Parliament and determined by laws. In fact, to change the railways implied to change the State.

Still much of the stability was due to the efforts of the Union. Certainly the union accepted demands for significant rationalisation starting in the 1950s with the transfer from steam to electricity, and it participated in reducing the manpower from 29000 in 1953 to 18000 in 1988. Their gain was that not a single worker was fired. In 1967 the railway management started a process to reorganise the transport of cargo in joint venture with major private road transporters, in order to reduce costs. This was the first step towards privatisation of core business in railway services and caused strong protests, not only from the union, but also from environmentalist

lobbies trying to stop a transfer from rail- to road transport. In 1973 the new transport company, Linjegods, owned by NSB and another transporter on a 50/50 basis, was founded. That fact that this process, which lasted for more than five years, was considered a management coup, is illustrative for the difficulties facing those who wanted to change the railways.

During the 1970ies and 1980ies the railways experienced a continuous loss in traffic percentage to cars and trucks, busses and air planes, increasing the economic burden on the State budget. The roots of the problems was that the Norwegian railroad system was outdated. While Japan and a number of European countries had invested in high speed infrastructure and equipment, Norway still had a single track infrastructure full of curves. When the railway management finally launched a plan for traffic speeds up to 250 km/h in 1992, had lost much support, even in the Labour Party. The plan was brushed aside by the Minister of Transport. He considered it much too expensive.

From 1986 the social democrats which were back in government after a break of five years, started discussions to privatise large parts of the public sector. Although not a member of the EU, Norway followed up the directives of the Commission closely. The attempts to privatise the NSB were strongly resisted by the Union, successfully for a while, but from 1996 it had to throw in the towel. The national railway monopoly was split up, first in two. The rolling stock was transformed into a shareholding company with the State owning all the shares. The lines and the infrastructure remained a part of the State administration. However, soon after these two corporations were split up into a large number of medium sized companies. From 2000 the right to traffic the lines was opened for competition.

Step by step the institutions which formed the basis for the *esprit du corps* have become dismantled. The employees have lost status and benefits. At the turn of the millennium the railways for the first time in history fired employees for other reasons than abuse of alcohol or theft. The corps has been reduced to battalions and lost its mission. The *esprit* seems to have escaped from the system.

¹ Paper to be presented at the 23rd International Labour Process Conference in Glasgow, 2005. The paper is based on Gulowsen, Jon and Ryggvik, Helge: Jernbanen i Norge 1854-2004. Nye tider og gamle spor, 1940-2004, Bergen 2004.

² Bergh, Trond: Jernbanen i Norge 1854-2004. Vol I, Bergen 2004.

⁵ In a classic study of international companies, Chandler () has given the American railroads the honour of pioneering the development of modern accountancy systems, but, even more important, of inventing middle management.

⁶ Dag Gjestland: Etatslojalitet, in: Ted Hanisch, Helge Halvorsen and Gunvor Strømsheim (Eds.): Marked for arbeid. Oslo : Universitetsforlaget, 1980.