

The Seamen's Union, the National Maritime Board and Firemen: Labour Management in the British Mercantile Marine

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By the outbreak of World War I, the change from sail to power propulsion was effectively complete. This had a major effect on the composition of seafaring manpower, causing the introduction of engine room ratings — firemen, trimmers and others — who grew to match in numbers the deck ratings who survived from the days of wind-propelled vessels.¹ Although at the lower end of the shipboard hierarchy, firemen were as essential to a coal-fired steamship as able seamen (ABs) were to a sailing vessel. But despite an existence in shipping approaching a century, firemen as a key sub-group of seafaring manpower did not have the same profile as ABs, whose numbers, quality and training had featured repeatedly over the previous half-century in the shipping press and in government investigations.² One cause was the lack of variety in the job description, which led to the assumption that the work was unskilled. Another must be the policy of extending the title "seaman" to all who served in merchant ships, including females but excluding masters, apprentices and pilots; this served to hide the much wider range of capacities now found on ships within a collective appellation which really belonged to one category only.³

Whether ship's firemen (stokers in naval vessels) ought to be classed as skilled is a matter of context, definition and opinion. It is clear that in the mercantile marine there was an accepted preparation of up to a year through service as a trimmer (coal passer), which was certainly unskilled work. Trimmers received *ad hoc* on-the-job training in firing, which was increasingly augmented during and after World War I with periods in firemen's training schools ashore. As will be shown below, in terms of remuneration they were paid as well as or better than ABs. While their range of skills might be considered narrow, and the work was undoubtedly most arduous, they had to develop and exercise complex physical skills combined with making judgements on servicing the furnaces from the colour of the fire and gauges. They needed to understand the structure of boilers and the operation of their valves and doors. Experienced firemen could rise to petty officer positions in the engine room.⁴

The introduction of the firemen coincided with the rise of organised trade unionism, a movement that aimed to improve wages and employment conditions, ideally through collective bargaining. The period was also one in which there were steady increases in merchant tonnage and demands for manpower, and a growing internationalism

in shipping operation and manning. The market continued to influence employment opportunities and wages, though in Britain the government regulated the process and set minimum conditions aboard domestically-registered ships.

This essay addresses one aspect of a wider study of firemen and trimmers by examining the structures and processes put in place at the end of World War I through which employees' organisations — notably the key union for ratings, the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union (NSFU) — negotiated with employers, especially the Shipping Federation, over wages and conditions for all merchant seafarers. When attempting to distinguish the place of engine room ratings in these arrangements it is important that consideration be given to the wider seafaring employment context into which firemen and trimmers fit. The first part of this paper explores developments which culminated in making the National Maritime Board (NMB) the permanent forum for employer/employee negotiations in British merchant shipping from 1919.⁵ Then the formal structures and operations of the NMB will be examined, followed by an examination of some of the longer-term outcomes with reference to engine room ratings in coal-fired ships. It will be suggested that while details of firemen/trimmers' working conditions received some attention, the NMB remained much more concerned with employment issues affecting seamen in general. Indeed, its processes served to restrict the profiles of particular sub-sets of seafarers. Owing to the ambiguity in terminology used to describe merchant seafarers, the term "seamen" will here be used with reference to ratings collectively, excluding only deck and engine room officers (in contrast to the legal definition noted above). The terms "able seaman," "ordinary seaman" and "sailor" are conventionally restricted to deck ratings. Most other terms used to describe merchant shipboard capacities are either reasonably self-explanatory or generally understood. Some titles have survived changes in technology to become attached to new functions. The "donkeyman" developed into the foreman of the engine room ratings rising from the ranks of firemen (in the way that the bosun has long been the foreman of the deck ratings rising from the ranks of ABs). The title, however, derives from the man employed to supervise the donkey engine used on sailing vessels to power deck operations in port, which in turn evolved from the animal used in the same role. Similarly, the fireman in coal-fired ships transferred to oil-fired ships with the same title, as an attendant to oil burners.

The background to the formation of the NMB lay in the previous fifty years, when seamen's trade unionism struggled with all the problems of emergent combinations of workers, particularly acute in this case given the context of merchant seafaring.⁶ The main objects were no different from unions in other industries: improvements in wages and conditions, recognition as the negotiating body, and a closed shop. The last implied union control of employment and the supply of workers, which became the key area of conflict that would be resolved eventually through the operation of joint-supply machinery under the auspices of the NMB. In shipping, this was complicated by the potentially large number of employers, the often limited duration over which individual agreements lasted, and the involvement of government in the regulation of the employment processes.

Seafarers have tended to form mutual interest groups at about the same rate as other sections of the population, and examples may be identified as far back as medieval times. Those having a long history, such as the trinity houses, invariably comprised masters and officers. Groupings solely of seamen were much more difficult to sustain due

to the problems of mobility and dispersal. In the changing context of the nineteenth century, when legal restrictions against combination were removed and communications became increasingly easy, the trade union movement evolved rapidly from its original craft base. In a listing that they acknowledge is incomplete, Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan have identified over fifty seamen's groupings, friendly societies, associations and unions, some as early as 1815.⁷ While many of the earlier examples were localised in a particular port, there was already an understanding of the need for a national organisation; later foundations certainly aimed at this. But in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seamen's unions were founded, merged or collapsed with bewildering frequency, a trend that was indicative of the desire to combine for mutual support, balanced against the inability to retain continuing allegiance and a lack of experience in managing complex organisations. That firemen were included with sailors (frequently "seamen" appeared in titles) in fourteen of those listed suggests an accepted equality with sailors for combination purposes, a recognition which seems to have existed in "steam" ports like Sunderland at least as early as 1850. It may also reflect the unionisation of some firemen in previous employment ashore, as their abilities must have been as much in demand in steam-powered industry ashore as in steamers.

Out of the instability, one union eventually emerged as the leading representative of seamen and the significant contributor in the creation of the machinery of the NMB. Social groupings are frequently identified with one prime mover, and this was certainly the case with the NSFU (1894), whose founder and president, J. Havelock Wilson, dominated until his death in 1929. " But his ultimate success resulted from a lengthy and hard apprenticeship in which he encountered an astonishing number of difficulties: a volatile, uncontrolled membership; weak financial management; personal attacks from within his organisation as well as from his main opponents; dishonesty among union officials; and numerous legal encounters leading to fines and imprisonment. Thus, it is hardly surprising that his first attempt, the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union of Great Britain and Ireland (NASFU, 1887) collapsed in 1894, after which Wilson promptly formed the NSFU.

Still, the NASFU was significant in that it achieved a network of branches and, briefly, an exceptionally large membership estimated at 75,000.⁹ Through local strike action, refusing to sail with non-union seamen, and particularly its support of the London dock strike in 1889, NASFU achieved a reputation for militancy that marked it as a leader in a more aggressive phase of union activity. But a more significant effect was that shipowners felt a need in 1890 to combine in a more positive manner by forming the Shipping Federation, which became the principal organisation representing employers in the NMB.

In the 1890s NASFU and the Shipping Federation were opponents in a guerilla war in which the key issue was the supply of seamen.¹⁰ By seeking all-union crews, NASFU was effectively attempting to control the supply of labour to ships, and it used the strike to try to achieve that objective. The Shipping Federation set up a counter-organisation to supply non-union crews — strikebreakers who had accepted the Federation "ticket" - to masters who faced the possibility of delay because they were unwilling to comply with the union. With the resources of the shipping industry behind it, the Shipping Federation rapidly built a network of regional offices, in effect matching those of the

NASFU. Both sides became shippers of seamen, thus impinging on long-established arrangements that were regulated and managed by government.

As part of the battle against crimping, seafaring charities had begun to supply seamen, and government had then instituted a whole range of facilities, measures and regulations, including the requirement that shipping masters (persons supplying seamen) had to be licensed." Government thus was already a third party to the employment of seamen, would assume a major role during World War I, and would promote the creation of the NMB. The activities of the Shipping Federation in organising strikebreakers over the twenty years from 1890 were ultimately little different from the work of licensed shipping masters who assembled crews for ships for a fee. No matter how a crew was brought together, the final stage of joining a ship was to sign articles of agreement according to government regulations in front of the Superintendent of the local Mercantile Marine Office, a process managed by the state since 1850. The union's desire for all-union crews did not come so close to the legal framework, but where local officials tried to assemble such crews for particular ships, it could be argued that such actions brought them within the law's requirements. In the event, the early success of the Federation in strikebreaking, culminating in the demise of NASFU, was followed by fifteen years of intermittent strife among seamen's unions and between the unions and the Federation. The recovery of Wilson's new union, NSFU, was tentative, and shipowners were left largely in control, reactivating strikebreaking from time to time to deal with local disputes.¹²

While it might appear that the NSFU generally had "its back to the wall" in disputes with the Shipping Federation, the seamen's cause did not lack sympathizers among shipowners and others with an interest in conditions. Samuel Plimsoll and Thomas Brassey are well known in this context. A "conciliation" approach had long been practised in northeastern England, and owners like the Holts and Runciman were supportive of the union's call for improvements.¹³ Other sympathizers included those connected with seafaring charities who saw much of the negative side of work at sea. One man in particular had considerable experience supporting seamen in disputes over wages and conditions. This was Father Charles P. Hopkins, a chaplain in Indian, who spoke on the union platform during the 1911 strike and became joint chairman of the Sailors' and Firemen's Panel of the NMB; he has almost certainly been underrated.¹⁴ On another level, support for the union's objectives was augmented by the promotion of contacts with seamen's and transport unions abroad through the International Transport Workers' Federation.¹⁵ This was a potential factor in the 1911 seamen's strike, and became increasingly important in the postwar period, but substantial German involvement prior to the war led Wilson to sever contact in 1914.¹⁶

In contrast to the NSFU, the Shipping Federation had become a national organisation with substantial assets in investments and property.¹⁷ Yet when the seamen's strike of 1911 generated a remarkable degree of unity and simultaneous action in the main British ports, shipowners made substantial concessions.¹⁸ Although in the remaining years before the war relationships between the two sides were by no means easy, 1911 marked a watershed from which the later co-operation could be traced.¹⁹ Although national conciliation and wages were long-standing objectives of Wilson and the NSFU, the employers moved sufficiently for the union to claim progress on policy as well as wages. In practice, numerous owners individually conceded increases in wages. In London,

standardisation of local rates was accepted. In Liverpool, where owners operated their own machinery separate from the Shipping Federation, there was agreement on the establishment of a local joint-conciliation committee. In Cardiff, the agreement formally recognised the NSFU. The Shipping Federation nominally recognised the union so that all seamen were free to join, while the union relaxed its insistence on all-union crews. Continued clashes during the final prewar years demonstrated that each side strove to maintain the spirit of its objectives. Had the war not intervened, the outcome could well have been a retreat to earlier patterns of conflict, particularly over the rapidly increasing employment of lascar and Chinese ratings.

With the outbreak of war, both sides put their principles to one side to devote full attention to the vital contribution of merchant shipping to the war effort. While outstanding grievances might have been shelved, war conditions still brought a range of new problems.²⁰ Rampant inflation rapidly eroded the value of wages and frequent increases had to be granted. Merchant ships were being attacked and sunk, killing some seamen and cutting off instantly the income of survivors. There was no provision for the support or compensation of such civilians or their relatives. Moreover, the position of seamen who found themselves on ships taken over as Admiralty transports to operate in high-risk areas needed special consideration. The indiscipline of merchant seamen compared with men in the forces raised special problems. The loss of sections of the merchant workforce to the armed forces and through internment; disruption of voyage patterns; and loss of life and increased rates of injury all created serious shortages of manpower at one extreme and unemployment at the other.

Though the NSFU had only achieved partial recognition from the shipowners by 1914, its rising status was endorsed, perhaps of necessity, by the increasing frequency with which officialdom turned to it for assistance concerning manning. As early as August 1914, a committee comprising representatives of the Board of Trade, Admiralty and union (Hopkins was a member of the latter's team) recommended wages for seamen serving in Admiralty-chartered vessels, agreeing a special remuneration of £1 above the current rates.²¹ As the war progressed, the need to re-deploy seafarers increasingly called for a homogeneous approach to manpower management. The myriad variations in manning, conditions, contracts, and especially wages, which represented the state of merchant service manpower management in 1914, became increasingly untenable. In 1916 the Admiralty Transport Service imposed continuous service and standard pay rates on merchant seafarers in transports despite contrary advice from the union.²² It was not a particularly successful initiative. Elsewhere, the union was involved in numerous local negotiations, but growing discontent among seamen over the issues noted above, and in official circles over traditional seamen's behaviours, such as drunkenness ashore and failure to join outward-bound ships, brought matters to a head.²³

With rising shipping losses and an increasingly serious war situation, a change in government at the end of 1916 produced a new Ministry of Shipping which was given responsibility for the tonnage employed as government transports. The historian of the Shipping Federation has little to say about the preliminary moves, but Hopkins points to conferences in the summer of 1917 between NSFU and the Federation over seamen's hours and overtime in port at which ideas of central and district joint committees were floated.²⁴ Soon after, the Ministry of Shipping held meetings with the two sides, having

already formed an interdepartmental Mercantile Marine Conciliation Committee. In the autumn of 1917, NSFU maintained pressure on the Ministry to quell the growing unrest among seamen. It took an agreement over simmering problems in Liverpool, which included moves toward a national wage and a pay rise, to crystallise the continuing debate over manning issues, including the supply question. By the end of November the structure of this first National Maritime Board (NMB [1917]) and the outcome of its first meeting (on sailors' and firemen's standard wages) had been announced.

The long-standing conflict over the supply of seamen was quickly solved by acceptance of an NSFU proposal for a joint supply system.²⁵ But Hopkins argues that putting the system into effect "proved a great difficulty, and a great test as to the loyalty to the Joint principle of all concerned."²⁶ In 1918, a shortage of seamen was developing and the NMB (1917) established a sub-committee on supply that recommended the release of seamen from the army, allowing youths to join the mercantile marine instead of the army and an employment register managed jointly by the Federation and the union. The supply of new blood was enhanced by a scheme for pre-sea training, notably at the new Gravesend Sea School, again under joint management. These measures addressed the shortage but not the routine management of supplying crews. In the war context the Ministry of Shipping needed control over the disposition of seamen, which meant a central register in London, with local supply offices close to mercantile marine offices and procedures to register seamen as they joined and left ships, the information being forwarded to the central register.

The structure of the NMB (1917) as a wartime expedient might seem relatively simple.²⁷ The Ministry of Shipping provided the neutral chairmanship and secretariat which oversaw joint meetings between representatives of the employers and seafarers. While the former was drawn largely from the Shipping Federation, the complexity of merchant ship manning required separate groups for the various types of manpower. Four panels were created: deck officers, engineers, sailors' and firemen, and cooks and stewards, each comprising representatives of appropriate unions and associations. It was in the panels that the real debates took place and national agreements were thrashed out. But the complexity of merchant shipping could not simply be handled by four central "departmental panels." Expressed in terms of industry ashore, each ship was a separate "factory" in a related area of production but of individual design and operation, and often concerned with different commodities. The differences could only be handled through local machinery capable of interpretation and arbitration, and even of making local adjustments to nationally-agreed standards. Provision for this was made by the appointment of teams of "port consultants," each "district" having at least one from the Federation and the unions (the Ministry of Shipping provided its own representative). This group was the front line in handling local disputes. Local support was provided by creating District Maritime Boards (DMBs [1917]), again with equal representation from the two sides. Chairmanship could be by agreement or, where this failed, by appointment by the Ministry of Shipping. The NMB (1917) created twenty-one districts spanning the whole coastline of Britain and Northern Ireland, each having the machinery indicated above and working under guidelines devised by the NMB (1917). The Shipping Federation and the unions each already had a network of local offices, and locations for meetings of the DMBs (1917) could be found on an *ad hoc* basis. But the full-time port

consultants needed a neutral base, which was found by the Ministry of Shipping at mercantile marine offices. These were the places where disputes were most likely to flare while crews were engaged or signed off. This might seem cumbersome, but a diverse merchant fleet numbering over 18,000 ships, each engaging and discharging crews several times per year, demanded a structure in which most problems could be settled promptly, with local recourse to the DMB (1917) for those the port consultants could not resolve themselves. Where the local machinery failed to filter out disputes, the NMB (1917) could act as final arbiter, as well as decide national standards on wages and conditions.

Table 1
Firemen's Wages, 1850-1930

Year	Monthly Rates						Weekly Rates							
	£	s	d		£	s	d	£	s	d	£	s	d	
1850	3	0	0	to	5	0	0	0	19	0	to	1	4	0
1870	3	10	0	to	5	10	0	0	22	6	to	1	8	0
1890	3	10	0	to	5	0	0	1	8	0	to	1	12	8
1910	3	15	0	to	4	10	0	1	5	0	to	1	11	11
1914 (July)	5	10	0	to	6	10	0	1	10	0	to	1	12	6
1915 (Jany)	6	10	0	to	8	0	0	1	10	0	to	2	5	0
1915 (July)	6	10	0	to	9	0	0	2	10	0	to	3	10	0
1916 (July)	7	0	0	to	9	10	0	2	11	0	to	3	5	0
1917 (Jany)	7	10	0	to	10	0	0	2	13	6	to	3	5	0
1917 (July)	8	10	0	to	10	0	0							
1917 (Novr)	12	0	0					3	17	6				
1930	9	10	0					3	2	0				

Sources: 1850-1910 and 1930: Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Maritime History Archive (MHA), and Public Record Office (PRO), Board of Trade (BT) 99, "Agreements and Accounts of Crew," samples; 1914-1918: PRO, MT9/123/1917, table compiled by Hopkins for Mercantile Marine Conciliation Committee, 1917; Father Hopkins [Charles Plomer], *National Service of British Seamen, 1914-1919* (London, 1920), appendix 53. Data excludes Asians.

How had firemen fared in the decades prior to the creation of the NMB? Wage data are given in table 1. The dual standard of monthly rates, including food, for foreign-going ships, and weekly rates without food for home trade vessels, was a long-standing practice. Rates varied by port, time and vessel, reflecting market forces. The range for monthly ships in 1890, for example, included seven different rates. Hopkins' data for 1915 show London and Liverpool paying the lowest rates and the northeast ports the highest. The 1930 sample shows clearly the standardisation of wage rates and the decline in wages due to the depression. Compared to AB rates on monthly agreements before

consolidation, they received the same wages in some ports (e. g., Glasgow), but in others were able to command a premium of perhaps ten shillings, as in Liverpool. Whether this reflected supply or the arduous physical environment is uncertain. The skill range was certainly narrower than required of an A.B. Under the NMB (1917), this differential was applied to all firemen. Thus, at the end of 1917 firemen received £12 per month and A.Bs £11 10s. But on weekly ships any differentials were abandoned: A.Bs and firemen were paid the same new national rate of £3 17s 6d.

The extent of progress before 1917 on the firemen's working environment is uncertain. We know that the three-watch system had been conceded on some foreign-going ships, probably on physical grounds, but with other issues, such as the number of firemen who should be carried in relation to the number of furnaces and consumption of coal, or working hours in port, firemen had to put up with circumstances as found on particular ships. The NSFU had such items on its agenda, but they do not seem to have been seriously addressed by the Shipping Federation until after the NMB was formed.²⁸

The operations of the NMB (1917) in 1918/1919 were eminently successful. But the end of the war threatened its existence, since it depended on the continued involvement of the Ministry of Shipping. Yet the idea of joint industrial councils was not restricted to shipping. The war had demanded unified approaches to labour problems in other industries, and parliament was urging the establishment of "Whitley Councils," the term under which many became known.²⁹ The brokerage of another government department, the Ministry of Reconstruction, set in train negotiations between the owners and unions for the creation of a permanent postwar National Maritime Board (NMB [1919]) which would not include government officials as final arbiters. The two sides prepared for discussions by consolidating their own groups. The Shipping Federation linked with the Employers Association of the Port of Liverpool (which had not been part of the NMB [1917]). The unions and societies representing the various sectors of seafaring labour formed the Seafarers Joint Council. Equal numbers of representatives from the two sides worked out a constitution for the NMB (1919), which was finally agreed at the end of November 1919.³⁰

In contrast to the NMB (1917), of which only the Sailors' and Firemen's Panel had a proper constitution, the formation of the NMB (1919) hinged on the drafting of a constitution, which was to establish the complete machinery. To the four national panels (navigation officers, engineer officers, sailors and firemen, and catering) was added a new one for masters. All the panels together constituted the NMB (1919). The district organisation was retained in principle, but instead of the DMBs (1917) there would be four parallel panels, each in the image of the main national committees. No local arrangement was envisaged for masters. The port consultants were retained, but they were now appointed by the district panels. This modified version of the old board retained the essential principle of national policy being agreed centrally with directives passed down to districts and ultimately to seafarers; local interpretation and arbitration was backed by the local panel structure and the ability to refer difficult issues to the NMB (1919). The principle of equal numbers from the two sides, with shared chairmanship, was carried through all levels, and of course the involvement of the Ministry ceased.

The effect of perpetuating the NMB was that one organisation penetrated the day-to-day working experience of all seafarers serving in British ships to an unparalleled

extent. This industrial council was not simply concerned with the periodic negotiations for revising wages and general conditions, but dealt with particular circumstances of individual seafarers on specific ships. Indeed, the more the working context (wages, manning levels, hours of work, overtime, job descriptions, or workplace conditions) was investigated and details agreed, the more exceptions and special cases were thrown up for consideration. The staff of the two sides involved in day-to-day matters could not avoid achieving a level of understanding of the industry well beyond that of the seafarers themselves.

A major cause of discontent and dispute for firemen and trimmers was the work involved in transferring ash and clinker from the stokehold to the ship's deck for dumping over the side. While in theory this should have been done as part of their duties while on watch, the need to maintain boiler pressures and the tradition of leaving the fires drawing well when handing over to the next watch mitigated against it. As each watch was responsible for leaving a clear stokehold for the next, it often meant that firemen and trimmers spent the first half-hour of their watch below on this task. The issues thus were hours of work, duties and overtime payments. The NMB (1919) Sailors' and Firemen's Panel ruled in 1919 that this work should be done as far as possible during the watch, but if this could not be done, overtime at Is 6d per hour (2s on Sundays) should be paid.³¹ In 1920 it ruled that if men were ordered to dump ashes after watches, the time standing by while fires were being cleaned was part of time worked and should count for overtime. Later that year, it conceded that this was standard practice in deep-sea vessels and should be extended to coastal ships.

The ash problem was never fully resolved; local issues repeatedly emerged. In 1922, for example, firemen in *Port Stephens* claimed one hour overtime for each watch, as stipulated in the crew agreement, but found on paying off that the ship would only allow half an hour because the men waited for the fires to be cleaned. Depending on the quality of coal, about thirty minutes were needed for the work. The Panel ruled that the complaint be allowed for time not in dispute and three-quarters of the overtime for hours in contention. In this case the firemen benefitted. Asked by a district panel the same year to define hardship associated with dumping ashes at sea, the National Panel failed to answer and referred the matter back to the district with an exhortation to try to settle it by "mutual understanding." In 1925, on a ship carrying only three firemen, consuming about eleven tons of coal per day and generating twenty-five buckets of ash each watch, the owners tried to cut costs by arguing that the ship was steaming slowly and the job did not need doing each watch. The Panel ruled that since the job could not be done in watchkeeping hours, each man should be allowed Is per day extra. In cases like this, variations in standard practice became attached to particular ships and can be seen as a way of allowing for the differences between vessels.

Returning yet again to the ash problem in 1931, the Panel defined hand-raising of ash as a hardship and recommended the urgent fitting of mechanical hoists, blowers or self-dumpers, though little action probably resulted. It also set policies on manning relative to the number of furnaces and whether the draft was natural or forced; on limiting the maximum hours worked; on one day's rest in seven at sea; and on annual leave (one day per month served). Even in 1950, the Sailors' and Firemen's Panel had to rule on a complicated claim for thirty hours overtime over three weekends by a trimmer who had

worked two-hour shifts overnight keeping the boiler room supplied with coal. Was this really day work, for which other rules existed? Why had the company allowed such a peculiar arrangement? The claim was allowed.

Table 2
Firemen's Wages 1917-1960

Date effective	Monthly Rates			Weekly Rates		
	£	s	d	£	s	d
Nov. 1917	12	0	0	3	17	6
1 May 1920	15	0	0	4	7	6
1 May 1921	12	10	0	3	19	0
1922	10	10	0			
16 Apr. 1923	9	0	0			
5 Jun 1924	9	10	0			
5 Sept. 1924	10	0	0			
3 Jul. 1925	9	0	0			
31 Jan. 1932	8	2	0			
25 Mar. 1935	8	16	6	2	17	6
24 Feb. 1936	9	0	0	2	19	0
1 Jan. 1938	10	2	6	3	3	6
1 Feb. 1943	14	10	0	4	4	0
1 Apr. 1947	24	10	0	6	10	8
1 Mar. 1951	26	10	0	7	0	0
28 Jan. 1952	28	10	0	7	12	10
25 Jan. 1954	30	0	0	7	19	10
30 May 1955	32	0	0	8	9	2
29 Aug. 1960	36	5	0	9	9	0

Sources: University of Warwick Modern Records Centre (UWMRC), NMB Minutes, "Summary of Negotiations between 1955 and 1920" [this document is arranged in reverse order of date]; and Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen: A History of the National Union of Seamen, 1887-1987* (Oxford, 1989), 110-111, 120-122 and 140.

The foregoing examples illustrate the penetration of the NMB (1919), and particularly the Sailors' and Firemen's Panel, into the very fabric of labour management in British merchantmen. They point also to a concern for working conditions and hint at the gradual improvement which was the union's aim. Firemen of course shared in changes affecting seamen generally, not all of which were positive. Table 2 sets out changes in firemen's wages from the formation of the NMB (1917). It will be immediately evident that firemen were seriously affected by the depression. The linkage with AB wages continued: firemen in weekly vessels were paid the same as ABs, while in monthly vessels the premium of ten shillings for firemen was retained into the 1960s, though the difference became less significant. All seafarers were affected by wage cuts imposed in the 1920s and 1930s. Their acceptance, if reluctantly, by union officials exposed the position the union had placed itself in by agreeing to be bound by the joint agreement.

Any decision finally agreed by the Board had to be supported. The union benefitted from supply arrangements which effectively guaranteed a closed shop, and it could take credit when improvements were agreed. But when large numbers of ships were laid-up, with accompanying high levels of unemployment among seafarers, and the owners demonstrated poverty, the union was forced to accept wage cuts and the stigma not only of failing its members but also of appearing to be in league with the owners. Union officials became pariahs not only among the more militant members but also in the wider trade union movement.³² Yet the supply arrangements were so effective that membership loss was prevented, splinter groups suppressed and rival unions collapsed, eventually leaving the NSFU as the sole union for all ratings. In recognition of this trend, it changed its name to the National Union of Seamen (NUS) from 1925. Of course, as the economic situation improved in the late 1930s, the NUS was in a position to argue for pay rises on the grounds of the earlier sacrifices.

The NMB structure, a product of the First World War, was well placed to handle manning during the Second. As before, seamen were paid a war-risks bonus, which was consolidated into basic wages at the end of the conflict. In the postwar era, the NMB agreed wage rises in line with inflation, and progress was made on conditions and fringe benefits. One example was the Established Service Scheme, in which firemen were able to participate and which arose out of wartime arrangements for continuous service. By the 1960s coal-burning ships were a minor proportion of the total fleet and most engine-room ratings classed as firemen were employed on oil-burning ships. The problems of coal-burners were a thing of the past. But the dangers implicit in the union's membership in the NMB were to catch up with it in the 1960s in the form of dissent, including unofficial strikes, the Seamen's Reform Movement and eventually the official strike of 1966. The monolithic nature of the NMB was identified by the Pearson Committee in 1967, and its failure to reform even after fifty years of operation has been examined by James McConville.³³ The committee was established by the government in response to the strike to investigate manning in the shipping industry, and led to the Merchant Shipping Acts of 1970 and 1974, which modernised the conditions of seafaring employment and incorporated some aspects of the NMB agreements.³⁴ The decline of the British shipping industry and the withdrawal of shipowners from membership in the Shipping Federation led to the NMB being terminated in the 1990s.

This essay has been concerned with the effect of labour management structures on one of the many subgroups of seafarers created by advances in ship technology. Firemen and trimmers were significant components of the sea-going labour force for barely a century. For over half that period they were employed for the best they could get in an open market, and there is little evidence that they achieved much special consideration except during manpower shortages, although philanthropists recognised the conditions in which they worked and the Board of Trade was concerned about the high level of deaths among firemen. The paper has shown that their circumstances did receive particular attention, though the NMB structures at times failed to produce solutions. They benefitted with all ratings from general advances which the NMB produced, in particular being locked in with ABs on the wage front from 1917.

Firemen were a significant section of the NSFU/NUS and shared in its ultimate success in the conciliation system of the NMB. Ultimately, they were constrained in union

membership, along with all seamen, by the supply system. In achieving both these objectives, the union was the major player, and there is strong circumstantial evidence that much of the detailed thinking came from the union, especially from Wilson and Hopkins. These structures served well during the two wars and the intervening depression. But were firemen and trimmers as invisible as was suggested at the start of this paper? When particular problems emerged, attention certainly was focused on them. But in so many other respects they were obscured by the term "seamen" and the vision that of ABs in sailing ships. Indeed, many discussions of seamen fail to show any awareness of this key group in the engine room. It was possible on liners for passengers to be wholly unaware of the huge mass of men labouring below, so well were firemen segregated; officers, however, dealing with their unruliness, were much more aware of them. Perhaps most telling is the history of the union, whose authors fail to refer to them in the index.

NOTES

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1. In coal-fired steamships, firemen fed coal into boiler furnaces and removed clinker and ash, semi-skilled tasks involving judgement of the state of the fire in relation to draft and pressure gauges. Trimmers supplied firemen with coal from the bunkers.

2. Among the key investigations were those conducted by the Select Committee on Shipwrecks (Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *Parliamentary Papers [BPP]*, 1836, XVII), Royal Commission on Manning the Navy (*BPP*, 1859, VI), Royal Commission on Unseaworthy Ships (*BPP*, 1874, XXXIV), and Board of Trade Committee on the Employment of Lascars and Other Foreigners (*BPP*, 1904, LXII).

3. This legal definition, found in the Merchant Shipping Act, 1894, 57 & 58 Vict., Ch. 60, Section 742, had long been common when making general reference to persons employed in merchant ships.

4. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "unskilled" as not possessing or requiring skill or special training, and "unskilled labouring" as simple forms of manual labour. For fuller considerations of firemen's work, see Alston Kennerley,

"Keeping Ships Moving: The Labourers Below," in Paul Rees (ed.), *Room Service: Aspects of Life Aboard the Ocean Liner* (Liverpool, 1996), 3-12; and Kennerley, "Stoking the Boilers: Firemen and Trimmers in British Merchant Ships, 1850-1950," in David J. Starkey (ed.), *Steam at Sea: The Application of Steam Power in the Maritime World* (Exeter, forthcoming).

5. As the wartime NMB was reconstituted with the same name after the war, whenever differentiation is required the date of formation will be inserted in parentheses.

6. For an overview of emergent seamen's unionism see Arthur Marsh and Victoria Ryan, *The Seamen: A History of the National Union of Seamen, 1887-1987* (Oxford, 1989), chapters 1-3.

7. *Ibid.*, appendix II, 310-312.

8. *Ibid.*, chaps. 5-7, examines Wilson's contribution in detail. Only the first volume of Wilson's autobiography, to 1894, was published: J. Havelock Wilson, *My Stormy Voyage Through Life* (London, 1925).

9. Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, 23.

10. L. H. Powell, *The Shipping Federation: A History of the First Sixty Years, 1890-1950* (London, 1950), is written from the Federation's perspective; it is much less well researched than Marsh and Ryan's study of the union.

11. Merchant Shipping Act, 1894, Sections 110-112, made the Board of Trade the licensing authority and provided penalties for acting without a license or for receiving payment from seamen, re-enacting measures which had existed since mid-century.

12. Powell, *Shipping Federation*, chap. 2; and Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, 27-35.

13. Wilson, *Stormy Voyage*, 123 and 250-254; and Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, 57.

14. The only study of Hopkins' work is Robert Miller, "Charles Plomer Hopkins and the Seamen's Union with Particular Reference to the 1911 Seamen's Strike" (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Warwick, 1992). For an outline of Hopkins' religious career see Robert Miller, "An Anglican Contribution to the Catholic Maritime Apostolate," *Mariner's Mirror*, LXXXII, No. 1 (February 1996), 84-89. Some hint of Hopkins' contribution appears in his own book, Father Hopkins [Charles Plomer], *National Service of British Seamen, 1914-1919* (London, 1920). Less than fifty of this work's 200 pages contain Hopkins' own commentary; the remainder comprises complete texts or extracts from contemporary documents relating to the management of merchant seafarers, and is thus a major compilation of printed primary material. PRO, MT9/1231/1917, MT9/1116/1917 and MT9/140/1920, contain several letters and other documents by Hopkins which indicate that he was at the heart of developments during and immediately after the war. He became joint secretary of the Sailors' and Firemen's Panel of the new NMB and was a member of the same panel of the NMB (1917), as well as serving on several NMB sub-committees. The evidence suggests he was an important behind-the-scenes operator who knew how to mix with owners and officials from the ministry; he may well have played a key role in drafting the policies.

15. Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, 52 and 74.

16. For a nearly contemporary discussion of Wilson's role and the contribution of both NMBs, see R. H. Thornton, *British Shipping* (Cambridge, 1939), chapters 6, 13, 14, and *passim*. Thornton joined the Liverpool shipowners Alfred Holt and Company in 1919, becoming a manager in 1929, and was thus able to witness developments at close range. He is full of praise for Wilson and the NMB

structures. For concise descriptions of the various organizations represented in the NMB in the same period, see F. Fletcher Hunt, "Shipowners' Organisations," and Thomas Scott, "Employees' Organisations," both in John A. Todd (ed.), *The Shipping World Afloat and Ashore* (2nd ed., London, 1934) 167-178. These authors note the moderating influences of the NMB and the stability anticipated in industrial relations. See also Ronald Hope, *A New History of British Shipping* (London, 1990), especially chapters 18-21.

17. Powell, *Shipping Federation*, 6.

18. *Ibid.*, chap. 2; and Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, 53-58.

19. Hopkins, *National Service*, 5, suggests relations between the NSFU and the Shipping Federation were worsening.

20. *Ibid.*, 13-38.

21. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

22. *Ibid.*, 24.

23. *Ibid.*, 41-49; and Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, 80-83.

24. Hopkins, *National Service*, 42-46.

25. *Ibid.*, 50-57.

26. *Ibid.*, 68.

27. *Ibid.*, 46-48. The following section is based on appendices 23 and 23a in Hopkins, where the texts of the constitutions of the NMB (1917) Panel for Sailors and Firemen, and the NMB (1917) instructions for Port Consultants, are set out.

28. CPH [Charles Plomer Hopkins], "The Manning of Merchant Ships: The Stakehold," undated pamphlet [1911?]; University of Warwick Modern Records Centre (UWMRC), National Union of Seamen Archive, NUS/175/6/MAN/4/1. Hopkins argues that despite statutory statements on undermanning and a requirement that the number of sailors be stated, nothing specific regulated stakehold manning, despite ample evidence of the overwork, danger, incidence of accidents, and suicide. Arguments are made on the methods by which a

manning scale might be reached, concluding that the only satisfactory measures were daily fuel consumption related to boiler design with an allowance for hot climates. Ships should carry one fireman for every three tons of daily fuel consumption (two and one-half tons in the tropics), plus additional trimmers. Thus, daily coal consumption of twenty-one tons would require seven firemen and two trimmers.

29. A number of "Whitley Councils," joint national industrial groups in which unions negotiated terms and conditions of employment with employers, were formed following the recommendations of the Whitley Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction towards the end of World War I. By 1920 they covered some four million workers. See S. Glynn and Alan Booth, *Modern Britain: An Economic and Social History* (London, 1996), 98.

30. Hopkins, *National Service*, 81-86; and NMB constitution, 87-92, appendix L V. Hopkins was Treasurer of the Seafarers' Joint Council; continued as Joint Secretary of the Sailors' and Firemen's Panel from the NMB (1917) to the NMB (1919), and was a member of the Committee of the Gravesend Sea School.

31. PRO, MT9/1480, "Determinations of the Old and New National Maritime Boards (Sailors' and Firemen's Panel) from November 1917 to March 1921 (NMB, 1921)." This printed summary illustrates the almost seamless continuity between the old and new Boards with respect to operations and decisions. The original minutes are found in the UWMRC, partly in NUS records (MSS 175) and partly in the Chamber of Shipping (MSS 367). All examples are from these sources.

32. This is explored in much greater depth in Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, chap. 6. See also Basil Mogridge, "Labour Relations and Labour Costs," in S. G. Sturme, *British Shipping and World Competition* (London, 1962), chap. 12.

33. Marsh and Ryan, *Seamen*, chap 8. See also J. McConville, *Strategic Factors in Industrial Relations Systems: The Shipping Industry in the United Kingdom* (Geneva, 1977), chap. 2; and The Pearson Report, Cmnd. 3211.

34. Hope, *New History*, 439-440; and Alan E. Branch, *Elements of Shipping* (7th ed., London, 1996), 86. See also F. N. Hopkins, *Business and Law for the Shipmaster* (7th ed., Glasgow, 1989), for more recent discussions of the roles of merchant shipping bodies involved with manning.

The National Union of Seamen (NUS) was the principal trade union of merchant seafarers in the United Kingdom from the late 1880s to 1990. In 1990, the union amalgamated with the National Union of Railwaymen to form the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT). The Seamen's Union was founded in Sunderland in 1887 as the National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union. Its founder, J. Havelock Wilson became its president. It quickly spread to other ports and had become genuinely