

# ARTICLES

## Brief Encounters:

### Italian Immigrant Workers and the CPR 1900-30

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#### I

THIS PAPER IS PART of a larger research effort aimed at reconstructing the work experience of Italian immigrants in Quebec during a period of massive immigration to Canada, and of sweeping changes in regional and local labour markets. One aspect of this research effort deals with one pole of the immigrant labour market in Canada, the one associated with railroad construction, mining, lumbering, and harvesting in the Canadian hinterland. It was a segment essentially seasonal in character, and one that closely followed the evolution of the industrial geography, both at a regional and a national level. It was this segment of the Canadian labour market that first attracted the largest quantity of Italian immigrant labour, giving rise to phenomena such as sojourning and "padronismo," so well studied by Robert Harney and Donald Avery, among others. Their large-scale concentration in these sectors, coupled with some of the recruiting practices put into effect by both companies and "padroni," are largely responsible for the degree of historical visibility these workers have enjoyed.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Donald Avery, "Dangerous Foreigners": *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979); Robert F. Harney "Men Without Women: Italian Migrants in Canada, 1885-1930," in Betty Boyd Caroli *et al.*, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto 1978); Robert F. Harney, "Montreal's King of Italian Labour: A Case Study of Padronism," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979); Robert F. Harney, "The Padrone System and Sojourners in the Canadian North, 1885-1920," in George E. Pozzetta, ed., *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class* (Toronto 1980); Antonio Pucci, "Canadian Industrialization versus the

Bruno Ramirez, "Brief Encounters: Italian Immigrant Workers and the CPR, 1900-1930," *Labour/Le Travail*, 17 (Spring 1986), 9-27.

Less known is the experience of Italian immigrants in the Canadian metropolises. Yet, whether coming to Canada as "sojourners," or as permanent settlers, the work experience of Italian immigrants became increasingly bound up with the dynamics of the urban labour market. In the expanding urban metropolis of the early 1900s, Italian immigrants could sell their labour while waiting to move on to a more remunerative job in the Canadian hinterland or while waiting for departure to their home country; for those who had decided to settle, the city became the environment in which they had to weave their economic strategies in order to insure the material subsistence of themselves and their families. The urban economy made it possible for many of them to put into use some of the skills they had learned in the old country: so, as city directories and various impressionistic evidence show, some of them earned their living as street musicians, peddlers or street vendors; others set up fruit stores, barber, and shoe repair shops. But very likely, the majority of them turned to wage labour and became part of an expanding urban work force responding to the needs of the manufacturing, construction, and service sectors.<sup>2</sup>

If we turn our attention to Montreal — the city that had the largest concentration of Italian immigrants up until World War II — we soon realize that our historical knowledge of this sector of the metropolitan labour force has remained rather superficial. This has resulted partly from the limitations posed by census sources, and from the fact that we are dealing with a mostly unskilled and highly mobile work force that left little trace in company records and trade union rolls. But the few documentary traces Italian workers have left, coupled with the knowledge derived from oral history, leave little doubt about their presence within the city's unskilled labour force. As early as 1895, for instance, Italian labourers are reported as working on the city's docks; and as late as the mid-1920s Italians were part of the labour gangs used in the large excavation and construction projects. Between these two points in time — marking a major period of Italian immigration and of urban expansion — one finds traces of an Italian presence in all the major sectors of the city's unskilled labour force.<sup>3</sup> But beyond this, little else is known. We can only guess, for

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Italian *Contadini* in a Decade of Brutality, 1902-1912," in Robert Harney and J. Vincenza Scarpaci, eds., *Little Italies in North America* (Toronto 1981); Bruno Ramirez, "U.S. Industrialism and the Internationalisation of Labour: Two Case Studies" (Paper presented at the 1984 Lowell Conference on Industrial History).

<sup>2</sup> For Toronto, see especially, John Zucchi, "The Italian Immigrants of the St. John's Ward, 1875-1915: Patterns of Settlement and Neighbourhood Formation," *Multicultural History Society of Ontario Occasional Paper 81-10* (Toronto 1981); Robert F. Harney, "Toronto's Little Italy, 1885-1945," in Harney, and Scarpaci, eds., *Little Italies*. For Montreal, see Bruno Ramirez and Michael Del Balso, "The Italians of Montreal: From Sojourning to Settlement, 1900-1920," in Robert F. Harney, and J. Vincenza Scarpaci, eds. *Little Italies*.

<sup>3</sup> For an initial analysis of the occupational experience of Montreal's Italians from 1870 to 1930, see Bruno Ramirez, *Les premiers Italiens de Montréal: L'origine de la Petite Italie du Québec* (Montréal 1984).

instance, about the fluctuations in their level of employment in relation to the flow of immigration, or the trends in Montreal's labour market. Nor do we know much about the sectors of urban employment in which Italian immigrants were concentrated, the type of labour relations prevailing in those sectors, the spectrum of occupations they filled, or the degree of mobility those occupations offered.

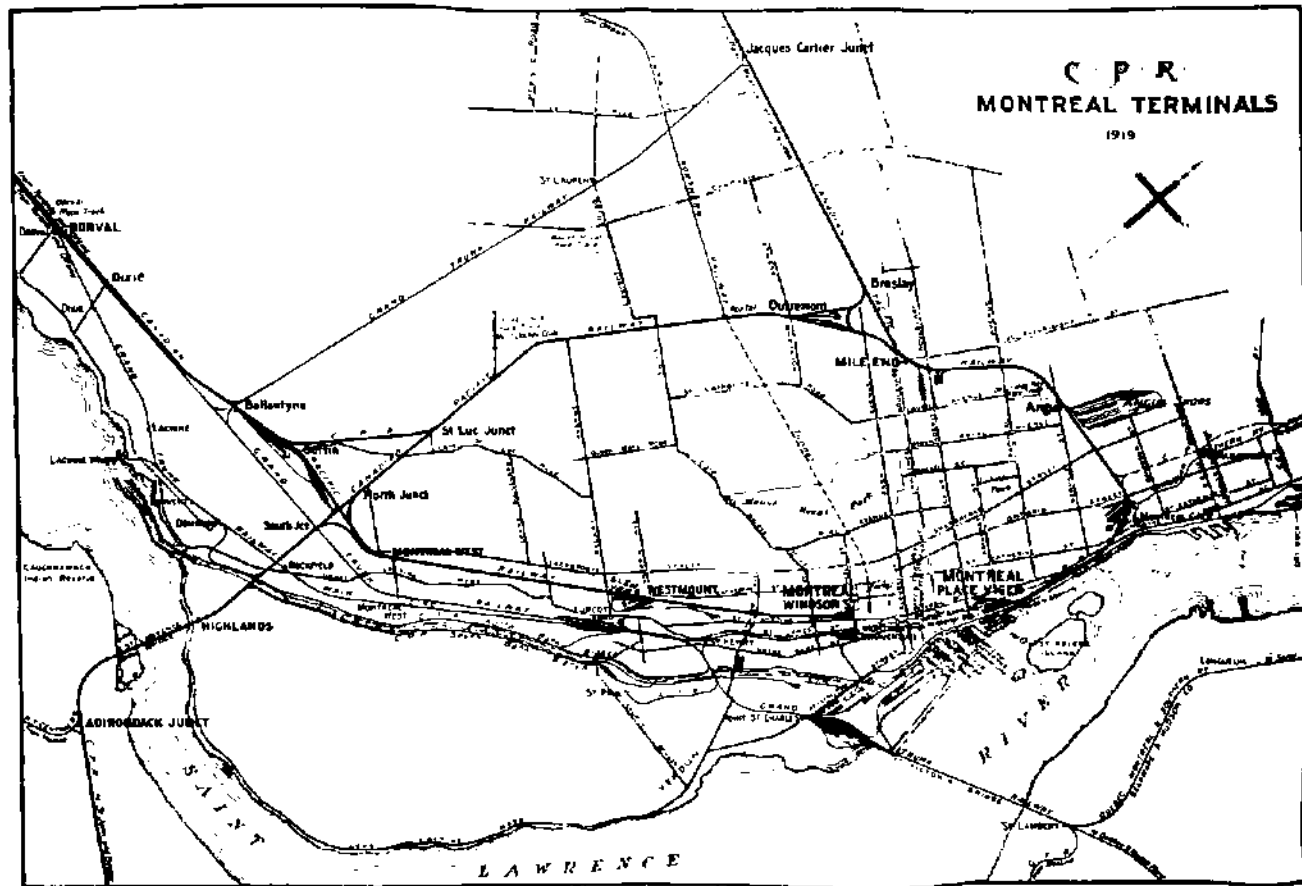
This essay is an attempt to throw new light onto this area of labour and immigration history, beginning with an analysis of the employment records of a large number of Italian immigrants who, over a 30-year period, worked for the largest employer of Italian labour in the city, the Canadian Pacific Railway. The limitations of this historical endeavour should be obvious. The lack of any systematic study of the dynamics operating within the city's unskilled labour market, and the impossibility of tracing the work experience of the sampled population prior to and after their employment at the CPR, can only provide a partial picture. Yet, the quality of the source makes an attempt at a socio-economic profile of this immigrant work force possible, paving the way for further research.

Access to the pension plan records at the CPR's Montreal headquarters made possible the reconstitution of this file. Each card contains demographic data (date of birth and nationality of the employee) as well as information pertaining to the work record of the person (date of hiring, date of separation, work site, department, occupation, wage rates, and reason for separation).<sup>4</sup> Included are all those Italian workers whose family names started with the letters C and D, and who at one time or another were employed in the CP Montreal sites during the period from 1900 to 1930. This yielded a file of 773 workers which — according to my estimates — represent between 20 and 30 per cent of the total Italian working population employed at CP during the period in question. When one considers statistics about the volume of Italian immigration to Montreal, their sex ratio, and their age composition for those years, one realizes that an overwhelming majority of Italian labourers passed through the CP, and that our 773 case-file is not only representative of the Italians working at the CP sites, but of Italian workers in Montreal in general.

## II

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Montreal was the nerve centre of the CPR's operations throughout the country. This became even more evident after the turn of the century, when the giant corporation witnessed a major expansion of its activities, and centralized several of them in the metropolitan territory. By the end of the first decade, the CPR was well inserted in the urban texture of

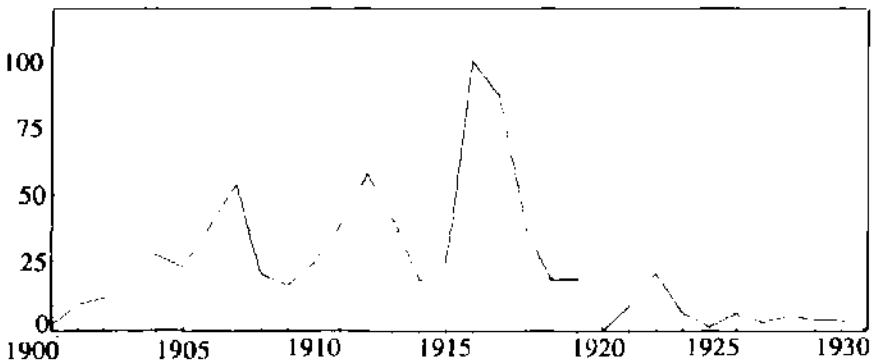
<sup>4</sup> Canadian Pacific Railway, "Employees Pension Plan Records," CPR Montreal office. All the quantitative data presented in this article come from our own computing based on this CPR source. We are grateful to Mr. Omer Lavallée, CPR archivist, and to Mr. Walter Gregory, head of the pension and actuarial services, for graciously allowing us to consult this source.



Montreal through a dozen installations that responded to precise criteria of division of labour and of operational efficiency. Central to this process of reorganization was the establishment of the giant Angus Works, which started operations in 1904. Here the CPR regrouped production and maintenance activities that previously had been carried out in older work sites, creating a modern and sophisticated industrial complex. Extending over a 269-acre area in the east end of the city, and with a labour force fluctuating between 4,000 and 8,000, the Angus Works became the world's largest railway shop. All the diverse operations necessary to manufacture engines, locomotives, passenger and freight cars, as well as repairs and maintenance to them all, were performed there.<sup>5</sup>

The expansion of CPR took place also on the city's west side. In 1905 the company built a large passenger car yard and engine terminal, known as Glen Yard. Designed primarily to serve Windsor Station, Glen Yard absorbed an important work force used for the cleaning and maintenance of locomotives and passenger cars. Finally, passenger stations (Place Viger, Windsor, and Mile-End), freight yards (Côte-St-Paul, Hochelaga, and Outremont), engine terminals (Hochelaga and Outremont), and railway junctions (Jacques-Cartier and

CHART 1  
Number of Italian Workers Hired at CPR, Montreal, 1900-31  
(by year of first hiring)



Source: Employees Pension Plan Records, CPR, Montreal, computed by the author.

<sup>5</sup> *The Canadian Engineer*, 11 (3 March 1904), and 22, (24 January 1912); see also Robert Nahuet, "Une expérience canadienne de Taylorisme Le Cas des usines Angus du Canadien Pacifique" (MA thesis, Université de Québec à Montréal, 1984). We are grateful to Robert Nahuet for kindly sharing with us some of his data on the Angus Works.

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Côte St-Luc) completed the diverse urban choreography of the company's Montreal-based operations.<sup>6</sup>

These were, then, some of the Montreal sites in which large numbers of Italian immigrants laboured during the 30-year period under investigation. As one might expect, their distribution throughout these workplaces varied according to the size of each site, the volume of activities taking place, and the demand for particular types of workers. Thus, the Angus Works was the site that attracted by far the largest number of Italian workers. Two out of three workers in our sample were hired there, with Glen Yard taking second place in importance (22 per cent); the rest of the sample was scattered in other CP work sites throughout the city. This geographical concentration of Italian workers was also a reflection of their uneven distribution within the range of operations performed at the CPR complex. Thus, out of 40 different departments, two of them absorbed 80 per cent of the workers in the sample. These were the car department and the motive power department. This percentage was even higher in the 1900 to 1918 period, reflecting the steady growth of CP's manufactured production in those years. While still the most important departments employing Italian workers, their relative weight declined sharply during the 1920s, allowing for a wider distribution of Italian labour throughout the various CP operations.

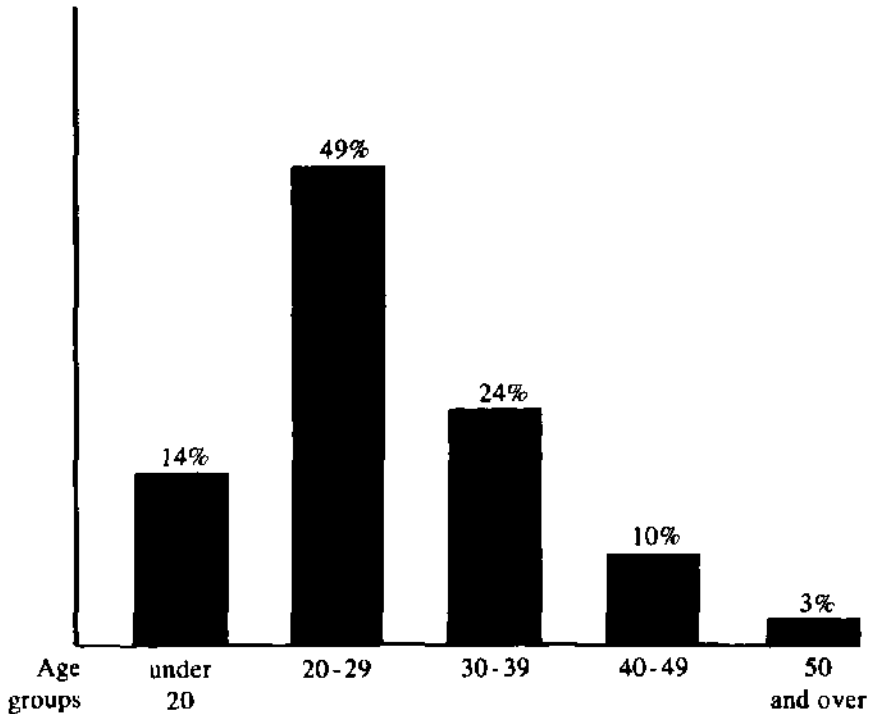
As Chart 1 shows, the level of employment of Italians at CPR over the 30-year period was far from uniform. Its fluctuations reflect the interaction of at least three major factors: (1) the changes in the CP's needs for labour, due to the expansion of its Montreal installations and to the company's labour policies; (2) changes in the volume of Italian immigration to Montreal; (3) particular conjunctural trends in Montreal's labour market.

In view of these factors, we have subdivided the 1900-30 years into three periods. The first extends to 1915. It corresponds to the years of major influx of Italians to Montreal, which reached its first peak around 1907, declined due to changes in immigration policy, and then went on to reach another peak around 1911-2. The outbreak of World War I brought this movement to a virtual halt. This period also witnessed — as already mentioned — the expansion of the CP's Montreal-based operations, particularly the construction of the Angus Works; and rationalization policies were effected which no doubt affected the hiring dynamics of the company. The second period, 1916-8 covers the war years. As the graph shows, the employment of Italians during this period reached its highest point, reflecting the greater demand for labourers due to war mobilization policies and conscription. The third period, from 1919 to 1930, registered the lowest level of Italian employment, showing the impact of declining trends in Italian immigration to urban centres as well as changes in the company's labour policies.

During the pre-World War I years, the Italian countryside rang with the

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Omer Lavallée, CPR archivist, to the author, 20 March 1984.

CHART 2  
 Age Distribution of Italian Workers  
 at CPR, Montreal, 1900-30  
 (by age at first hiring)



lity coming from land owners, politicians, and editorialists to the effect that the emigration exodus was taking away the youngest and the strongest arms from the local economy. There is, in fact, ample statistical evidence showing that the Italian emigration movement of those years was made up predominantly of young men.<sup>7</sup> The research data confirm this reality. By hiring these workers the CP was tapping a labour force at its prime working age. As Chart 2 shows, almost two-thirds of these workers were younger than 30 years of age, and only 11 per cent were 40 or older.

If one compares the age structure of this working population with that compiled from the 1905 census of the Montreal Italian parish, one is struck by

<sup>7</sup> See especially, Ercole Sori, *L'emigrazione italiana dall'Unità alla seconda guerra mondiale* (Bologna 1979); and Gianfausto Rosoli, ed., *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana: 1876-1976* (Roma 1978).

the overrepresentation of the younger age groups, even in relation to the city's wider Italian male population. Did the CP attract primarily young Italian immigrants, most able to endure the hard working conditions to which they had to submit? Or did this bias result from the large presence of newly arrived immigrants, including many who stayed in Montreal only temporarily? Probably the answer is found in both suggestions. As to the working conditions at CP, some useful insights will be gained in our discussion on occupational structure and mobility. The relationship between the younger age groups and the particular immigration dynamics is something that emerges clearly when one looks at the three periods separately. Italian workers hired at CP during the 1900-15 period, when the immigration movement from Italy was in full swing, were considerably younger than those hired in the two successive periods. Their mean age was 26, compared to 30 for the 1916-8 period, and 32 for the 1919-30 period. Clearly the halting of the immigration flow from Italy due to the outbreak of World War I showed an effect. The city's Italian population ceased to renew itself through new arrivals and thus the CP drew its work force from an Italian population that became increasingly older, and, as we shall see, less mobile.

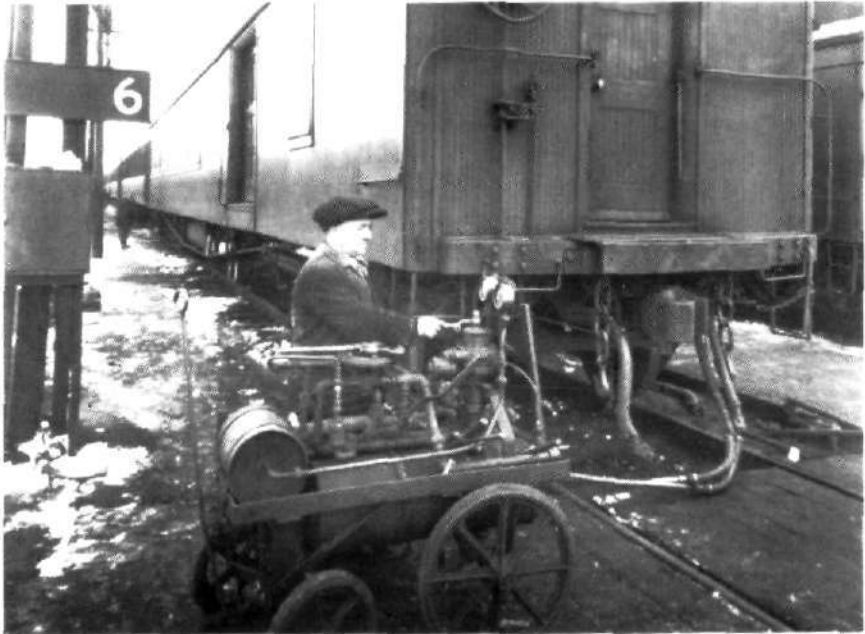
TABLE I  
Italians employed at CPR, Montreal, 1900-30  
(by frequency of employment)

Total no. of workers	Employed one time	Employed twice	Employed three times and more
773	497	161	115

Besides age, one of the most striking aspects of this labour scenario was the temporary nature of these workers' employment at CPR. Italian workers who turned their jobs at CP into a lifelong career are virtually non-existent. Instead, for the overwhelming majority of these immigrants, working at CP was a temporary experience that lasted as long as they or the company saw fit. Table I and chart 3 provide a graphic sense of this phenomenon. Detailed analysis of this aspect of the employment experience reveals several patterns. One of these patterns is exemplified by those workers — the majority in our sample — who were hired only once and then disappeared from the company records. It is within this group that one finds the largest proportion of short-term employment. It seems legitimate to suggest that within this group were to be found a considerable number of sojourners who entered the Montreal labour market for a limited period of time, and then moved on to other North American areas or simply made their way back to their home towns. This pattern, in fact, is more obvious during the first period, when the phenomenon of sojourning was an important dimension of the Italian immigration movement.



Another pattern involved what one may call "repeat employment," that is, workers were rehired by the company a second time or even several times. A smaller group than the first, their number is far from negligible. It is probable that within this group, one finds that largest proportion of Italian immigrants who settled in Montreal and became a permanent part of the city's labour force. Repeat employment, however, was also a reflection of a particular labour market conjuncture, one marked by labour shortage or, inversely, by greater



*Glen Yard employee testing brakes on passenger cars. From Canadian Pacific Corporate Archives, photo 12800.*

employment opportunities. Thus, it is not surprising that this pattern was most frequent during the war years, when Italian immigrants residing in the city could afford to choose among jobs, and quit them in pursuit of an optimal utilization of the existing economic opportunities.

A third pattern was the seasonality of employment. This seems to have been the case especially for the first of the three periods under investigation, when the largest volume of hirings and separations occurred during the spring to fall months, suggesting both a greater availability of Italian labour during that period of the year, and a greater demand for workers destined for jobs that the company expanded then as well.

Whether or not an individual worker fell precisely into one or another of these patterns, clearly the employment experience of the majority was an unstable and volatile one. The question that immediately emerges is whether this

dynamic grew out of the company's hiring and firing policies, or whether it was one for which characteristics of the Italian workers were primarily responsible. The employment records allow us to throw some important light onto this aspect of workers' mobility. In most cases, the company specified the reason for separation on the employee card. As far as the sample population is concerned, there was a range of 38 different reasons given for their separations. These reasons have been grouped into four categories in table 2. In the first two categories are included all those separations which were company-initiated, involving either technical reasons (category 1) such as reduction of staff or incompetence, or disciplinary reasons (category 2) such as insubordination, loafing, etc. In the third category are placed all the cases of separation initiated by the workers, such as "resigned," "deserted the company," etc. The fourth category includes miscellaneous reasons which did not fit into the above criteria, such as "sickness," "termination of a replacement job," etc.

TABLE 2  
Separations of Italian Workers Employed at CPR, 1900-30  
(by reason and by time periods)

Reason for separation	All periods		1900-15		1916-18		1919-30	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Company-initiated, disciplinary	133	10.5	122	13.8	14	4.5	7	4.8
2. Company-initiated, technical	283	22.4	175	21.5	37	12.1	71	48.9
3. Worker-initiated	737	58.3	455	56.0	239	77.8	43	29.6
4. Other	111	8.8	70	8.6	17	5.5	24	16.5

Looking at the 1900-30 period as a whole, the dominant trend is clear: more than half the total number of separations were initiated by the workers themselves, compared to one-third initiated by the company. Among the latter, technical reasons were twice as frequent as disciplinary reasons.

This general trend is strongly reflected in the first of three periods, the 1900-15 years, which involve the largest number of workers in the sample. The following two periods, however, marked as they were by important conjunctures in the city's labour force, show significant changes. During the war years, for instance, the proportion of worker-initiated separations witnessed a dramatic rise, and, inversely, company-initiated separations dropped off sharply — a clear reflection of the acute labour shortage of those years and of the wider employment choice facing Italian workers. The post-1918 period shows a drastic reversal of these trends. Although the number of Italian work-

ers employed at the CPR became much smaller during these years, it was clearly the company that now took the initiative. While still roughly one-third of the workers quit their jobs voluntarily, more than half the total separations were initiated by the company.

Establishing a direct link between the remarkable mobility experienced by these workers — certainly up to 1918 — and their high propensity for quitting their jobs, provides only a partial picture. One has to know whether the jobs these workers held were worth keeping longer, or, to put it differently, whether they afforded the possibility for occupational advancement. An analysis of the occupational experience of this work force provides important insights into this central question.

### III

ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS WORKING at the various CP sites entered a very diversified occupational structure. The sample has yielded as many as 148 separate occupations in which this immigrant work force became involved over the 30-year period, ranging from skilled jobs such as machinist or moulder to unskilled ones such as general labourer. Within this diversity, strata or occupational concentration are quite striking. To make some historical sense out of this diversity, we divided the 148 occupations into four groups. In the first group we included all those occupations denoting general and unskilled labour. Classifications such as "labourer," "car washer," "car cleaner," and "general helper" made up virtually the totality of this group. This also represented the stratum with the largest number of workers in the sample. Almost two out of three Italians who entered employment at CPR did so by working at these kinds of jobs. These were no doubt the occupations that exhibited the highest degree of instability and precariousness. There is reason to believe that this was the typical occupational terrain where the labour needs of the CPR and the earning needs of many Italian immigrants encountered each other. It was a brief encounter, but nevertheless one that was long enough to permit the CPR to replenish its supply of unskilled labourers, and the Italian immigrants to gain a foothold in their search for more desirable employment. It was a scenario that seems to fit perfectly the labour economists' description of "labour market segmentation:" *the most sophisticated industrial-commercial complex in Canada generating a constant demand for jobs whose performance required only physical strength and a willingness to submit to the dictates of some supervisor or departmental boss.* This willingness the CPR found, at least partly, among Italian immigrants, who out of necessity, or because nothing else was available at the moment, or because their lack of readily marketable skills precluded better jobs, took employment there. Some stayed a few weeks, others a few months.

What needs to be stressed here is that this mobility was as much a result of the company's occupational structure as it was a reflection of the workers' own

economic strategies. Although in the CPR's work-flow scheme these unskilled tasks were integrated into the company's overall work process, workers performing those tasks very likely saw barriers separating their jobs from the worthier ones existing in other departments or operations.

Antonio Funicelli, who soon after his arrival in Montreal in 1913 held a general labourer's job for several months at the "Canadian Car," vividly expressed his attitude towards that kind of employment. "They made us load pieces of scraps which were then sent to the foundry. The foreman called us all 'Joe.' 'Hey Joe, come here, you!' And then he ordered us 'Take this stuff over there, load this stuff on those trucks.' I remained there nine months — it was tough. I was not made for that kind of work; that was not work for artisans, but for *journaliers*."<sup>8</sup>

If this held true for Funicelli, who went to Montreal to join his family and settle permanently, it held even truer for labourers who entered the employ of the CP as target migrants. For most of these workers, entering and exiting through these "dead-end" jobs was an act only remotely connected with considerations on career opportunities. It was more likely linked to economic considerations whose temporal and spatial contexts transcended a specific CPR work site, encompassing truncated family relationships and land-hungry appenine villages. These workers' subsequent itineraries across Montreal work sites or through the Canadian and international highways of labour will probably never be known to the historian. The CPR records only allow us a snapshot of this segmented labour force, but one that is clear enough to see in it the dynamics of unskilled labour mobility at work, and to capture a moment in the working life of immigrants caught in the pursuit of a North American wage.

In the second group (which made up 13 per cent of the sample) are included all those occupations which, while being of an unskilled nature, involved tasks and responsibilities which were specific to railway operations. Jobs such as "ashpit man," "trackman," "sectionman" were typical of this category. These jobs tended to be less interchangeable than those of a general unskilled type, involving also a higher degree of synchronization with other CP operations. At the same time, they were far removed from the industrial activities carried out by the various CP departments, and in a very important sense could also be labeled as "dead-end jobs." Costanzo D'Amico held one of these jobs, not at the CP but at the other Montreal-based railway company, the Grand Trunk. After completion of the Mount Royal Tunnel in 1918, he managed to be hired permanently as a watchman. His was one of those rare cases in which a job of this kind is turned into a lifelong career. As he told us with a sense of satisfaction mixed with irony, "I spent almost all my life inside that tunnel."<sup>9</sup>

The third group was made up of occupations of a semi-skilled nature which were classified under the general heading of "crafts helpers jobs." These were mostly occupations attached to a precise craft, such as "blacksmith's helper."

<sup>8</sup> Taped interview, in Bruno Ramirez, *Les premiers Italiens*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Taped interview, 30 April 1979, Montreal.

"machinist's helper," etc. Our classification criterion stresses the fact that these jobs, performed in constant contact with a craft, not only implied a certain aptitude for skilled work, but also afforded some opportunity for occupational advancement within the company's occupational structure. Italian employees working in this group of occupations represented 14 per cent of the sample.

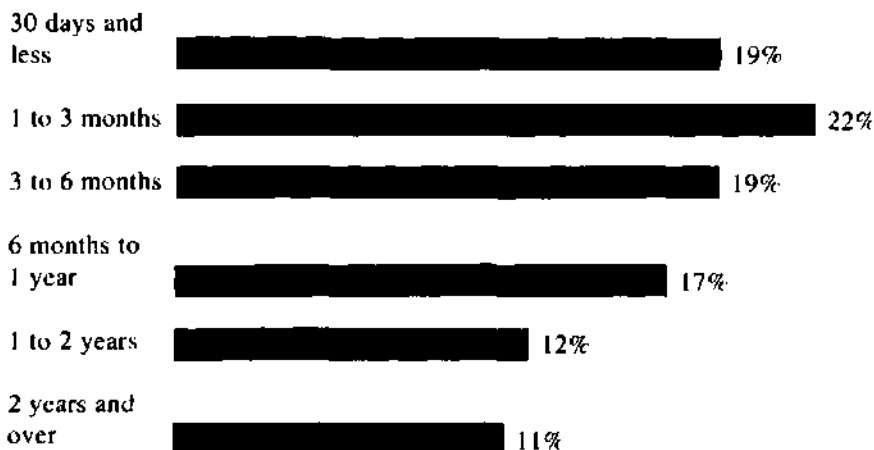
In an attempt to ascertain the potential for advancement in these jobs, the three most frequent occupations of this group were selected for analysis, namely, "blacksmith's helper," "carpenter's helper," and "moulder's helper." The employment record of all the cases involved (53 workers in all, including some cases of repeat employment) were followed. The analysis shows that cases of occupational advancement were extremely rare.



*Glen Yard upholstery shop workers loading gurny with cleaned cushions. From Canadian Pacific Corporate Archives, photo 12798.*

One such case was that of Domenico C., who had been first hired at the Angus Works in 1907, at the age of 20 as a shop labourer. He lost his job due to reduction in personnel, was rehired, and was again laid off for the same reason. In April 1910 he was hired as "carpenter's helper," worked in that capacity for one month and then resigned. Finally in June of the same year he was hired as

**CHART 3**  
**Jobs Held by Italian Workers at CPR, Montreal, 1900-30**  
 (by length of each job)



"freight carpenter." Having reached this occupational plateau, Domenico C.'s successive employment experience was far from being stable. He was laid off twice because of reductions in staff despite his satisfactory work record, which the company noted on his personnel card. On 24 October 1913, he was rehired at a higher wage, but — as the record says — "he did not start work," and he then disappears from the company records. Francesco C.'s record with CP spans a period of thirteen years. Starting in 1903 as a "flanger's helper," his record is replete with intermittent employment, always terminated by his own resignation. In June 1911, he resigned again even though in the course of the past year he had received two pay raises. He then showed up in the company records during the war, hired temporarily (for six months) as a tuber. After a couple of months, he was demoted to helper, and then in the summer of the same year, he resigned.

As to the other 51 cases belonging to those "helper's" categories, the pattern that emerges from the analysis may help to explain the lack of occupational advancement. One striking aspect of this pattern is the brief nature of the employment. Of these jobs, 39 lasted less than six months (with as many as eighteen lasting less than one month), and only nine went beyond the one-year period. Was this pattern a result of the company's hiring and firing practices or was it due to the workers' own choices? Both answers are correct. By analyzing and computing the reasons for separation, a more precise understanding of this pattern is reached. Of the 57 separations experienced by this group of workers, sixteen were initiated by the company (eight were due to reduction in

staff, three were due to incompetence, and five were for disciplinary reasons). Leaving aside three unknown cases of separation (and one due to sickness), all the others (38) were initiated by the workers — the reasons recorded by the company ranged from “resigned” (nineteen cases) to “left without notice,” and “deserted the company.”

The employment scenario that emerges — as far as this category of workers is concerned — may best be defined as precarious and unstable, despite the potential for occupational advancement. Workers had to deal with a company where dismissal for technical or disciplinary reasons was a normal occurrence. At the same time, one is inclined to conclude that the precarious and unstable relation was largely due to the workers' own choices or strategies. Only by comparing the record of these workers with the corresponding records of Canadian employees belonging to the same occupational categories may one approach a final conclusion. Given the limitations imposed by these data, one may suggest that the employment itinerary of this group of workers must have been heavily conditioned by its immigrant experience and status. An overwhelming proportion of these cases occurred during the 1900 to 1907 period, a time when Italian immigration to Montreal had not yet stabilized, and when the sojourning pattern still predominated. It was also a period when the CP installations in Montreal experienced considerable growth and expansion, opening up employment possibilities in the “skilled stream” occupations. Yet, as we have seen, a large proportion of Italian immigrants who held these jobs did not choose to invest the time and the energy necessary to turn their employment at CP into a career.

At the same time, it seems that this chance for advancement did not last long, and that access to skilled positions became closed to the Italian workers by changes in the CPR's labour policies. We know, in fact, that after the bitter 1908 strike at the Angus Works involving several skilled trades, the company instituted its own apprenticeship system as a way of gaining complete control over the formation of its future skilled work force. Candidates were submitted to an “intelligence” test, and the programme was geared towards practical and theoretical activities, including company-dispensed courses in arithmetic, drafting, and geography.<sup>10</sup> This tightening up of the apprenticeship system must have had the effect of marginalizing craft helpers' jobs, and of cutting them off from skilled streams.

In any case, given the level of education of most Italian immigrants arriving in Montreal in those years, and considering the language difficulties that they all encountered in the host society, the chances of qualifying for the company's apprenticeship programme must have been remote.

What about those Italian workers who occupied skilled positions within the CPR? Though a small minority (11 per cent of our sample), what does their

<sup>10</sup> Cf. S.J. Hungerford, “Instruction to Railway Shop Apprentices,” *Railway and Marine World* (September 1909); *La Gazette du Travail* (October 1909); Robert Nahué, “Une expérience canadienne.”

access to the company's top occupational stratum suggest about the possibilities for job advancement?

In order to answer these questions we have followed the individual records of those workers belonging to three of the most frequently occupied skilled occupations, namely, machinists, blacksmiths, and moulders. This makes a total of fifteen workers. The occupational itineraries of these workers are quite diversified, making it impossible to detect an overall pattern. However, they allow an important view into the occupational scenarios of these skilled workers. About one thing the data leave no doubt; none of these workers — whether first hired as skilled or promoted to that status — developed their jobs into stable careers with the company. Their employment while holding skilled positions seems to have been as volatile as that of non-skilled workers.

This may be explained in part by the fact that the majority of them (particularly the machinists and the blacksmiths) were hired or promoted to those positions during the war years. Clearly, for these workers the particular labour market conjuncture provided the stepping stone making access to those jobs possible. But having reached those jobs, their occupational rise was far from becoming a permanent destination.

A.C. and T.D. exemplified quite well this kind of itinerary. The former held several jobs at CP before 1911 — mostly of an unskilled type. In March 1916 he was hired at Angus as a freight carpenter, a well-paid job that he quit in less than a month. Then in July of the following year he was rehired as a machinist at one of the top wage rates; but he did not last long on that job, for one week later he was listed as a bolt threader at a substantially lower wage. Finally, four days before Christmas he was laid off because of staff reduction.

T.D.'s itinerary is even more hectic. He was first hired in July 1917 as a machinist, but, like his compatriot A.C., one week later he was switched to a bolt threader job and then laid off during a staff reduction. In February of the following year, he landed another skilled job, this time as a boiler maker, but in less than two months he was laid off again in another staff reduction. Three days later, T.D. took another try: he got himself hired as a bolt threader and one month later he climbed to a machinist job. But the path to downward mobility could be a precipitous one, and in fact one year later T.D. found himself once more at the bottom working as a labourer. Clearly T.D. was not the type who gave up easily: in November 1920, he started moving up the occupational ladder again, first as a "foundry helper," then as a "skilled helper." His path was halted by another reduction in staff. It took another two years before T.D. was back in the employ of CP. His job? Machinist. A few months later he had slipped down again, and was working as a rivetter. Then in February 1924, he dropped from the books; the reason for separation is not known.

The story of this tiny minority of Italian workers who made it into skilled positions at CP is much the same. Repeat-employment and permanency in the Montreal labour market no doubt increased their chances of finding themselves



in the right spot at the right time; but holding their jobs and turning them into stable careers was quite another story. Access to skilled positions seemed more a function of the temporary needs of the CP's internal labour market than the result of a progressive, upward-moving career. And thus they could be sucked into the higher strata of the CP productive and service apparatus as quickly as they could be expelled.



*Glen Yard car cleaners prepare vacuum cleaner for cleaning of the interior of car. From Canadian Pacific Corporate Archives, photo 12799.*

By the time T.D. dropped out of the CP's records, only a handful of Italians remained employed at the giant railway corporation. Gone were the days of massive immigrant arrivals into the city's work sites that marked the pre-1915 years. Gone also were the days of acute labour shortages of the war mobilization years, when Italian immigrants who stayed in the city could benefit from the employment bonanza and move from one job to another. By the early 1920s, for hundreds and perhaps thousands of Italian workers who had left but a brief trace in the CP employment records, "la Cipierre" was no more than a subject of discussion in village taverns and barber shops scattered across the mountainous Italian *Mezzogiorno*. For those who stayed in Montreal, the CP sites rising through the city stood as reminders of the few brief encounters they had with the corporation in their pursuit of a new life in Canada. For many of them, the CPR remained as accessible as the turbulent waters of an ocean are accessible to an inexperienced surfer. Some made it to the top, soon to be sucked into a vortex; others left with a bitter taste in their mouths. Their

subsequent experiences in the metropolitan economy hold the key to a full understanding of how this immigrant community managed to cope with the Canadian wage labour system.

Meanwhile, the record of Italian immigrants at the CPR, as well as the labour market dynamics uncovered in this study, point to a labour terrain which thwarted the possibilities for collective action. While Italian labourers were present in sectors that were by no means marginal to the *Montreal* economy, their presence was highly segmented and spatially mobile, favouring individual exploits rather than collective ones — it was hardly the ideal terrain on which to build an emancipatory strategy. It is not surprising to note, after having gone through 30 years of daily news in *Montreal's* major newspapers, that the cases of collective actions at the workplace involving Italian labourers are very rare, and that, on the contrary, there are frequent cases of conflict involving a single worker. Some of these situations were marked by insubordination, and sometimes even by violence. More often the worker just walked out of the situation by quitting and looking for a new job. Under these conditions the workplace did not function as a terrain for an emancipatory class strategy. And this resulted less from an incipient class consciousness in this type of immigrant worker and more from the work reality within which these immigrants inserted themselves in *Montreal*, as well as from the type of use Canadian capitalism made of their labour power.



*Aerial view of Angus Shops, Montreal, Quebec. From Canadian Pacific Corporate Archives, photo 8471.*

We know that for several Italian labourers, the only way to beat the wage labour system was to get out of it. Thus, for Antonio Funicelli, the lever that enabled him to do so was the fact that in his *paese* he had learned the shoemaker trade. His interview reveals very clearly the contrast between his artisan mentality and the reality he encountered working as a labourer after his arrival in Montreal. As soon as he managed to save a little money, he started a small shoe repairing shop, and later on, he could even exploit his second trade — music. He organized his own music group, which became his main source of income.<sup>11</sup>

For Vincenzo Monaco, for whom the years spent working in public construction projects were “years of slavery,” the chance to get out of that labouring life came when he got himself hired by an Italian bakery. While working there he learned the basic rules of the small business enterprise. A few years later, in spite of hard economic times, he was ready to venture into the baking business in partnership with his two brothers.<sup>12</sup> The move from common labour to small ethnic business represents an extremely important socio-economic itinerary which unfortunately cannot be analyzed here. Suffice it to say that in the face of the impossibility or incapability of recycling oneself occupationally within the wage labour context, the access to small ethnic business constituted one of the few qualitative leaps possible; among other things, it allowed immigrants to invest their human and psychic resources in the attempt to make a breach towards a vision (subjective yet concrete) of economic emancipation.

But then, in 1929, the Depression struck, tearing apart much of what had been painfully woven into the fabric of these people’s existence, and opening a new chapter in the ethnic and labour history of Montreal.

<sup>11</sup> Taped interview, in Ramirez, *Les premiers Italiens*, 125-6.

<sup>12</sup> Taped interview, *ibid.*, 102-5.

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Working Girl: "Mr. Eaton, can't you please make life a little easier for us?"

*According to OMWB statistics, in 1924 the 3,588 women employed in the three department stores employing over 150 in the city of Toronto earned an average wage of \$15.61 for a 47-hour work week. Illustration from Jack Canuck, Vol. 1, No. 17, Mar. 2, 1912.*