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When the musician's union held the radio industry for ransom:

In the 1940s, the American Federation of Musicians, led by the powerful James C. Petrillo, had a stranglehold on the radio industry. Stations needed staff musicians for their live programs, and the AFM held each station to contracts that required them to hire a minimum number of staff musicians. The musicians worked 8 hour days at union wages, even if they only played one 30 minute program.

Petrillo's fear was that recorded music would undermine his union's strength. A number of small stations that broadcast only recorded music (the first "disc jockeys") were having success and needed to be stopped. Chicago, a strong pro-union town where the Chicago Federation of Musicians had a tight grip on the radio industry, became his battleground.

As a test case in 1944, he demanded that WJJD increase its staff of ten musicians to twenty, with the additional ten to be employed as "record turners" (Petrillo called them "pancake turners" A record turner's job was to operate the station's turntables, and they were not allowed to play musical instruments or otherwise perform.) WJJD refused and Petrillo called a strike. The case went to the Labor Relation's Board, where Petrillo stated his demand that the U.S. broadcast industry hire 2,000 AFM members as record turners. The case was resisted by NABET, the engineer's union, who wanted to keep equipment operation under their own jurisdiction.

As the case dragged on, a city-wide musician's strike in 1945 took several stations off the air, and a contract dispute with WAAT in 1946 led the government to take the case to the Supreme Court, who acquitted Petrillo. But by 1948, with TV looming on the horizon, stations across the country were starting to disband their studio orchestras. Petrillo finally backed down on his demands on the networks and U.S. radio broadcasters elsewhere, but he was still able to uphold his requirements in Chicago because of the CFM's ironclad union contracts. They announced that Chicago stations couldn't fire their musicians, but they could turn them into record turners. As a result, up until the mid 1960s, EVERY Chicago union radio station had "record turners" who received musicians' hourly wages to operate the turntables and play music.

Interestingly, the mechanism that finally allowed the Chicago stations to get rid of the record turners was the tape cartridge machine. One by one, WLS, WBBM, WIND, WCFL, WMAQ and WJJD all converted their music to tape cartridge and got rid of the turntables - and the record turners - in their studio. The last holdout was WGN in Chicago, where up until the 1980s it took three people to run a disc jockey record show - an announcer, an engineer, and a record turner.

Thus, the "record turner" goes down in history as radio's version of the locomotive fireman, whose jobs continued for more than two decades after the railroads converted to diesel engines.

Photo: a record turner operates two mammoth turntables at WBBM in 1941

