

Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Evidence 10: J. M. Carson, "Military Blunder — Uncalled-For Bloodshed," 22 July 1877

A

Introduction

The massacre at Pittsburgh provoked an angry response in Pittsburgh and the surrounding communities. The following article appeared in the *Pittsburgh Critic* one night after the Philadelphia militia fired on strikers and their supporters.

Questions to Consider

- How did Carson argue the strike should have been handled?
- What was his attitude toward the Pennsylvania Railroad Company?
- What was his attitude toward officials who had called in the militia?
- What was the point of his comparison between the lives of managers and workers?
- What did he predict would happen next?

Document

Even at the moment of this writing, it is not difficult to perceive that a fearful blunder has been committed by the Governor and his ill-timed military advisers. It is impossible for us to conceive that the action of the railroad strikers, taking the worst view of either side of the case, justified the calling out of the military.

Time should have been allowed for a respectful parley between parties; time for the railroad company to properly consider the grievances complained of in the respectful petition of the strikers, and time for railroad employés to act in response. There is tyranny in this country worse than anything ever known in Russia, and it is time we should get at the gist of it.

Strikes are common occurrences, but it appears that it is only when the "great monopoly," the hated company, which discriminates against the interests of Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania, is subjected to one of

these strikes, that the military are ordered out, and that, too, without a moment's consideration, as though the Pennsylvania railroad was more important than the peace and order and the lives of half the citizens of the State.

There is no use disguising the matter. The people of this city sympathize with the strikers. They are incensed beyond measure, with the cold, corrupt legislation which has fostered the colder and more corrupt organization known as the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. But we cannot disguise the legal technicalities which appear to brace up that company as against the people. All that we say and care to know is, that a fearful blunder was made by the constituted authorities, who from Governor down to General Pearson and Sheriff Fife, appeared to be only the willing tools of a giant oppressor.

We hold that the reckless haste of General Pearson and Governor Hartranft makes them the prime ringleaders of what promises to be the bloodiest riot with which the Commonwealth has ever been visited. The insane policy of calling Philadelphia troops to this city to quell a domestic quarrel is reprehensible beyond degree. . . .

The railroad magnates claim and protest their inability to carry on their business with profit without the much vexed [wage] reduction. All the employés can say is, we must starve at these wages. Now, granting that on the one side or the other there must be suffering, which, is it equable, should suffer? . . .

The officials can build palaces, the laborer can rent a hovel. The one can roll along in the bustling splendor of a four-in-hand, the other cannot hide the burnt and frost-bitten foot. These railroad authorities can afford salaries that will secure the costliest luxuries and sustain an apish aristocracy, that cannot extent the salary to meet the commonest necessities of life, to the beggared, starving, crushed laborer and his family. All these magnates will talk of the impossibility of running business without further curtailing the wages of the poor laborer. Arrogant impudence! Unbearable tyranny! Why, it has come to this, that labor is servitude! That a poor man must delude himself to satisfaction at the thought of starving, and respectfully take a pittance called wages. The millions must stand off and die smilingly, and look pleasurably at the outstretched arms of a few like Tom Scott grasping,

robbing, paralyzing, crushing our industries, even our lives. Capital has raised itself on the ruins of labor.

The laboring class cannot, will not stand this longer. The war cry has been raised, and has gone far and wide. It will not confine itself to the narrow, nor even long stretch of the railroads. Labor will assert itself. It must have its equality, and that it will, sooner or later, amicably, it is desirable, forcibly, if necessary. Certainly rebellion against lawful authority is never lawful, but the principle that freed our nation from tyranny will free labor from domestic aggression.

Source:

J. M. Carson, "Military Blunder — Uncalled-For Bloodshed," *Pittsburgh Critic*, 22 July 1877, reproduced in *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July, 1877* (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, State Printer, 1878), 817-819.