

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

Evidence 12: "The Great Railroad Strike," 21 July 1877

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Introduction

As the previous author suggested, most newspapers feared the growing strike and strongly condemned the violence associated with it. This editorial from the *New York Times* is typical of that response.

Questions to Consider

- What term did the writer use to describe the strike?
- According to the author, what was the "fatal weakness" of the strikers?
- To what did the author compare the workers' wage demands?
- In his view, to what were the railroad companies entitled?

Document

It is not certain whether the feebleness of the West Virginia authorities, or a previous understanding among railroad employees, is at the bottom of the present general railroad strike. The disaffection, which is almost a rebellion, is spreading. From the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the trouble has been communicated to the Pittsburg[h] and Fort Wayne Road, and to the Western Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The Western Division of the Erie Railway, with head-quarters at Hornellsville, is also in a state of insurrection, and there are rumors of similar difficulties on the Lake Shore Road. There are indications that the rebellion, if such we may call it, will affect most of the lines of railroad travel between the East and the West, and will seriously impede the movement of freight, which, at this time, is a matter of very great importance. If the strikers have been watching for an opportunity to strike when they could most seriously embarrass the roads, they have certainly hit on the right time. On several lines the passenger business is also interrupted or wholly suspended.

Generally speaking, the interruption of freight and passenger traffic would not be great if the strikers simply quit work without ado. But, as is the case

of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the strikers, not content with leaving their posts without warning, oppose the employment of men who would take their places, on any terms. This is a fatal weakness in the cause of the strikers. So far as heard from, in every case of insubordination, the issue is merely a question of wages. The firemen, engineers, and brakemen insist upon being paid a certain rate of wages. If they are not paid at this rate, they will not only quit work, but they will prevent others from taking their places on any terms. This is the tyranny of trades-unionism. There is something about it which is so antagonistic to the proverbial Anglo-Saxon love of fair play that most fair-minded men refuse at once all sympathy with the movement. If these so-called strikers can buy flour cheaper in Hornellsville than they can in Martinsburg, other things being equal, they will buy in Hornellsville. They would think it monstrous if anybody should attempt to compel them to buy dear flour when they can buy cheap flour. But they now, by force of arms, are trying to coerce the railroad managers into employing them at rates which only they, the insurgents, are willing to accept.

Back of this, of course, lie many questions of general management of the railroads which cannot now be discussed. It is said, for example, that some of the men who have struck on the Baltimore and Ohio Road have been earning a sum hardly sufficient for subsistence, and that the proposed reduction would leave them less wages than are adequate for the support of life. If this is true, it is deplorable, both as regards the condition of the men and the condition of the railroad corporation. It is no less deplorable that men needy enough to accept the reduced terms can now be found. Just now, however, this is not the question. Ours is a free country, and the right of a man to get the best price he can for his work necessarily involves the converse of this proposition: a man or corporation may procure labor at the lowest possible cost. It is a pretty bad state of things when able-bodied men are obliged to work for three or four dollars a week, and pay extra expenses for board out of that. It is worse, however, when any considerable body of men, armed, belligerent, and violent, insist, at the pistol's muzzle, that they shall be paid certain wages, and that no man shall work for less at the peril of his life. As well might a striker go into a grocery store and insist that the dealer sell him provisions at a certain price or have his head shot off.

As at is, the passenger and freight business on several great roads is

impeded and confused by unlawful acts of men who insist on being employed at certain wages. The corporation for which they have worked, though it may be ill-managed, and even dishonestly managed, is under no obligation to employ them at any rate of compensation which is not acceptable to both parties. But a strange hallucination seems to have seized the men, who fancy, because they have worked for the corporation, they have a standing claim for employment at wages which they may dictate. The hallucination, unhappily, extends to many unthinking people outside the ranks of the employed. In Baltimore, for example, a regiment marching to the scene of disorder was fired upon by a crowd of sympathizers with the strikes. The fire was returned and several people were killed. This is simply a revolt against law and order. How soon it will end, we cannot tell. That it can only end in one way is absolutely certain. The railroad companies are entitled to the protection of the law in the pursuit of their lawful business. Nobody has a claim upon them for employment. Any interference with them, or with their employe[e]s, must be prevented, whatever it may cost.

Source:

"The Great Railroad Strike," *New York Times*, 21 July 1877, 4.