

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

Evidence 16: "Women's Warfare," 27 July 1877

A

Introduction

In several cities, the railroad strike quickly evolved into a more general strike involving tens of thousands of workers. Chicago, the largest and most important metropolis in the Midwest, figured among these. Here, too, working-class women were both ridiculed and condemned for participating in the strike, as the extract below from a prominent Chicago newspaper reveals. As you read the article, keep in mind that "Amazon" and "Amazonian" were terms of derision applied to women considered overly masculine and aggressive. In the same vein, "Bohemian" was applied to vagabonds who refused to accept the conventions of middle-class society, and the Parisian Commune refers to the socialist government that came to power in France following a bloody insurrection in 1871.

Questions to Consider

- How does the author portray women protestors?
- What does the author conclude about the episode?

Document

Women's Warfare. Bohemian Amazons Rival the Men in Deeds of Violence. Women first came to the front as rampant rioters yesterday. The taste of blood which the men had had in the early part of the day seemed to have inflamed the women. The night before last there were a few, half crazed with liquor and smarting under their real or fancied wrongs, who were bold enough to yell for pillage. Yesterday there was a ripening of this sentiment and the result was an Amazonian outbreak in the afternoon. . . .

Hundreds of these Amazons congregated in the vicinity of Twentieth and Fisk streets. The nearest factory from that corner was the Goss & Phillips place. The crowd rapidly increased. Women with babies in arms joined the enraged female rioters. The streets were fluttering with calico of all shades and shapes. Hundreds were bareheaded, their disheveled locks streaming

in the wind. Many were shoeless. Some were young, scarcely women in age, and not at all in appearance. Dresses were tucked up around the waists, revealing large understandings. Open busts were as common as a barber's chair. Brawny, sunburnt arms brandished clubs. Knotty hands held rocks and sticks and wooden blocks. Female yells, shrill as a curlew's cry, filled the air. The swarthy features of the Bohemian women were more horrible to look on in that scene than their men in the Halsted street riots. The unsexed mob of female incendiaries rushed to the fence and yards of Goss & Phillips' Manufacturing Company. The consternation which that attack created extended to Twenty-second street, at that hour very quiet. A crowd of men gathered on Fisk street to witness this curious repetition of the scenes of the Paris Commune.

The fence surrounding the yard gave way, and was carried off by the petticoated plunderers in the unbridled rage. There was fear for a little while that the Amazonian army would continue their depredations. Word was dispatched to the Hindman Street Station, and a force of officers under Lieutenant Vesey pushed down to the corner of the contest. The women hissed as they saw the blue-coats march along. Some of the less valorous took to their heels incontinently. Some developed into wonderful athletes, and ditches were danced over as though they were the floor of some popular ball-room. Others stood their ground.

A shower of missiles greeted the boys as they came smiling along left front into line. One woman pitched a couple of blocks at the heads of the officers, then moved on to attend to her family duties. The men were weak in the strength and forcefulness of their language compared with these wretches. Profanity the most foul rolled easily off their tongues with horrid glibness, expressions were made use of that brought the blood mantling to the cheeks of the worst-hardened men in the crowds of spectators. It was awful. Several shots were fired, by whom was not known. The police soon restored order, and drove the women back, and finally scattered them. This most disgraceful of occurrences is the most disgusting revelation that has yet deepened the shades of the already too black record of riot and villainy which for nearly a week has disgraced the fair fame of Chicago.

Source:

"Women's Warfare," *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 27 July 1877, 2.