

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

Evidence 19: "The Issue and the Remedy," 2 August 1877

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Introduction

The *New York Independent* had been one of the harshest critics of the strike. In the aftermath of the strike, the newspaper continued to take a hard-line stance on the complex issues the uprising presented.

Questions to Consider

- What did the author of the editorial consider the "highest law" of human society?
- How did the author characterize the strike and the strikers?
- How did the author think the government should have responded to the strike?

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One of the first and most imperative laws of human society is *public safety*. Individual rights must yield to this one great demand. Indeed, there are no individual rights inconsistent with it. Even the time-honored writ of personal liberty, which has so long been the glory of England, as well as of this country—the writ of *habeas corpus*—is held in abeyance when the public safety requires it. Public safety is the general good, the good of the *many*, the good of the great body of society; and this must be secured at all hazards and against all of its enemies.

An equally obvious truth is that, with the exception of those cases in which the elementary right of revolution comes into action, the public safety demands the preservation of peaceful and orderly movement of society through the agency of organized government, enacting and executing law, protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty, promptly repressing all disturbances of the public peace, and wielding the police, and, if necessary, the military power of society to secure these ends. This can be done only through the government; and government can only act through its officers. Officers that either cannot or will not do it are not fit for the position they

disgrace.

We are almost ashamed, so soon after the Centennial year, to be writing such truisms; yet the horrible spectacle presented by this country for the last two weeks shows that we need to consider and reassert first principles. The disorderly elements of American society undertook to settle a purely economical question by lawless violence and at the expense and peril of the whole community. Riots bore rule in cities and the great railway trunk lines of communication between the East and the West were for days held in the state of complete blockade by a set of desperadoes. The issue presented, though having its exciting occasion in a contest between railway companies and their employés about wages, immediately became a conflict between forty-five millions of people and a few thousand rioters. The continuance of the conflict for a succession of days and its rapid increase, so that at one time it involved nearly half the Union, are mainly due to the fact that these rioters were not summarily dealt with and shot down on the spot. As we said last week, so we may say again and shall continue to say, that whenever riot appears, no matter what may be the occasion, the one and at the time the only thing to be done is to apply to it with unsparing severity the law of force. If the club of the policeman, knocking out the brains of a rioter, will answer, then well and good; but if it does not promptly meet the exigency, then bullets and bayonets, canister and grape—with no sham or pretense, in order to frighten men, but with fearful and destructive reality—constitute the one remedy and the one duty of the hour.

The remedy is a horrible one, yet is immeasurably the least of two evils. It does its work quickly, and so does it as to make an example that rioters will be likely to remember. Rioters are worse than mad dogs because they are quite as savage, while they know more; they are worse than an invading army, because they are under no government except that of their own passions, which is the law of Hell; they are worse than the most detestable despotism that ever cursed the world; and any tampering with them, for fear that somebody will be hurt, is the most stupid poltroonery [i.e., cowardice]. Napoleon was right when he said that the way to deal with a mob is to exterminate it. Men when in this attitude not only have no value to human society, but they are its worst enemies; and they should have no exemption from the liability to instant death. It is the business of the law either to imprison or kill the men, according to circumstances, who

disregard its mandates. We emphasize this point, because it is really the most important lesson taught by the experience of the last two weeks. . . .

The best thing that can happen for the interests of the country and for those of honest labor is the absolute and utter defeat of this great railway strike. Its success would be a general calamity to our whole industrial system. Such a method of controlling wages would be alike intolerable and ruinous. It substitutes the law of force for the healthful operation of natural law.

We can hardly think that state legislatures at their next sessions will omit to inquire whether states laws in respect to the militia, in respect to municipal corporations, in respect to public travel, and especially in respect to any interference with railway communication are adequate to the public safety. New exigencies demand new remedies; and the strikers have certainly made an exigency and disclosed a peril which legislation ought very carefully to consider. West Virginia had no organized militia, and even the great State of Pennsylvania had to shout for Federal help almost in the very outset of the disorder. If it is the business of the states especially to preserve the public peace within their respective borders, which is the doctrine of state rights, then let them be prepared to do it. And if existing laws are not adequate, as has been proved to be the fact in some cases, then let us have more law and the right kind of law. Such a spectacle as that of the last fourteen days ought never to be repeated. Law, taught by the spectacle, should now interpose the most ample preventive remedies.

Source:

"The Issue and the Remedy," *New York Independent*, 2 August 1877, 16.