

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

Evidence 20: "The Lessons of the Week," 29 July 1877

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Introduction

The *New York Times* offered its own suggestions about how to prevent a future uprising.

Questions to Consider

- What specific proposals did the editorial offer?
- Did any of the suggestions address the underlying issues that led to the strike?

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The lessons to be drawn from events of the last week can be briefly stated. In the first place, the methods of the trades-unions need amendment. So far as an association of artisans is formed for the protection of benefit of its members nothing can be urged against it in principle, and so far as it confines itself strictly to its professed purpose, no objection can be made against it in practice. Capital, if not formally organized for the assertion of its rights, has the obvious power to enforce its demands derived from the capacity of remaining idle itself and compelling idleness in others. All legitimate combinations which can be made by the laborer to make up for the natural inferiority under which he suffers in a contest with capital are perfectly admissible, whether tested by the principles of political economy or the laws of social order.

But when the laborer says not only "I shall not work," but resorts to violent measures to prevent others from working on the terms he has rejected, he puts himself outside the pale of the sympathy of his fellow-citizens, whether they judge his conduct from the stand-point of the political economist or of the rough common sense which molds the great body of public opinion. The violent opposition to have the places of a body of men on strike filled by persons who are willing to take the wages they have refused is simply the first step in a policy of lawlessness which naturally leads to pillage, arson,

and murder. That fact has been very clearly demonstrated this last week, and its application is not far to seek. Unless trades-unions are to sink to the level of the Communist and Socialist agitators, whose ultimate aim is the forcible redistribution of property and the violent leveling of all social distinctions, they must seek for some more rational means of enforcing their demands than those borrowed from a state of social barbarism. If the trades-union is to continue to be a power in the settlement of labor disputes, if its demands are to secure the attention of reasonable men, it must set itself to devise some plan of arbitration which may avert strikes, some method of fair and rational discussion, which will leave the absolute cessation of work and the consequent trial of endurance as the very last resort in any dispute between employers and employed.

The melancholy failure of the local governments of several large cities in the Union to deal promptly and effectually with the elements of disorder which have been called into action by the railroad strikes has been sufficiently insisted on in these columns. It has a lesson, however, altogether apart from the necessity of reinforcing the municipal powers for the preservation of order by agencies of a more trustworthy character. The city itself must be made strong enough to face the onset of the rabble, otherwise the city as a unit in our political system has forfeited its claim to existence. For a long series of years the better class of our urban population have seen with comparative indifference the control over their affairs pass into the hands of the nominees of the roughs—the elect of the corner groggeries. It is absurd to say that this cannot be prevented. It has always been prevented in times of public excitement, when the "respectable voter" has come to the polls in force because he felt it was a question of existence whether or not the right was triumphant. There is in every city an organization and a set of leaders who are confessedly identified with the ignorant and the depraved among its population, and there never has been a time when thoroughly united effort of the men who had some tangible stake in welfare of the city could not overcome the organization and scatter its agencies to the winds. The official demagogues who tried to coax the ruffians of Buffalo and of Cincinnati belong to the same category as those who abandoned Tompkins-square to the use of a handful of mischievous blatherskites. The fact that the former made mischief and the latter escaped does not by any means alter their respective positions. We must learn to elect city officers who are not the creatures of the mob, if we wish to preserve our property from pillage and destruction by the persons who

assume to be the masters of our city governments.

As purely municipal agencies for preserving order may, under the most favorable circumstances, prove inadequate, we must develop to the utmost the efficiency of our Militia organizations. As misdirected sympathy, imperfect discipline, and incompetent leadership are not by any means visionary drawbacks to the successful employment of the Militia, we must have a standing army adequate for all reasonable demands which can be made upon it. Because our Militia needs encouragement, it does not follow that we must spend millions upon its armories, and give its officers accommodations equal in luxury to that afforded by the most expensive clubs. Nor does the imperative need of a central Police force in the shape of Federal troops involve the assumption that we must have an army even as large as that of England, not to mention the bloated military establishment of the great powers of the European Continent. But the policy of careless neglect in regard to the Militia must cease, as obviously as the policy of starvation in regard to the United States Army. Both must be kept up to a standard of strength and efficiency adequate to the demands which the experience of last week has shown may be made upon them, and neither must be held to be a proper subject of jealousy by a freedom-loving and law-abiding people. All these reflections may seem sufficiently commonplace, while the accompaniments of the great railroad strike are still fresh in public memory. It is quite possible, however, that their practical application may be violently opposed when the time comes for utilizing our recent experience.

Source:

"The Lessons of the Week," *New York Times*, 29 July 1877, 4.