Great Railroad Strike of 1877

Great Railroad Strike of 1877, series of violent rail strikes across the United States in 1877. That year the country was in the fourth year of a prolonged economic depression after the Panic of 1873. The strikes were precipitated by wage cuts announced by the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad—its second cut in eight months. Railway work was already poorly paid and dangerous. Moreover, the railroad companies had taken advantage of the economic troubles to largely break the nascent trade unions that had been formed by the workers before and after the American Civil War.

On July 16, 1877, workers at the B&O station at Martinsburg, West Virginia, responded to the announcement of 10 percent wage cuts by uncoupling the locomotives in the station, confining them in the roundhouse, and declaring that no trains would leave Martinsburg unless the cut was rescinded. West Virginia Gov. Henry M. Mathews dispatched the militia when police were unable to break up the supportive crowd that had gathered. When the militia then proved incapable of freeing the 600 or so trains stranded in Martinsburg (perhaps because many of the militiamen were themselves railroad workers sympathetic to the strike), Mathews requested and received assistance from federal troops. After their arrival, trains were able to begin leaving Martinsburg on July 20.

Meanwhile, the strike had begun spreading along the mainline of the B&O all the way to Chicago, and on July 19 it grew to include Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Railroad. On July 19 flagman Gus Harris unilaterally refused to work on a “double-header” (a train hauled by two engines, thus requiring fewer workers), and the rest of the crew joined him. The resulting strike quickly grew and was joined by men from the nearby iron mills and factories. Elsewhere, on July 20 militiamen were sent to Cumberland, Maryland, where strikers had halted trains. At least 10 people in a crowd were killed by militiamen that were en route to Camden Depot, prompting the assignment of federal troops to Baltimore.

Back in Pittsburgh, when local police and National Guard units were reluctant to act against their fellow townsmen, Pennsylvania Gov. John F. Hartranft called in guardsmen from Philadelphia. On July 21, after local forces had made only a token effort to clear the tracks of the growing mob, the troops from Philadelphia made a bayonet charge. A riot erupted, with guns fired on both sides, and as many as 20 deaths resulted. As anger swelled among the workers, the guardsmen withdrew into a roundhouse while the crowd set fire to the Pennsylvania Railroad’s engines, cars, and buildings. Gunfire was exchanged through the next night, with 20 more crowd members being killed, along with five guardsmen. A virtual general strike ensued in the city, with iron and steel workers, miners, and labourers joining the action.

Although the entire National Guard of Pennsylvania was summoned, many units were delayed in arriving by the actions of strikers in other towns in the state. In Harrisburg, factories and stores were closed; in Lebanon, a National Guard company mutinied; and in Reading, a mob tore up tracks, derailed cars, and set fires. Nevertheless, by July 29 a fresh contingent of National Guard, supported by federal troops, had brought calm to Pittsburgh and reopened railroad operations.

By the end of July, the railroad strike had spread, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout the Northeast to cities such as Albany and Buffalo in New York and to Midwestern cities such as Newark, in Ohio, and Chicago. The leaders of the major railway fraternal organizations (the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the Order of Railway Conductors, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers), however, appear to have been as frightened of the riots as the authorities were. Most disavowed the strike. Many in the middle and upper classes, recalling the Paris Commune of some six years earlier, assumed that the aggressive strikes had been organized communist insurrections. In Chicago the Marxist Workingman’s Union did provide more structure and organization to the demonstrations than elsewhere, but the actions they encouraged were quickly suppressed by the police and the National Guard. Only in St. Louis was there anything approaching an organized effort to take control, but by the end of July the strikes had collapsed almost everywhere.

The strikes dissipated, first and foremost, because the federal army did not break. Unlike the militias, those professional soldiers stayed together and followed orders. The strikes also collapsed because, despite the fears of the industrialists and the government, they were not organized uprisings but rather spontaneous outbursts. Once the anger of the strikers and crowds had run its course, so too did the revolt. There had been no leaders with greater political visions to take command of the strikers

More than 100,000 workers participated in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, at the height of which more than half the freight on the country’s tracks had come to a halt. By the time the strikes were over, about 1,000 people had gone to jail and some 100 had been killed. In the end the strike accomplished very little. Some national politicians talked of labour reforms, but nothing came of it. Industrialists continued to cut wages and break unions. In a few years the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was all but forgotten.