

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877: A Catalyst for the American Labor Movement

Jessica Piper

Fairview High School, Boulder, Colorado

Senior Division Historical Paper, National History Day 2013 Competition

"An epoch in the history of the nation is here marked, and from it will be dated the beginning of political discussion, and social movements which are destined to enlist the profound attention of thinking minds throughout the civilized world."

J. A. Dacus, on the Great Railroad Strike, 1877¹

RAPID INDUSTRIALIZATION during the nineteenth century revolutionized commerce, communication, politics, and American social life. But in the wake of such transformation, one emerging group was left behind: the common laborer. When workers finally revolted in 1877, their cause, which became known as the Great Railroad Strike, marked the first national labor event in United States history and served as a turning point for the American labor movement. Although the strike itself failed, it evoked further labor upheaval, organization of American workers, and long-term political and social change.

The Changing Nature of Labor

Strikes have existed as long as employed labor; records reveal strikes on the Egyptian pyramids thousands of years ago and the first documented strike in North America occurred in 1636.² Yet in the early 1800s, strikes in the United States were local, unorganized, and often illegal.³ Prior to the Second Industrial Revolution in the mid-1800s, the vast majority of laborers were self-employed farmers or artisans, so there was little need for strikes.⁴ In the event of a dispute, workers merely stayed home until terms were settled; these "turn-outs" were largely peaceful.⁵ Yet as the nineteenth century progressed, the nature of labor changed dramatically. The factory system increased demand for labor in urban areas, and rural Americans, drawn by the offer of a steady wage, saw industrialization as their chance to find a better life.⁶ At the same time, an influx of European immigrants arrived in Eastern cities, expanding the

available labor force and stimulating further industrial development.⁷ In 1800, just eleven percent of laborers worked outside of agriculture, but by 1900, this figure climbed to eighty percent.⁸

Following the Civil War, the railroad industry took the lead in industrial growth. In 1850, less than 10,000 miles of tracks existed, but by 1877, 79,000 miles crisscrossed the nation.⁹ Fueled by government subsidies and land grants, during the 1870s the railroad industry became the largest commercial sector in the United States.¹⁰ The *Chicago Tribune* called it "the very heart and life of the modern system of commercial existence."¹¹ As railroads expanded, their political and economic power grew as well. Railroad lobbyists were ubiquitous in both state and federal legislatures. A British ambassador described the companies' influence in 1877: "The power wielded by [railroad] corporations in this country is almost incredible ...they ignore entirely the principle that property has its duties as well as its privileges."¹²

In contrast, workers lacked political and economic power. Emigration from Europe to America and migration from rural areas to cities meant the supply of labor was constantly greater than demand.¹³ Because the individual worker was not a highly-valued commodity, companies seldom had incentive to respond to their employees' needs. Since there was little prevailing ideology of working-class solidarity, labor unions were unsuccessful and often viewed as criminal organizations.¹⁴ Politicians and business leaders, citing events such as the 1871 Paris Commune, justified anti-union legislation to prevent violence and anarchy.¹⁵

In addition to facing legal obstacles, unions were unpopular with the public. In an 1877 sermon, preacher Henry Ward Beecher summarized the opinion of many Americans: "I do not say that a dollar a day is enough to support a working man... But a man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live."¹⁶ Beecher and many others believed workers must submit to whatever conditions prevailed in the industry. Despite the 1842 Supreme Court ruling *Commonwealth vs. Hunt*, which established that unions were technically legal, public opinion of labor organizations remained negative prior to the Great Strike of 1877.¹⁷

The problems faced by the labor movement only intensified when economic panic erupted in 1873. With unemployment at twenty-five percent in many Eastern cities, the value of the individual worker dropped further.¹⁸ As wage cuts worsened, workers and existing unions fought back. But when corporations responded mercilessly, firing and blacklisting suspected unionists, employees grew wary of protesting and labor unions lost strength or disbanded entirely.¹⁹ In New York City, union membership dropped from 45,000 workers in 1873 to just 5,000 in 1876.²⁰ Railroad employees faced harsh conditions during the panic and subsequent depression, as workers lacked organization and could not collectively respond to wage cuts.²¹ The only major group of railroad workers with an established brotherhood, the engineers, attempted a strike in February 1876 in response to a ten percent pay cut. The strike failed, engineers who participated were replaced, and railroad business continued as usual.²²

Tensions Break

As economic depression persisted and corporations suffered falling revenues, owners of several major railroad companies agreed to simultaneously cut wages by ten percent in the spring of 1877.²³ For most workers, this represented a thirty-five percent pay cut from three years previously.²⁴ Though John Garrett, president of B&O Railroad, hoped the workers would "cheerfully recognize the necessity of the reduction," the cut provoked already angry workers.²⁵ On July 16, when pay cuts took effect, B&O workers in Martinsburg, West Virginia, drove company engines into the roundhouse and announced no train would leave until pay was restored.²⁶ When the state militia, summoned by West Virginia Governor Henry Matthews, failed to contain the strike, Matthews wrote to President Rutherford B. Hayes, requesting federal troops to quell the "riotous proceedings" and "protect the law-abiding people of the State against domestic violence."²⁷ ²⁸ Hoping public pressure would suppress the furious strikers, President Hayes warned citizens against "aiding, countenancing, abetting or taking part in such unlawful proceedings."²⁹ But the president's words were in vain: within a few days, the strike spread to dozens of other railroad cities.³⁰

What differentiated this railroad strike from previous efforts was public sympathy for the striking workers and disapproval of railroad company tactics. Farmers throughout the country resented high freight rates, workers across multiple industries blamed railroad companies for chronic unemployment and low wages, and the public was infuriated by railroad corruption.³¹ Many protesters were not railroad employees, but tradesmen or common people who shared the workers' outrage.³² In Martinsburg, a reporter noted the townspeople "all seemed to express sympathy with the strikers."³³ When state governors mobilized local militia, the militiamen too sympathized with the workers, refusing to "take up arms against their brethren."³⁴ In Pittsburgh, a reporter described: "[The militia] refused absolutely to operate against rioters. [They] threw their guns away, and distributed cartridges among the crowd."³⁵ If the militia tried to fight the strikers, they faced public opposition. When Maryland Governor John Carroll assembled the state militia to contain strikers in Cumberland, only 59 of the 200 militiamen arrived at the scene of the strike; they were repeatedly attacked en route and most defected.³⁶ In Syracuse, one reporter remarked: "[the] militia had become more like a mob than custodians of the public peace, and nobody felt any confidence in their efficiency."³⁷

As the violence spread, President Hayes was forced to act. Under pressure from governors and railroad corporations, he deployed federal troops to quell the riots. After three weeks of turmoil, the strike ended. Over one hundred people were killed during the violence.³⁸ The economic costs in property damage and lost business totaled over six million dollars in Pittsburgh alone.³⁹ On August 5, President Hayes noted in his diary: "The strikes have been put down by force, but now for the real remedy..."⁴⁰

Aftermath and Response

The Great Railroad Strike highlighted the weakness and vulnerability of the American labor movement. The strike was not organized; instead it spread, in the words of J. P. McDonnell, editor of *The Labor Standard*, "because the workingmen of Pittsburgh felt the same oppression ... [as] the workingmen of West Virginia and so with the workingmen of Chicago and St. Louis."⁴¹ Yet despite the protesters' persistence, the strikes did not achieve their goal: restored pay for railroad employees. Instead, workers who had participated were punished or replaced. The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* remarked: "The strike fails. The railroad companies make no concessions, and are masters of the situation."⁴²

Fearful of another costly strike, railroad companies sought to prevent upheaval both by appeasing workers and preventing them from organizing. Citing expensive damage from the strike, Robert Harris, president of the Burlington Railroad, wrote: "We have seen that a reduction of pay to the employees may be as expensive...as an increase in pay."⁴³ Under popular pressure, several railroad companies attempted to boost workers' morale by improving conditions and providing coverage for sickness, injury, and death.⁴⁴ Although visible working conditions sometimes improved, corporations continued to suppress unions and other alliances by enacting conspiracy statutes, firing workers who unionized, and employing strikebreakers at any sign of trouble.⁴⁵

A National Movement

Although the railroad protesters hardly achieved their goals, their efforts awoke the American people to the potency of a vast working class, inspiring more protests and reform. The Great Railroad Strike marked the first labor movement to jump state boundaries and extend across the nation.⁴⁶ In an 1887 account, historian Samuel Logan remarked: "It would be difficult to find a community or even a family in the nation [who]...remained untouched."⁴⁷ The Great Railroad Strike established labor as a political and societal force that would greatly influence the United States in the following years.

The Great Railroad Strike also inspired several prominent labor leaders. Terence Powderly, director of the Knights of Labor, took lessons from the 1877 strike to channel worker outrage into effective protests.⁴⁸ His organization, founded in 1869, saw membership skyrocket in the early 1880s and engineered successful several railroad strikes in 1885.⁴⁹ The 1877 strike also spurred the development of railroad brotherhoods. Prior to the strike, just three of these organizations existed; by 1901, all seventeen classifications of railroad employees established a brotherhood.⁵⁰ Recognizing the strike's failure, brotherhood leaders, such as Eugene Debs, advocated negotiations rather than mass strikes. Speaking to brotherhood members in 1877, Debs remarked: "recent strikes, which terrified an entire nation... are the last means... after all peaceful efforts to obtain justice have failed."⁵¹ While Debs sympathized with the railroad workers' cause, he sought diplomatic methods to achieve their goals. He later became president of

the American Railway Union, which played a key role in labor relations during the 1890s.⁵² Another prominent labor leader, Samuel Gompers, held similar views: "Without organizations strong enough to conduct a successful strike, the railway workers rebelled... The railroad strike of 1877 was the tocsin that sounded a ringing message of hope to us all."⁵³ Gompers blamed the strike's failure and violence on the lack of organized labor and believed that unions could provide the discipline and means for workers to negotiate successfully.⁵⁴ With this mindset, he founded the Federation of Trades of North America in 1881, which became the American Federation of Labor in 1886 and played a substantial role in labor relations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁵

Even while leaders preached negotiation instead of violent protests, strikes in the 1880s grew in frequency and intensity, resulting in greater government involvement. In 1881, 100,000 workers engaged in just 471 strikes; in 1886, over 400,000 workers participated in nearly 1,500 strikes.⁵⁶ Whereas the federal government avoided labor disputes prior to the Great Railroad Strike, federal troops were commonly used to combat strikes during the 1880s and 1890s. Violence in Texas during the 1886 Southwest Railroad strikes required government military assistance;⁵⁷ that same year, a bomb killed seven policemen during a protest for the eight-hour workday in Haymarket Square, Chicago.⁵⁸ Union-organized walkouts on the Buffalo and Northern Railroad lines in 1891 and 1893 were met with federal force, and the railroad turmoil peaked in 1894, when workers retaliated against pay cuts by the Pullman Palace Car Company.⁵⁹ The Pullman Strike stopped railroad traffic across the nation, battles broke out between federal troops and strikers in twenty-six states, and twenty-five were killed.⁶⁰

Political Change

Workers also took their grievances to the political stage as several labor parties strengthened following the Great Railroad Strike. The strike provided the impetus for the Greenback-Labor Party, which ran on a platform including reduction of labor hours by law and prohibition of convict labor.⁶¹ In the election of 1878, the year following the Great Railroad Strike, the Greenback-Labor party polled up to twenty-five percent of the vote in some states and elected fourteen candidates to Congress.⁶² The Workingmen's Party of the United States also gained political traction following the 1877 strike; however, the WPUS was viewed as Marxist by many Americans and thus never became a serious political force.⁶³ While the Workingmen's Party never gained a large constituency and the Greenback-Labor Party faded after the election of 1884, labor continued to impact American politics, inspiring major legislation and fueling the emergence of the Populist Party in the 1890s.⁶⁴

In addition to galvanizing several minor parties, the Great Railroad Strike established labor rights as a persistent political issue that impacted both major parties throughout the late nineteenth century. Increased awareness of unions prompted the first Labor Day celebration in 1882.⁶⁵ In 1894, Congress, under pressure following the violent Pullman Strike, declared Labor Day a national

holiday, partially to appease the demands of angry workers.⁶⁶ In response to continued labor unrest, Congress also established the Bureau of Labor in 1884 to investigate the "relations between labor and capital, the wages and hours of labor, the conditions of the labor classes...strikes, and... the causes thereof."⁶⁷ The Bureau gained support of both labor advocates and opponents, as unions viewed it as an opportunity to voice workers' concerns, while other Americans, frightened by labor unrest, believed a federal labor agency could prevent violent strikes.⁶⁸ Concerns over railroad labor and unfair corporate practices also prompted the first measure to regulate railroads, the 1887 Interstate Commerce Act.⁶⁹ Though not directly aimed at railroad workers, this law represented the first major government regulation of private enterprise and reduced railroad corporations' political and economic power.⁷⁰ Although railroad workers and labor unions did not make serious gains until the passage of progressive-era legislation, such as the 1916 Workingmen's Compensation Bill, the Great Railroad Strike profoundly influenced American politics throughout the late nineteenth century.⁷¹

As the first mass strike in United States history, the Great Railroad Strike served as a turning point for American labor by prompting widespread organization of unions and nationalizing the American labor movement. Though the strike hardly resolved workers' challenges, it politicized the issue of labor rights, leading to long-term political and social change. Just a few weeks after the strike ended, the *Washington Capital* remarked: "Those who understand the forces at work in American society already know that America will never be the same again. For decades, yes centuries to come, our nation will feel the effects of the tidal wave that swept over it for two weeks in July."⁷² Although the reporter who wrote these words could not have imagined the changes the United States would face over the next century, the prediction remains astonishingly accurate.

Notes

1. J. A. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes*. (Chicago: C. B. Beach, 1877), iii.
2. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1997), 9.
3. Joseph G. Rayback, *A History of American Labor* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 12.
4. Brecher, 9.
5. Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1999), 27.
6. Gloria Skurzynski, *Sweat and Blood: A History of U.S. Labor Unions* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2009), 17.
7. Nick Salvatore, "Railroad Workers and the Great Strike of 1877," *Labor History* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 525. Business Source Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed December 10, 2012).
8. Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800* (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1964), 172.

9. U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1878*. 1st ed. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1878. <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1878-01.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2013).
10. George R. Taylor and Irene D. Neu, *The American Railroad Network: 1861- 1890* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 3.
11. Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Monad Press, 1977), 14.
12. Ibid, 229.
13. Marianne Debouzy, "Worker's Self-Organization and Resistance in the 1877 Strikes," in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1983), 74.
14. Robert V. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 18.
15. Troy Rodinone, *The Great Industrial War: Framing Class Conflict in the Media, 1865-1950* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 53.
16. Dubofsky and Dulles, 111.
17. Morgan Reynolds, "A History of Labor Unions from Colonial Times to 2009," *Ludwig von Mises Institute*, July 17, 2009, <http://mises.org/daily/3553> (accessed January 8, 2013).
18. Samuel Rezneck, "Distress, Relief, and Discontent in the United States During the Depression of 1873-78," *Journal of Political Economy* 58, no. 6 (December 1950): 498. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1827088?uid=3739568&uid=2134&uid=377360303&uid=2&uid=377360293&uid=70&uid=3&uid=3739256&uid=60&sid=21101541619193> (accessed January 16, 2013).
19. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the US Volume I: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the AFL*. (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 456.
20. Bruce, 17.
21. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 16.
22. Bruce, 35.
23. "Trouble on the Baltimore & Ohio," *Baltimore American*, July 17, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0075&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=33 (accessed December 12, 2012).
24. Rayback, 134.
25. John W. Garrett, "The Official Order," *Baltimore American*, July 11, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0002&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=33 (accessed January 7, 2013).
26. "The Great Railroad Strike." *New York Times*, July 21, 1877. ProQuest. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/93655898?accountid=48257> (accessed December 11, 2012).
27. "The Recent Railroad Damages," *American Railroad Journal*, July 18, 1877. Maryland State Archives. http://teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000070/images/july_28_1877-copyright.jpg (accessed December 10, 2012).
28. Henry M. Matthews to Rutherford B. Hayes, 18 July 1877. Transcript from *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0004&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=34 (accessed January 7, 2013).
29. "The President's Proclamation," *Baltimore American*, July 18, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_

document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0008&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=34 (accessed January 8, 2013).

30. "Midnight News from the Seat of War," *Baltimore American*, July 18, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0070&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=33 (accessed December 12, 2012).

31. Strikers at Grafton, letter to the editor, *Baltimore American*, July 20, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0059&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=34 (accessed December 12, 2012).

32. David O. Stowell, *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 144.

33. Bruce, 80.

34. *Ibid*, 135-136.

35. "Striking Everywhere," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, July 25, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0286&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=38 (accessed January 7, 2013).

36. Brecher, 21.

37. Stowell, 75.

38. Brecher, 35.

39. "The Great Strike," *Harper's Weekly*, August 11, 1877. Catskill Archive. <http://www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/sk7711.html> (accessed December 10, 2012).

40. Rutherford B. Hayes, Diary Entry, August 5, 1877. Transcript from *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?views%5B0%5D=Strike&renders%5B0%5D=diary&id=rail.str.0110 (accessed April 11, 2013).

41. Bruce, 229.

42. "The Strike Ended and Trains Moving," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, July 30, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0162&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=39 (accessed January 7, 2013).

43. Bruce, 302.

44. Sylvia Gillett, "Camden Yards and the Strike of 1877," in *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History*, ed. Elizabeth Fee, Linda Shopes, and Linda Zeidman, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 11.

45. Dubofsky and Dulles, 111.

46. Timothy Starr, *Railroad Wars of New York State* (Charleston: History Press, 2012), 144.

47. Samuel Crothers Logan, *A City's Danger and Defense: Or, Issues and Results of the Strikes of 1877* (Philadelphia: Jas G. Rodgers Printing Company, 1887), 25.

48. Craig Phelan, *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 276.

49. Rayback, 159.

50. Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the 19th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 264.

51. Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 36-37.

52. *Ibid*, 139.

53. Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labour: An Autobiography* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1925), 46.

54. Bernard Mandel, *Samuel Gompers* (Yellow Springs, OH: The Antioch Press, 1963), 25.
55. Rowland H. Harvey, *Samuel Gompers: Champion of the Toiling Masses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1935), 41.
56. Paul Michel Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men: Railroad Brotherhoods 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 71.
57. Licht, 250.
58. John J. Miller, "What Happened at Haymarket?" *National Review* 65, no. 2 (February 11, 2013): 32. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed March 10, 2013).
59. Licht, 252.
60. Yellen, 111.
61. Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor & Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 23.
62. Rayback, 138.
63. Philip Dray, *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America* (New York, Random House, Inc., 2010), 128.
64. Melvyn Dubofsky, *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 47.
65. U.S. Department of Labor. *Important Events in American Labor History: 1778-1978*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1978), 4.
66. "The History of Labor Day," United States Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/opa/aboutdol/laborday.htm> (accessed April 13, 2013).
67. Jonathan Grossman, and Judson Maclaury, "The creation of the Bureau of Labor Statistics," *Monthly Labor Review* 98, no. 2 (February 1975): 25. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2013).
68. Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State & Labor in Modern America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 13.
69. Arthur T. Hadley, "Railroad Business Under the Interstate Commerce Act." *Quarterly Journal Of Economics* 3, no. 2 (January 1889): 173. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 27, 2013).
70. James W. Ely Jr., "The Troubled Beginning of the Interstate Commerce Act," *Marquette Law Review* 4, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 1131. <http://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5126&context=mulr> (accessed January 27, 2013).
71. Taillon, 181.
72. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 230.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

"Cause of the Strike and a Remedy," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 23, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0305&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=36 (accessed December 12, 2012).

The *Chicago Tribune* published this editorial in the midst of the strike, discussing the causes of the strike and how to resolve workers' concerns. I found this article interesting because it demonstrated how people viewed the purpose of Great Railroad Strike as it was happening.

Dacus, J. A. *Annals of the Great Strikes*. Chicago: C. B. Beach, 1877.

This account of the Great Railroad Strike was published just a few months after the strike ended. Dacus attempted to report with accuracy the events of the strike in American cities. Although many of the strike's ramifications were not yet apparent, Dacus wholeheartedly believed that the strike was a turning point for American labor and society. I found this book useful because it provided a unique perspective on the strikes and showed that, even just a few months after the strike, historians believed it would permanently alter the course of the American labor movement.

Garrett, John W. "The Official Order." *Baltimore American*, July 11, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0002&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=33 (accessed January 7, 2013).

On July 11, John Garrett, President of the Baltimore & Ohio railroad, issued this circular, which was published in the *Baltimore American*, announcing across the board wage cuts for B&O employees. The statement inspired resentment among employees, leading them to strike. Although the causes of the strike were much more complicated than a simple pay cut, I found it helpful to look at the document that ignited the violent strikes. I quote this document in my paper.

Gompers, Samuel. *Seventy Years of Life and Labour: An Autobiography*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1925.

Samuel Gompers, founder of the American Federation of Labor, was clearly one of the most influential working-class leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His autobiography detailed many aspects of his life and work for labor unions. I chose to cite this book as a primary source because it helped me understand the impact of the Great Railroad Strike on Gompers' actions and ideology.

"The Great Strike," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 23, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0304&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=36 (accessed December 24, 2012).

This article was written in the midst of the Great Railroad Strike. It favored the railroad workers, suggesting that corporations meet some of their demands, and it considered constant pay reductions unfair to the workers. I helped me understand the workers' perspective on the strike.

"The Great Strike," *Harper's Weekly*, August 11, 1877. Catskill Archive. <http://www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/sk7711.html> (accessed December 10, 2012).

This magazine article was published in *Harper's Weekly*, a prominent news source at the time of the Great Railroad Strike, shortly after the strike ended. Though this article is mainly reporting the facts, its tone indicates clear opposition to the workers as it emphasizes the bloodshed and destruction caused by the riots. This account helped me understand the mentality of the many who did not side with the workers in the strikes.

"The Great Railroad Strike." *New York Times*, July 21, 1877. ProQuest. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/93655898?accountid=48257> (accessed December 11, 2012).

This article, published in the *New York Times* just a week into the strike, presented the opinion that, while the strikers had every right to refuse to work, they didn't have the right to halt the entire railroad industry. It supported federal intervention on behalf of the industry, saying railroad companies were entitled to the protection of the law. This helped me understand the attitude of many Americans at this. Though some sympathized with the strikers, almost all considered the violence unacceptable.

Hayes, Rutherford B. Diary Entry. 5 August 1877. Transcript from *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?views%5B0%5D=Strike&rends%5B0%5D=diary&id=rail.str.0110. (accessed April 11, 2013).

Although President Hayes did activate federal forces to end the strike, his diary actually expressed some sympathy with the workers' cause. President Hayes realized that the Great Railroad Strike was not just a reaction to pay cuts, but a call for action to fix a broken system. Despite this, President Hayes did not pursue any remedial policies during his term. Nonetheless, I found his diary a useful resource, because it helped me appreciate President Hayes' views on the strike.

Matthews, Henry M., to Rutherford B. Hayes, 18 July 1877. Transcript from *Railroads and the Making of Modern America*, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0004&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=34 (accessed January 7, 2013).

Henry Matthews, Governor of West Virginia, wrote this letter to President Rutherford B. Hayes requesting federal assistance to quell the strikes. Matthews clearly opposed the strikes, regarding them as unlawful domestic violence. I found this source useful because it demonstrated the government's attitude toward the strikes and the lack of protocol in handling such uprisings. I quote part of this letter in my paper.

"Midnight News from the Seat of War," *Baltimore American*, July 18, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0070&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=33 (accessed December 12, 2012).

This article, from the *Baltimore American*, gives an account of the workers' growing strength and the local militia's failure to stop the protests. It described the spread of the riots from Martinsburg to nearby towns. It illustrated the civilian support for the railroad workers, and noted that the strikes seemed peaceful prior to government intervention.

"The President's Proclamation," *Baltimore American*, July 18, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0008&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=34 (accessed January 8, 2013).

When the Railroad Strike erupted, President Hayes made several public statements, as reported in this article from the *Baltimore American*. Hayes was hoping to calm the strikers before the riots became out-of-control, but his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. I quote part of this article in my paper.

"Railroad War in Maryland," *Baltimore American*, July 21, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0067&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=35 (accessed December 12, 2012).

This article detailed conflict between strikers and militia in Maryland. I found it interesting because it was one of the first publications to refer to the Great Railroad Strike as a "war," rather than a strike.

"The Recent Railroad Damages," *American Railroad Journal*, July 18, 1877. Maryland State Archives. http://teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000070/images/july_28_1877-copyright.jpg (accessed December 10, 2012).

The *American Railroad Journal* clearly opposed the striking workers. This article focused on the violent and destructive nature of the protests and supported the railroad's decision to cut pay, arguing that such measures were necessary in bad economic times. It helped me understand the strikes from the perspective of the railroad industry.

"The Strike Ended and Trains Moving," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, July 30, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0162&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=39 (accessed January 7, 2013).

This article was published in the *Pittsburgh Daily Post* shortly after federal troops quelled the strikes in Pittsburgh. The strike in Pittsburgh was the most violent of any city and this article was more sympathetic to the workers than the militia or federal troops. I quote this article in my paper.

Strikers at Grafton, West Virginia, letter to the editor, *Baltimore American*, July 20, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0059&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=34 (accessed December 12, 2012).

This letter to the editor was sent from a group of strikers from Grafton, West Virginia, who wanted to correct the opinion that their behavior was destructive and lawless. They felt the railroad companies were exaggerating the extent of damage and they defended their actions, instead placing blame on the railroad companies. This document helped me understand the opinion of the striking workers.

"Striking Everywhere," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, July 25, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0286&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=38 (accessed January 7, 2013).

Although the Great Railroad Strike began as an isolated incident in just one rail yard, it quickly spread to many American cities. This article, published a week into the strike, provided details of the strike from thirty-five cities across the United States. It helped me understand the rapid growth of the strike and public sympathy toward the striking workers.

"Trouble on the Baltimore & Ohio," *Baltimore American*, July 17, 1877. University of Nebraska. http://railroads.unl.edu/documents/view_document.php?yearStart=&yearStop=&keyword=&publication=&id=rail.str.0075&sort=date&order=asc&per_page=20&page=33 (accessed December 12, 2012).

This article details the actions of the railroad workers on the first day of the strike. It discussed the rebellion of workers in Martinsburg and reported the spread of the strike

to a few nearby towns. Although the strike was not a national issue yet, this article described the failures of the state militia and foreshadowed the impending conflict.

U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1878*. 1st ed. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1878. <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1878-01.pdf> (accessed January 14, 2013).

The first Statistical Abstract of the United States was published by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1878. This document included a plethora of statistics on American industry, including data on railroad growth dating back to 1830. These statistics helped me understand the rapid growth of the railroad industry and I cited several of them in my paper.

Secondary Sources

Brecher, Jeremy. *Strike!* Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1997.

This book analyzed major strikes and labor protests in the United States, beginning with the Great Strike of 1877. In addition to providing details on the strike, it helped me understand the strike's legacy and its impact on future labor uprisings.

Bruce, Robert V. *1877: Year of Violence*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959.

This book presented the Great Railroad Strike in detail and included historical accounts from many newspapers of the time. It also analyzed how changing labor relations and the rise of industry contributed to the strike. It discussed the development of labor unions during the nineteenth century and helped me understand why previous strikes had failed.

Dubofsky, Melvyn, and Foster Rhea Dulles. *Labor in America: A History*. Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1999.

This book analyzed the labor movement in the United States from colonial times until the present. It provided useful background information on labor in the U.S. and helped me understand the American labor movement before and after the Great Railroad Strike.

Dubofsky, Melvyn. *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

This book traced the development of labor unions, beginning in the late nineteenth century. It helped me understand how the Great Railroad Strike shaped the future of American labor.

_____. *The State & Labor in Modern America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

This book discussed the impact of government involvement and regulation of American labor, beginning with the Great Railroad Strike and the labor upheaval of the late nineteenth century. It helped me understand how the government's role in labor changed following the Great Railroad Strike.

Debouzy, Marianne. "Worker's Self-Organization and Resistance in the 1877 Strikes." In *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s*, ed. Dirk Hoerder, 61-75. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

This article discussed the Great Railroad Strike by focusing on the individual workers. I found it useful because it analyzed why railroad employees and other

laborers chose to participate in the strike, and how issues of ethnicity manifested themselves during the strike.

Dray, Philip. *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America*. New York, Random House, Inc., 2010.

This book detailed the development and impact on labor unions in the United States. It helped me understand the impact of the Great Railroad Strike of unions, labor reform, and labor as a political issue.

Ely, James W. Jr. "The Troubled Beginning of the Interstate Commerce Act." *Marquette Law Review* 4, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 1131-1135. <http://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5126&context=mulr> (accessed January 27, 2013).

The Great Railroad Strike made labor and the railroads a political issue, leading to legislation such as the Interstate Commerce Act. Though this law did little to protect railroad workers, it was the first government attempt to regulate the railroad industry and was a prototype for later regulations. This article helped me understand the events that led to the passage of Interstate Commerce Act and the law's impact on the American railroad industry.

Foner, Philip S. *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*. New York: Monad Press, 1977.

This book analyzed the causes of the Great Railroad strike and presented stories and quotes from strikers, militiamen, and townspeople across the United States. It helped me understand the reasons the strike occurred and the consequences of the strike for the American people. I use several quotes from this book in my paper.

_____. *History of the Labor Movement in the US Volume I: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the AFL*. (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 456.

This book discussed the growth of organized labor in the United States, from the beginnings of organized trade unions to the development of the AFL. I found its discussion of the impact of economic recession on the labor movement very helpful for my paper.

Gillett, Sylvia. "Camden Yards and the Strike of 1877." In *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History*, edited by Elizabeth Fee, Linda Shopes, and Linda Zeidman, 1-14. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.

This article told the Great Railroad Strike as part of a series on the history of Baltimore. It presented perspectives on the strike through quotes from laborers, militiamen, and other involved in the protested. The article also detailed the impact of the strike on the railroad industry and its workers, which helped me understand the strike's legacy.

Grossman, Jonathan, and Judson Maclaury. "The Creation of the Bureau of Labor Statistics." *Monthly Labor Review* 98, no. 2 (February 1975): 25. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2013).

This article described the establishment of the Bureau of Labor. I found it useful because it described the impact of the Great Railroad Strike and labor unrest on the decision to create the Bureau of Labor.

Hadley, Arthur T. "Railroad Business Under the Interstate Commerce Act." *Quarterly Journal Of Economics* 3, no. 2 (January 1889): 170-187. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 27, 2013).

The Interstate Commerce Act was passed in 1887, much due to resentment and protest against the railroad industry. Although the law did little for railroad workers, it represented the first government attempt to regulate the railroad industry. This article discussed the impact of the Interstate Commerce Act on railroad business. It helped me understand early government regulation of the railroads.

Harvey, Rowland H. *Samuel Gompers: Champion of the Toiling Masses*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1935.

This book detailed the life of Samuel Gompers, who founded the American Federation of Labor. While this book discussed many aspects of Gompers' labor work, it briefly discussed the impact of the Great Railroad Strike on Gompers' political views and ideology. It helped me understand the impact of the Great Railroad Strike on later labor movements.

Hild, Matthew. *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor & Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century South*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

This book discussed the development of the Greenback Party, the Knights of Labor, and the Populists and the impact of these groups on American politics. It helped me understand how the Great Railroad Strike led to political change.

"The History of Labor Day." United States Department of Labor. <http://www.dol.gov/opa/aboutdol/laborday.htm> (accessed April 13, 2013).

Labor protests during the late nineteenth century led Congress to establish Labor Day. This article detailed the development of Labor Day at the federal level. It helped me understand the impact of the Great Railroad Strike on the way people viewed labor in the United States.

Lebergott, Stanley. *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1964.

This book compiled hundreds of statistics on American labor dating back to 1800. I found it very helpful in understanding how the nature of work changed in the United States during the nineteenth century. I cite several statistics from this book in my paper.

Licht, Walter. *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the 19th Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

As the largest employers, railroads played a key role in industry, commerce, and politics in the nineteenth century. This book analyzed the impact of railroad corporations on American business during the late 1800s. I found it useful because it explained how railroad companies' political and economic power impacted American labor.

Logan, Samuel Crothers. *A City's Danger and Defense: Or, Issues and Results of the Strikes of 1877*. Philadelphia: Jas G. Rodgers Printing Company, 1887.

Ten years after the Great Railroad Strike, Samuel Logan wrote this book detailing the impact of the strike from a local perspective. He focused on the developments of city defense mechanisms to prevent future strikes. However, I found this book most useful because it showed how historians viewed the strike ten years later.

Mandel, Bernard. *Samuel Gompers*. Yellow Springs, OH: The Antioch Press, 1963.

Samuel Gompers founded the American Federation of Labor in 1886, which was an important labor organization, both politically and socially. While this book discussed

many aspects of Gompers' work, I found it useful because it discussed the impact of the Great Railroad Strike on Gompers' political views and ideology.

Miller, John J. "What Happened at Haymarket?." *National Review* 65, no. 2 (February 11, 2013): 31-33. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed March 10, 2013).

This article looked at the facts regarding the Haymarket Affair, a controversial incident in 1886 in which capital and labor blamed each other for the violence. The article concluded that both were likely at fault. I found this article useful because it demonstrated that the issues present at the Great Railroad Strike continued in the 1880s.

Phelan, Craig. *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Terence Powderly founded the Knights of Labor, which was a prominent force in the 1880s. I found this book useful because, among many other things, it explained how events such as the Great Railroad Strike impacted both Powderly and the Knights of Labor.

Rayback, Joseph G. *A History of American Labor*. New York: The Free Press, 1959.

This book detailed a history of labor in the United States, dating from the colonial times to the New Deal. It provided excellent background information on American labor and analyzed developments in labor both before and after the Strike of 1877, which helped me understand the causes and effects of the strike.

Rodinone, Troy. *The Great Industrial War: Framing Class Conflict in the Media, 1865-1950*. Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2010.

This book discussed the evolution of journalism regarding the Strike of 1877 and other labor events during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I found it useful because it analyzed how media reporting, for example, references to class warfare and communism, developed during the Great Railroad Strike and in subsequent years.

Reynolds, Morgan. "A History of Labor Unions from Colonial Times to 2009." *Ludwig von Mises Institute*, July 17, 2009, <http://mises.org/daily/3553> (accessed January 8, 2013).

This article traced the development of labor unions from colonial times, through the Great Railroad Strike and the progressive era, and discussed the impact of unions today. It provided me with background information on labor unions in the United States.

Reznek, Samuel. "Distress, Relief, and Discontent in the United States During the Depression of 1873-78." *Journal of Political Economy* 58, no. 6 (December 1950): 494-512. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1827088?uid=3739568&uid=2134&uid=3773603&uid=2&uid=377360293&uid=70&uid=3&uid=3739256&uid=60&sid=21101541619193> (accessed January 16, 2013).

The Panic of 1873 and depression that followed forced wage cuts, high unemployment, and sparked discontent among workers, factors that contributed to the Strike of 1877. This article analyzed the economic troubles during the 1870s and their impact on politics, labor and other issues. It deepened my understand of the economic problems that contributed to the Strike of 1877.

Salvatore, Nick. *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982.

This book discussed Eugene Debs' impact on American labor and politics. It helped me understand how the Great Railroad Strike shaped Debs' views and actions regarding the American labor movement.

_____. "Railroad Workers and the Great Strike of 1877." *Labor History* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 522-545. Business Source Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed December 10, 2012).

While many primary sources were helpful in analyzing the motives of the striking workers, this secondary source was very intriguing because it analyzed the intentions behind the strike in a greater historical context, taking into account the socio-economic factors of the time period. This article evaluated many of the factors that may have contributed to the Great Strike, including the rise of capitalism, growing tensions between social classes, economic speculation, political problems, immigration and anti-foreignism. This analysis greatly aided my understanding of the historical context and causes of the strike.

Schneirov, Richard. "Chicago's Great Upheaval of 1877: Class Polarization and Democratic Politics." In *The Great Strikes of 1877*, ed. David O. Stowell, 76-104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Although wage cuts may have pushed workers over the top, tensions had been boiling for a while before the Great Railroad Strike erupted. This essay discussed how social, political, and economic trends contributed to the Great Railroad Strike in Chicago. It helped me understand the causes of the strike.

Skurzynski, Gloria. *Sweat and Blood: A History of U.S. Labor Unions*. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2009.

This book presented a history of the development of labor unions in the United States. It discussed how immigration made unionization more difficult and how the development of labor unions accelerated following the Great Railroad Strike. I found it useful because it provided an interesting perspective on American labor unions.

Starr, Timothy. *Railroad Wars of New York State*. Charleston: History Press, 2012.

Among other things, this book discussed the labor conflicts on railroads in the state of New York. It emphasized the Strike of 1877 as the first major labor conflict. It provided further perspective on the causes and effects of the Strike of 1877.

Stowell, David O. *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

The Great Railroad Strike was not just the product of angry workers and wage cuts, but was something that had been building in the United States for some time. This book evaluated the rise of capitalism and mechanization in the U.S. and looked at the Strike as a backlash against these ideas. I found this book useful because it analyzed the Great Railroad Strike in a broader historical perspective.

Taillon, Paul Michel. *Good, Reliable, White Men: Railroad Brotherhoods 1877-1917*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

This book analyzed the development of railroad Brotherhoods, which were alliances of railroad workers that were similar to labor unions. Brotherhoods were rare and had small membership prior to the Great Railroad Strike, but became an important labor force in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many Brotherhoods were also incorporated into other unions. This book examined their growth and impact on the railroad industry and future labor relations.

Taylor, George R. and Irene D. Neu. *The American Railroad Network: 1861-1890*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956.

In the late 1800s, American industry expanded rapidly, led by the development of the railroad industry. This book detailed the growth of the railroads between 1861 and 1890 and explained the causes and effects of such swift expansion. It helped me understand the impacts of railroad business on American labor and industry.

U.S. Department of Labor. *Important Events in American Labor History: 1778-1978*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1978.

This government document detailed 200 years of important labor events. It helped me recognize how the Great Railroad Strike impacted America politically, socially, and economically.

Yellen, Samuel. *American Labor Struggles: 1877-1934*. New York: Monad Press, 1936.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was the first major American labor uprising, but many more strikes were to follow. This book analyzed ten American labor struggles, starting with the Strike of 1877. It presented many views on the strike and included quotes from workers, militiamen, politicians, and others. Additionally, it demonstrated how the Great Railroad Strike paved the way for future labor movements, an idea central to my paper.

Copyright of History Teacher is the property of Society for History Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.