



Pittsburgh, July 22, 1877. The interior of the Pennsylvania Railroad upper roundhouse the day after a battle between strikers and the Philadelphia militia. The image is part of a series of stereographs taken by S.V. Albee, "The Railroad War." (Photo courtesy of the American Social History Project.)

Chapter 1

The Great Upheaval

In the centers of many American cities are positioned huge armories, grim nineteenth-century edifices of brick or stone. They are fortresses, complete with massive walls and loopholes for guns. You may have wondered why they are there, but it has probably never occurred to you that they were built to protect America not against invasion from abroad but against popular revolt at home. Their erection was a monument to the Great Upheaval of 1877.

July 1877 does not appear in many history books as a memorable date, yet it marks the first great American mass strike, a movement that was viewed at the time as a violent rebellion. Strikers seized and closed the nation's most important industry, the railroads, and crowds defeated or won over first the police, then the state militias, and in some cases even the federal troops. General strikes brought work to a standstill in a dozen major cities and strikers took over authority in communities across the nation.

It all began on Monday, July 16, 1877, in the little railroad town of Martinsburg, West Virginia. On that day, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad cut wages 10 percent, the second cut in eight months.¹ Men gathered around the Martinsburg railroad yards, talking, waiting through the day. Toward evening the crew of a cattle train, fed up, abandoned the train, and other workers refused to replace them.

As a crowd gathered, the strikers uncoupled the engines, ran them into the roundhouse, and announced to B&O officials that no trains would leave Martinsburg until the pay cut was rescinded. The mayor arrived and conferred with railroad officials. He tried to soothe the crowd and was booed. When he ordered the arrest of the strike leaders they just laughed at him, backed up in their resistance by the angry crowd. The mayor's police were helpless against the population of the town. No railroad workers could be found willing to take out a

train, so the police withdrew and by midnight the yard was occupied only by a guard of strikers left to enforce the blockade.²

That night, B&O officials in Wheeling went to see Governor Henry Matthews, took him to their company telegraph office, and waited while he wired Col. Charles Faulkner, Jr., at Martinsburg. Matthews instructed Faulkner to have his Berkeley Light Guards "prevent any interference by rioters with the men at work, and also prevent the obstruction of the trains."³

The next morning, when the Martinsburg master of transportation ordered the cattle train out again, the strikers' guard swooped down on it and ordered the engineer to stop or be killed. He stopped. By now, hundreds of strikers and townspeople had gathered, and the next train out hardly moved before it was boarded, uncoupled, and run into the roundhouse.

About 9 a.m., the Berkeley Light Guards arrived to the sound of a fife and drum; the crowd cheered them. Most of the militiamen were themselves railroaders.⁴ Now the cattle train came out once more, this time covered with militiamen, their rifles loaded with ball cartridges. As the train pulled through the yelling crowd, a striker named William Vandergriff turned a switch to derail the train and guarded it with a pistol. A soldier jumped off the train to reset the switch. Vandergriff shot him and in turn was fatally shot himself.⁵

At this, the attempt to break the blockade at Martinsburg was abandoned. The strikebreaking engineer and fireman climbed down from the engine and departed. Col. Faulkner called in vain for volunteers to run the train, announced that the governor's orders had been fulfilled, dismissed his men, and telegraphed the governor that he was helpless to control the situation.

With this confrontation began the Great Upheaval of 1877, a spontaneous, nationwide, virtually general strike. The pattern of Martinsburg—a railroad strike in response to a pay cut, an attempt by the companies to run trains with the support of military forces, and the defeat or dissolution of those forces by amassed crowds representing general popular support—became the pattern for the nation.

With news of success at Martinsburg, the strike spread to all divisions of the B&O, with engineers, brakemen, and conductors joining

with the firemen who provided the initial impetus. Freight traffic was stopped all along the line, while the workers continued to run passenger and mail cars without interference. Seventy engines and six hundred freight cars were soon piled up in the Martinsburg yards.

Governor Matthews, resolved to break the strike, promised to send a company "in which there are no men unwilling to suppress the riots and execute the law."⁶ He sent his only available military force, sixty Light Guards from Wheeling. But the Guards were hardly reliable, for the sentiment in Wheeling was strongly in favor of the strike.

The Guards marched out of town surrounded by an excited crowd, who, a reporter noted, "all expressed sympathy with the strikers."⁷ Box-makers and can-makers in Wheeling were already on strike and soon people were discussing a general strike of all labor. When the Guards' train arrived in Martinsburg, it was met by a large, orderly crowd. The militia's commander conferred with railroad and town officials, but dared not use the troops, lest they "further exasperate the strikers."⁸ Instead, he marched the Guards away to the courthouse.

At this point the strike was virtually won. But hardly had the strike broken out when the president of the B&O began pressing for the use of the U.S. Army against the strikers in West Virginia. "The loss of an hour would most seriously affect us and imperil vast interests," he wrote. With federal troops, "the rioters could be dispersed and there would be no difficulty in the movement of trains."⁹ The railroad's vice-president wired his Washington agent, saying that the governor might soon call for federal troops, and instructing him "to see the Secretary of War and inform him of the serious situation of affairs, that he may be ready to send the necessary force to the scene of action at once."¹⁰ Although a journalist on the scene at Martinsburg reported "perfect order,"¹¹ and other correspondents were unable to find violence to report, Col. Faulkner wired the governor:

The feeling here is most intense, and the rioters are largely cooperated with by civilians.... The disaffection has become so general that no employee could now be found to run an engine even under certain protection. I am satisfied that Faulkner's experiment of yesterday was thorough and that any repetition of it today would pre-

cipitate a bloody conflict, with the odds largely against our small force.¹²

On the basis of this report, the governor in turn wired the president:

To His Excellency, R.B. Hayes,
President of the U.S.
Washington, D.C.:

Owing to unlawful combinations and domestic violence now existing at Martinsburg and at other points along the line of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, it is impossible with any force at my command to execute the laws of the State. I therefore call upon your Excellency for the assistance of the United States military to protect the law abiding people of the State against domestic violence, and to maintain supremacy of the law.¹³

The president of the B&O added his appeal, wiring the president that West Virginia had done all it could "to suppress this insurrection" and warning that "this great national highway [the B&O] can only be restored for public use by the interposition of U.S. forces."¹⁴ In response, President Hayes sent 300 federal troops to suppress what his secretary of war was already referring to publicly as "an insurrection."¹⁵

This "insurrection" was spontaneous and unplanned, but it grew out of the social conditions of the time and the recent experience of railway workers. The tactics of the railroad strikers had been developed in a series of local strikes, mostly without trade union support, that occurred in 1873 and 1874. In December 1873, for example, engineers and firemen on the Pennsylvania Railroad system struck in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, Columbus, Indianapolis, and various smaller towns, in what Ohio's *Portsmouth Tribune* called "the greatest railroad strike" in the nation's history.¹⁶

Huge crowds gathered in depot yards and supported the strikers against attempts to run the trains. State troops were sent into Denison, Ohio, and Logansport, Indiana, to break strike strongholds.¹⁷ At Susquehanna Depot, Pennsylvania, three months later, shop and repair workers struck. After electing a "Workingmen's Committee," they seized control of the repair shops; within twenty minutes the en-

tire works was "under complete control of the men."¹⁸ The strike was finally broken when 1,800 Philadelphia soldiers with thirty pieces of cannon established martial law in the town of 8,000.¹⁹

The railroad strikes of 1873 and 1874 were generally unsuccessful; but, as historian Herbert Gutman wrote, they "revealed the power of the railroad workers to disrupt traffic on many roads."²⁰ The employers learned that "they had a rather tenuous hold on the loyalties of their men. Something was radically wrong if workers could successfully stop trains for from two or three days to as much as a week, destroy property, and even 'manage' it as if it were their own."²¹ And, Gutman continued, "the same essential patterns of behavior that were widespread in 1877 were found in the 1873-1874 strikes. Three and a half years of severe depression ignited a series of local brush fires into a national conflagration."²²

The more immediate background of the 1877 railroad strike also helps explain why it took the form of virtual insurrection, for this struggle grew out of the failure of other, less violent forms of action.

The wage cut on the B&O was part of a pattern initiated June 1 by the Pennsylvania Railroad. When the leaders of the Brotherhoods of Engineers, Conductors, and Firemen made no effort to combat the cut, railroad workers on the Pennsylvania system took action themselves. A week before the cut went into effect, the Newark, New Jersey, division of the Engineers held an angry protest meeting against the cut. The Jersey City lodge met the next day, voted for a strike, and contacted other workers; by the day the cut took effect, engineers' and firemen's locals throughout the Pennsylvania system had chosen delegates to a joint grievance committee, ignoring the leadership of their national unions.

The wage cut was not the workers' only concern; the committee proposed what amounted to a complete reorganization of work. They opposed the system of assigning trains in which the first crew into town was the first crew out, leaving them no time to rest or see their families; they wanted regular runs to stabilize pay and work schedules; they wanted passes home in case of long layovers; and they wanted the system of "classification" of workers by length of service and efficiency—used to keep wages down—abolished.²³

But the grievance committee delegates were easily intimidated and cajoled by Tom Scott, the masterful ruler of the Pennsylvania Railroad, who talked them into accepting the cut without consulting those who elected them. A majority of brakemen, many conductors, and some engineers wanted to repudiate the committee's action; but, their unity broken, the locals decided not to strike.²⁴

Since the railroad brotherhoods had clearly failed, the workers' next step was to create a new, secret organization, the Trainmen's Union. It was started by workers on the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago line. Within three weeks, lodges had sprung up from Baltimore to Chicago, with thousands of members on many different lines. The Trainmen's Union recognized that the privileged engineers "generally patched things up for themselves,"²⁵ so it included conductors, firemen, brakemen, switchmen, and others as well as engineers. The union also realized that the various railroad managements were co-operating against the workers, one railroad after another imitating the Pennsylvania with a 10 percent wage cut. The union's strategy was to organize at least three-quarters of the trainmen on each trunk line, then strike against the cuts and other grievances. When a strike came, firemen would not take engineers' jobs and workers on non-striking roads would not handle struck equipment.²⁶

But the union was full of spies. On one railroad the firing of members began only four days after the union was formed, and other railroads followed suit. "Determined to stamp it out," as one railroad official put it, the company issued orders to discharge all men belonging to "the Brotherhood or Union."²⁷ Nonetheless, on June 24 forty men fanned out over the railroads to call a general railroad strike for the following week. The railroads learned about the strike through their spies, fired the strike committee in a body, and thus panicked part of the leadership into spreading false word that the strike was off. Local lodges, unprepared to act on their own, flooded the union headquarters with telegrams asking what to do. Union officials were denied use of railroad telegraphs to reply, the companies ran their trains, and the strike failed utterly.²⁸

Thus the Martinsburg strike broke out because the B&O workers had discovered that they had no alternative but to act on their own

initiative. Not only were their wages being cut, but, as one newspaper reported, the men felt they were "treated just as the rolling stock or locomotives"—squeezed for every drop of profit. Reduced crews were forced to handle extra cars, with lowered pay classifications and no extra pay for overtime.²⁹

A similar spontaneous strike developed that same day in Baltimore in response to the B&O wage cut, but the railroad had simply put strikebreakers on the trains and used local police to disperse the crowds of strikers.³⁰ What made Martinsburg different? The key to the strike, according to historian Robert Bruce, was that "a conventional strike would last only until strikebreakers could be summoned." To succeed, the strikers had to "beat off strikebreakers by force, seize trains, yards, roundhouses."³¹ This was possible in Martinsburg because the people of the town so passionately supported the railroad workers that they collectively resisted the state militia. It was the support of workers elsewhere that would soon allow the strikers to resist the federal troops as well.

On July 19, four days into the strike, 300 federal troops arrived in Martinsburg to quell the "insurrection" and bivouacked in the roundhouse. With militiamen and U.S. soldiers guarding the yards, the company was able to move a few trains loaded with U.S. regulars through the town. When 100 armed strikers tried to stop a train, the sheriff and the militia marched to the scene and arrested the leader. No one in Martinsburg would take out another train, but with the military in control, strikebreakers from Baltimore were able to run freights unimpeded. The strike seemed broken.

But the population of the surrounding area also now rallied behind the railroad workers. Hundreds of unemployed and striking boatmen on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal lay in ambush at Sir John's Run, where they stoned the freight train that had broken the Martinsburg blockade, forced it to stop, and then hid when the U.S. regulars attacked. The movement soon spread into Maryland, where a crowd of boatmen, railroaders, and others swarmed around the train at Cumberland and uncoupled the cars. When the train finally got away, a mob at Keyser, West Virginia, ran it onto a side track and took the crew off by force—while the U.S. troops stood by help-

lessly.³² Just before midnight, the miners of the area met at Piedmont, four miles from Keyser, and resolved to go to Keyser in the morning and help stop trains. Coal miners and others—"a motley crowd, white and black"—halted a train guarded by fifty U.S. regulars after it pulled out of Martinsburg.³³ At Piedmont a handbill was printed warning the B&O that 15,000 miners, the united citizenry of local communities, and "the working classes of every state in the Union" would support the strikers. "Therefore let the clashing of arms be heard ... in view of the rights and in the defense of our families we shall conquer, or we shall die."³⁴

The result was that most of the trains sent west from Martinsburg never even reached Keyser. All but one, which was under heavy military escort, were stopped by a crowd of unemployed rolling-mill men, migrant workers, boatmen, and young boys at Cumberland, Maryland; on the one that went through, a trainman was wounded by a gunshot. When two leaders of the crowd were arrested, a great throng went to the mayor's house, demanded the release of the prisoners, and carried them off on their shoulders.

Faced with the spread of the strike through Maryland, the president of the B&O now persuaded Governor John Carroll of Maryland to call up the National Guard in Baltimore and send it to Cumberland. They did not expect, however, the reaction of Baltimore to the strike. "The working people everywhere are with us," said a leader of the railroad strikers in Baltimore. "They know what it is to bring up a family on ninety cents a day, to live on beans and corn meal week in and week out, to run in debt at the stores until you cannot get trusted any longer, to see the wife breaking down under privation and distress, and the children growing up sharp and fierce like wolves day after day because they don't get enough to eat."³⁵

The bells rang in Baltimore for the militia to assemble just as the factories were letting out for the evening, and a vast crowd assembled as well. At first they cheered the troops, but then severely stoned them as they started to march. The crowd was described as "a rough element eager for disturbance; a proportion of mechanics [workers] either out of work or upon inadequate pay, whose sullen hearts rankled; and muttering and murmuring gangs of boys, almost outlaws,

and ripe for any sort of disturbance."³⁶ As the 250 men of the first regiment marched out, 25 of them were injured by the stoning of the crowd, but this was only a love-tap. The second regiment was unable even to leave its own armory for a time. Then, when the order was given to march anyway, the crowd stoned them so severely that the troops panicked and opened fire. In the bloody march that followed, the militia killed ten and seriously wounded more than twenty of the crowd, but the crowd continued to resist, and one by one the troops dropped out, went home, and changed into civilian clothing. By the time they reached the Baltimore train station, only 59 of the original 120 men remained in line.³⁷ Even after they reached the depot, the remaining troops were unable to leave for Cumberland, for a crowd of about 200 drove away the engineer and firemen of the waiting train and beat back a squad of policemen who tried to restore control.

The militia charged the growing crowd, but were driven back by brickbats and pistol fire. It was at that stage that Governor Carroll, himself bottled up in the depot by the crowd of 15,000, desperately wired President Hayes to send the U.S. Army.

Like the railroad workers, others joined the "insurrection" out of frustration with other means of struggle. Over the previous years they had experimented with one means of resistance after another, each more radical than the last.

The first to prove their failure had been the trade unions. Craft unions had grown rapidly during and after the Civil War and had organized nationally. The number of national unions grew from six in 1864 to about thirty-three in 1870, enrolling perhaps 5 percent of non-farm workers. Railroad workers formed the Brotherhoods of Locomotive Engineers, Railway Conductors, and Firemen. But the depression devastated the unions. By 1877 only about nine of these unions survived. Total membership plummeted from 300,000 in 1870 to 50,000 in 1876.³⁸

Under depression conditions, the unions were simply unable to withstand the organized attack levied by lockouts and blacklisting. Unemployment demonstrations in New York had been ruthlessly broken up by police. Then the first major industrial union in the

United States, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association of the anthracite miners, led a strike that was finally broken by the companies, one of which claimed the conflict had cost it \$4 million. Next the Molly Maguires—a secret organization Irish miners developed to fight the coal operators through terrorist methods—were infiltrated and destroyed by agents from the Pinkerton Detective Agency, which specialized in providing spies, agents provocateurs, and private armed forces for employers combating labor organizations.³⁹ Thus, by the summer of 1877 it had become clear that no single group of workers—whether through peaceful demonstration, tightly-knit trade unions, armed terrorism, or surprise strikes—could stand against the power of the companies, their armed guards, the Pinkertons, and the armed forces of the government.

Indeed, the Great Upheaval had been preceded by a seeming quiescence on the part of workers. The general manager of one railroad wrote on June 21: "The experiment of reducing the salaries has been successfully carried out by all the Roads that have tried it of late, and I have no fear of any trouble with our employees if it is done with a proper show of firmness on our part and they see that they must accept it cheerfully or leave."⁴⁰ The very day the strike was breaking out at Martinsburg, Governor John Hartranft of Pennsylvania was agreeing with his adjutant general that the state was enjoying a calm it had not known for several years.⁴¹ In less than a week, it would be the center of the insurrection.

Three days after Governor Hartranft's assessment, the Pennsylvania Railroad ordered that all freights eastward from Pittsburgh be run as "double-headers"—with two engines and twice as many cars. This meant in effect a speed-up—more work and increased danger of accidents and layoffs. Pennsylvania trainmen were sitting in the Pittsburgh roundhouse listening to a fireman read them news of the strike elsewhere when the order came to take out a "double-header." At the last minute a flagman named Augustus Harris, acting on his own initiative, refused to obey the order. The conductor appealed to the rest of the crew, but they too said no. When the company sent for replacements, twenty-five brakemen and conductors refused to take out the train and were fired on the spot. When the dispatcher finally found

three yard brakemen to take out the train, a crowd of twenty angry strikers would not let the train go through. One of them threw a link at a strikebreaker, whereupon the volunteer yardmen gave up and went away. Said flagman Andrew Hice, "It's a question of bread or blood, and we're going to resist."⁴²

Freight crews joined the strike as their trains came in and were stopped, and a crowd of mill workers, tramps, and boys began to gather at the crossings, preventing freight trains from running while letting passenger trains go through. The company asked the mayor for police, but since the city was nearly bankrupt the force had been cut in half, and only eight men were available. Further, the mayor had been elected by the strong working-class vote of the city, and shared with the city's upper crust a hatred for the Pennsylvania Railroad and its rate discrimination against Pittsburgh. The railroad was given no more than seventeen police, whom it had to pay itself.⁴³

As elsewhere, the Trainmen's Union had nothing to do with the start of the strike. Its top leader, Robert Ammon, had left Pittsburgh to take a job elsewhere, and the president of the Pittsburgh Division didn't even know that trouble was at hand; he slept late that morning, didn't hear about the strike until nearly noon—his first comment was "Impossible!"—and then busied himself persuading his colleagues to go home and keep out of trouble.⁴⁴

The Trainmen's Union did, however, provide a nucleus for a meeting of the strikers and representatives of such groups as the rolling-mill workers. "We're with you," said one rolling-mill man, pledging the railroaders support from the rest of Pittsburgh labor. "We're in the same boat. I heard a reduction of ten percent hinted at in our mill this morning. I won't call employers despots, I won't call them tyrants, but the term capitalists is sort of synonymous and will do as well."⁴⁵ The meeting called on "all workingmen to make common cause with their brethren on the railroad."⁴⁶

In Pittsburgh, railroad officials picked up the ailing sheriff, waited while he gave the crowd a *pro forma* order to disperse, and then persuaded him to appeal for state troops. That night state officials ordered the militia to be called up in Pittsburgh, but only some of the troops arrived. Some were held up by the strikers, while others sim-

ply failed to show up. Two-thirds of one regiment made it; in another regiment not one man appeared.⁴⁷ Nor were the troops reliable. As one officer reported to his superior, "You can place little dependence on the troops of your division; some have thrown down their arms, and others have left, and I fear the situation very much."⁴⁸

Another officer explained why the troops were unreliable.

Meeting an enemy on the field of battle, you go there to kill. The more you kill, and the quicker you do it, the better. But here you had men with fathers and brothers and relatives mingled in the crowd of rioters. The sympathy of the people, the sympathy of the troops, my own sympathy, was with the strikers proper. We all felt that those men were not receiving enough wages.⁴⁹

Indeed, by Saturday morning the militiamen had stacked their arms and were chatting with the crowd, eating hardtack with them, and walking up and down the streets with them, behaving, as a regular army lieutenant put it, "as though they were going to have a party."⁵⁰ "You may be called upon to clear the tracks down there," said a lawyer to a soldier. "They may call on me," the soldier replied, "and they may call pretty damn loud before they will clear the tracks."⁵¹

The Pittsburgh Leader came out with an editorial warning of "The Talk of the Desperate" and purporting to quote a "representative workingman":

This may be the beginning of a great civil war in this country, between labor and capital. It only needs that the strikers ... should boldly attack and rout the troops sent to quell them—and they could easily do it if they tried.... The workingmen everywhere would all join and help ... The laboring people, who mostly constitute the militia, will not take up arms to put down their brethren. Will capital, then, rely on the United States Army? Pshaw! These ten or fifteen thousand available men would be swept from our path like leaves in the whirlwind. The workingmen of this country can capture and hold it if they will only stick together.... Even if so-called law and order should beat them down in blood ... we would, at least, have our revenge on the men who have coined our sweat and muscles into millions for themselves, while they think dip is good enough butter for us.⁵²

All day Friday, the crowds controlled the switches, and the officer commanding the Pittsburgh militia refused to clear the crossing with artillery because of the slaughter that would result. People swarmed aboard passenger trains and rode through the city free of charge.⁵³ The sheriff warned the women and children to leave lest they be hurt when the army came, but the women replied that they were there to urge the men on. "Why are you acting this way, and why is this crowd here?" the sheriff asked one young man who had come to Pittsburgh from Eastern Pennsylvania for the strike. "The Pennsylvania [Road] has two ends," he replied, "one in Philadelphia and one in Pittsburgh. In Philadelphia they have a strong police force, and they're with the railroad. But in Pittsburgh they have a weak force, and it's a mining and manufacturing district, and we can get all the help we want from the laboring elements, and we've determined to make the strike here."

"Are you a railroader?" the sheriff asked.

"No, I'm a laboring man," he replied.⁵⁴

Railroad and National Guard officials, realizing that the local Pittsburgh militia units were completely unreliable, sent for 600 fresh troops from its commercial rival, Philadelphia. A Pittsburgh steel manufacturer came to warn railroad officials not to send the troops out until workingmen were back in their factories. "I think I know the temper of our men pretty well, and you would be wise not to do anything until Monday.... If there's going to be firing, you ought to have at least ten thousand men, and I doubt if even that many could quell the mob that would be brought down on us."⁵⁵

These words were prophetic. But, remembering the 2,000 freight cars and locomotives lying idle in the yards, and the still effective blockade, the railroad official replied, "We must have our property." He looked at his watch and said, "We have now lost an hour and a half's time." He had confidently predicted that "the Philadelphia regiment won't fire over the heads of the mob."⁵⁶ Now the massacre he counted on—and the city's retaliation—was at hand.

As the imported troops marched toward the 28th Street railroad crossing, a crowd of 6,000 gathered, mostly spectators. The troops be-

litia was stoned on Sunday but scattered the crowd by threatening to shoot. The next morning a crowd armed with knives and cudgels stormed into the railroad shops, brushed aside militia guards, and forced shopmen to quit work. They seized the Erie roundhouse and barricaded it. When a militia company marched out to recapture the property, a thousand people blocked it and drove it back. By Monday evening, all the major railroads had given up trying to move anything but local passenger trains out of Buffalo.

Court testimony later gave a good picture of how the strike spread to Reading, Pennsylvania. At a meeting of workers on the Reading Railroad, the chairman suggested that it would not be a bad idea to do what had been done on the B&O. "While it is hot we can keep the ball rolling," someone chimed in. After some discussion, men volunteered to head off incoming trains.⁶⁵

The next day a crowd of 2,000 assembled while twenty-five or fifty men, their faces blackened with coal dust, tore up track, fired trains, and burned a railroad bridge. That evening seven companies of the National Guard arrived. As they marched through a tenement district to clear the tracks, the people of the neighborhood severely stoned them, wounding twenty with brickbats and pistol shots. The soldiers opened fire without orders and killed eleven.⁶⁶

As in Pittsburgh, the population grew furious over the killings. They plundered freight cars, tore up tracks, and broke into an arsenal, taking sixty rifles. The next day the National Guard companies that had conducted the massacre marched down the track together with newly arrived troops; the crowd stoned the former and fraternized with the latter. When the Guard that had conducted the massacre turned menacingly toward the crowd, the new troops announced that they would not fire on the people, turned some of their ammunition over to the crowd, and proclaimed, "If you fire at the mob, we'll fire at you."⁶⁷

Such fraternization between troops and the crowd was common. When the governor sent 170 troops to Newark, Ohio, they were so unpopular that the county commissioners refused to provide their rations. The strikers themselves then volunteered to feed them. By the end of the day, strikers and soldiers were socializing in high good hu-

mor. Similarly, when the governor of New York sent 600 troops to the railroad center of Hornellsville in response to the strike on the Erie, the troops and strikers fraternized, making commanders doubtful of their power to act. When the entire Pennsylvania National Guard was called up in response to the Pittsburgh uprising, a company in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, mutinied and marched through town amid great excitement. In Altoona, a crowd captured a westbound train carrying 500 militiamen. The troops gave up their arms with the best of will and fraternized with the crowd. The crowd refused to let them proceed but was glad to let them go home—which one full company and parts of the others proceeded to do. A Philadelphia militia unit straggling home decided to march to Harrisburg and surrender. They entered jovially, shook hands all around, and gave up their guns to the crowd.

Persuasion worked similarly with would-be strikebreakers. When a volunteer started to take a freight train out of Newark, Ohio, a striking fireman held up his hand, three fingers of which had been cut off by a railroad accident. "This is the man whose place you are taking," shouted another striker. "This is the man who works with a hand and a half to earn a dollar and a half a day, three days in the week, for his wife and children. Are you going to take the bread out of his mouth and theirs?"⁶⁸ The strikebreaker jumped down amid cheers.

By now, the movement was no longer simply a railroad strike. With the battles between soldiers and crowds drawn from all sectors of the working population, it was increasingly perceived as a struggle between workers as a whole and employers as a whole. This was now reflected in the rapid development of general strikes. After the burning of the railroad yards in Pittsburgh, a general strike movement swept through the area. At nearby McKeesport, workers of the National Tube Works gathered and marched all over town to martial music, calling fellow workers from their houses. From the tube works the strike spread first to a rolling mill, then a car works, and then a planing mill. In mid-morning, 1,000 McKeesport strikers marched with a brass band to Andrew Carnegie's great steel works, calling out planing-mill and tin-mill workers as they went. By mid-afternoon, the Carnegie workers and the Braddocks car workers joined the strike. At

Castle Shannon, 500 miners struck. On the South Side, laborers struck at Jones and Laughlin and at the Evans, Dalzell and Co. pipe works.⁶⁹

In Buffalo, New York, crowds roamed the city trying to bring about a general strike. They effectively stopped operations at planing mills, tanneries, car works, a bolt and nut factory, hog yards, coal yards, and canal works. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, factories and shops throughout the city were closed by strikes and crowd action. In Zanesville, Ohio, 300 unemployed men halted construction on a hotel, then moved through town shutting down nearly every factory and foundry and sending horse-cars to the barns. The next morning a meeting of workingmen drew up a schedule of acceptable wages. In Columbus, a crowd growing from 300 to 2,000 went through town inciting a general strike, successfully calling out workers at a rolling mill, pipe works, fire clay works, pot works, and a planing mill. "Shut up or burn up" was the crowd's slogan.⁷⁰ An offshoot of a rally to support the railroad workers in Toledo, Ohio, resolved to call a general strike for a minimum wage of \$1.50 a day. The next morning a large crowd of laborers, grain trimmers, stevedores, and others assembled and created a committee of safety composed of one member from every trade represented in the movement. Three hundred men formed a procession four abreast while a committee called on the management of each factory; workers of those not meeting the committee's demands joined in the strike.

In San Francisco, 7,000 attended a rally called by the Workingmen's Party, a national organization that had been formed the year before by predominantly immigrant followers of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle. The speakers demanded the eight-hour day and government operation of the struck railroads. But the movement soon was swamped by burgeoning hostility to the 50,000 Chinese workers who had been brought to California to build the railroads, many of whom had then been abandoned by the railroad companies and were finding their way into other occupations. At the Workingmen's Party rally someone in the crowd proposed the appointment of a committee to demand the discharge of Chinese workers from the Central Pacific, but the chair refused to entertain the motion. The rally ended peacefully, but in its wake gangs began attacking Chinese laundries

and residences. Several nights of anti-Chinese rioting were finally brought to an end by police and a Committee of Safety.

In Chicago, the Workingmen's Party called a series of mass rallies. At the same time, forty switchmen struck on the Michigan Central Railroad. The switchmen roamed through the railroad property with a crowd of 500 others, including strikers from the East who had ridden in to spread the strike, calling out other workers and closing down those railroads that were still running. Next the crowd called out the workers at the stockyards and several packinghouses. Smaller crowds spread out to broaden the strike; one group, for example, called out 500 planing-mill workers, and with them marched down Canal Street and Blue Island Avenue closing down factories. Crews on several lake vessels struck. With transportation dead, the North Chicago rolling mill and many other industries closed for lack of coke and other supplies.

The next day the strike spread still further: streetcars, wagons, and buggies were stopped; tanneries, stoneworks, clothing factories, lumberyards, brickyards, furniture factories, and a large distillery were closed in response to roving crowds. A day later the crowds forced officials at the stockyards and gasworks to sign promises to raise wages to \$2 a day, while more dock and lumberyard workers struck.⁷¹ In the midst of this burgeoning activity, the Workingmen's Party proclaimed: "Fellow Workers ... Under any circumstances keep quiet until we have given the present crisis a due consideration."⁷²

The general strikes spread even into the South, often starting with black workers and spreading to whites. Texas and Pacific Railroad workers at Marshall, Texas, struck against the 10 percent pay cut. In response, black longshoremen in nearby Galveston struck for and won pay equal to that of their white fellow workers. Fifty black workers marched down the Strand in Galveston, persuading construction men, track layers, and others to strike for \$2 a day. The next day committees circulated around town supporting the strike. White workers joined in. The movement was victorious, and \$2 a day became the standard wage in Galveston. In Louisville, Kentucky, black workers

made the round of sewers under construction, urging a strike for \$1.50 a day. By noon, sewer workers had quit everywhere in town. On Tuesday night a group of 500 stoned the depot of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which was refusing a wage increase for laborers. By Wednesday, most of Louisville's factories were shut down by roving crowds, and Thursday brought further strikes by coopers, textile workers, plow factory workers, brick makers, and cabinet workers.

The day the railroad strike reached East St. Louis, the St. Louis Workingmen's Party marched 500 strong across the river to join a meeting of 1,000 railroad workers and residents. Said one of the speakers: "All you have to do, gentlemen, for you have the numbers, is to unite on one idea—that the workingmen shall rule the country. What man makes, belongs to him, and the workingmen made this country."⁷³ The St. Louis General Strike, the peak of the Great Upheaval, for a time nearly realized that goal.

The railroad workers at that meeting voted for a strike, set up a committee of one man from each railroad, and occupied the Relay Depot as their headquarters. The committee promptly posted General Order No. 1, forbidding freight trains from leaving any yard.

That night, across the river in St. Louis, the Workingmen's Party called a mass meeting, with crowds so large that three separate speakers' stands were set up simultaneously. "The workingmen," said one speaker, "intend now to assert their rights, even if the result is shedding of blood.... They are ready to take up arms at any moment."⁷⁴

The next morning, workers from different shops and plants began to appear at the party headquarters, requesting that committees be sent around to "notify them to stop work and join the other workingmen, that they might have a reason for doing so."⁷⁵ The party began to send such committees around, with unexpected results. The coopers struck, marching from shop to shop with a fife and drum shouting, "Come out, come out! No barrels less than nine cents."⁷⁶ Newsboys, gasworkers, boatmen, and engineers struck as well. Railroadmen arrived from East St. Louis on engines and flatcars they had

commandeered, moving through the yards enforcing General Order No. 1 and closing a wire works.

That day, an "executive committee" formed, based at the Workingmen's Party headquarters, to coordinate the strike. As one historian wrote, "Nobody ever knew who that executive committee really was; it seems to have been a rather loose body composed of whomsoever chanced to come in and take part in its deliberations."⁷⁷

In the evening, 1,500 men, mostly molders and mechanics, armed themselves with lathes and clubs and marched to the evening's rally. To the crowd of 10,000 the first speaker, a cooper, began, "There was a time in the history of France when the poor found themselves oppressed to such an extent that forbearance ceased to be a virtue, and hundreds of heads tumbled into the basket. That time may have arrived with us."⁷⁸ Another speaker called on the workingmen to organize into companies of ten, twenty, and a hundred, to establish patrols to protect property, and to "organize force to meet force." Someone suggested that "the colored men should have a chance." A black steamboatman spoke for the roustabouts and levee workers. He asked the crowd if they would stand behind the levee strikers, regardless of color. "We will!" the crowd shouted back.⁷⁹

The general strike got under way in earnest the next morning. The employees of a beef cannery struck and paraded. The coopers met and discussed their objectives. A force of strikers marched to the levee, where a crowd of steamboatmen and roustabouts "of all colors" forced the captains of boat after boat to sign written promises of 50 percent higher pay.⁸⁰ Finally everyone assembled for the day's great march. Six hundred factory workers marched behind a brass band; a company of railroad strikers came with coupling pins, brake rods, red signal flags, and other "irons and implements emblematic of their calling."⁸¹ Strikers' committees went out ahead to call out those still working, and as the march came by, with a loaf of bread on a flag-staff as its emblem, workers in foundries, bagging companies, flour mills, bakeries, chemical, zinc, and white lead works poured out of their shops and into the crowd. In Carondelet, far on the south side of the city, a similar march developed autonomously, as a crowd of iron workers closed down two zinc works, the Bessemer Steel Works,

and other plants. In East St. Louis there was a parade of women in support of the strike. By sundown, nearly all the manufacturing establishments in the city had been closed. "Business is fairly paralyzed here," said *The Daily Market Reporter*.⁸²

But economic activities did not cease completely; some continued under the control or by permission of the strikers. The British Consul in St. Louis noted how the railroad strikers had "taken the road into their own hands, running the trains and collecting fares"; he added, "It is to be deplored that a large portion of the general public appear to regard such conduct as a legitimate mode of warfare."⁸³ It was now the railroad managers who wanted to stop all traffic. One official stated frankly that by stopping all passenger trains, the companies would cut the strikers off from mail facilities and prevent them from sending committees from one point to another along the lines.⁸⁴ Railroad officials, according to *The St. Louis Times*, saw advantage in stopping passenger trains and thus "incommoding the public so as to produce a revolution in the sentiment which now seems to be in favor of the strikers."⁸⁵ From the strikers' point of view, running non-freights allowed them to coordinate the strike and show their social responsibility.

The strikers had apparently decided to allow the manufacture of bread, for they permitted a flour mill to remain open. When the owner of the Belcher Sugar Refinery applied to the executive committee for permission to operate his plant for forty-eight hours, lest a large quantity of sugar spoil, the committee persuaded the refinery workers to go back to work and sent a guard of 200 men to protect the plant. According to one historian of the strike, "The Belcher episode revealed ... the spectacle of the owner of one of the city's largest industrial enterprises recognizing the *de facto* authority of the Executive Committee."⁸⁶

But the strikers in St. Louis and elsewhere failed to hold what they had conquered. Having shattered the authority of the status quo for a few short days, they faltered and fell back, unsure of what to do. Meanwhile, the forces of law and order—no longer cowering in the face of overwhelming mass force—began to organize. Chicago was typical: President Hayes authorized the use of federal regulars; citi-

zens' patrols were organized ward by ward, using Civil War veterans; 5,000 special police were sworn in, freeing the regular police for action; big employers organized their reliable employees into armed companies, many of which were sworn in as special police. At first the crowd successfully outmaneuvered the police in the street fighting that ensued, but after killing at least eighteen people the police finally gained control of the crowd and thus broke the back of the movement.⁸⁷

Behind them stood the federal government. "This insurrection," said General Winfield Hancock, the commander in charge of all federal troops used in the strike, must be stifled "by all possible means."⁸⁸ Not that the federal troops were strong and reliable. The Army was largely tied down by the rebellion of Nez Perce Indians, led by Chief Joseph. In the words of Lieutenant Philip Sheridan, "The troubles on the Rio Grande border, the Indian outbreak on the western frontier of New Mexico, and the Indian war in the Departments of the Platte and Dakota, have kept the small and inadequate forces in this division in a constant state of activity, almost without rest, night and day."⁸⁹ Most of the enlisted men had not been paid for months, because Congress had refused to pass the Army Appropriations Bill to force the withdrawal of Reconstruction troops from the South. Finally, the Army included many workers driven into military service by unemployment. As one union iron molder in the Army wrote, "It does not follow that a change of dress involves a change of principle."⁹⁰ No mutinies occurred, however, as the 3,000 available federal troops were rushed under direction of the War Department from city to city, wherever the movement seemed to grow out of control. "The strikers," President Hayes noted emphatically in his diary, "have been put down by force."⁹¹ More than 100 of them were killed in the process.

The Great Upheaval was an expression of the new economic and social system in America, just as surely as the cities, railroads, and factories from which it had sprung. The enormous expansion of industry after the Civil War had transformed millions of people who had grown up as farmers, self-employed artisans, and entrepreneurs into

employees, growing thousands of whom were concentrated within each of the new corporate empires. Their work was no longer individual, but collective; they no longer directed their own work, but worked under control of a boss; they no longer controlled the property on which they worked or its fruits, and therefore could not find gainful employment unless someone with property agreed to hire them. The Great Upheaval grew out of workers' intuitive sense that they needed each other, had each other's support, and together were powerful.

This sense of unity was not embodied in any centralized plan or leadership, but in the feelings and action of each participant. "There was no concert of action at the start," the editor of *The Labor Standard* pointed out. "It spread because the workmen of Pittsburgh felt the same oppression that was felt by the workmen of West Virginia and so with the workmen of Chicago and St. Louis."⁹² In Pittsburgh, concludes historian Robert Bruce, "Men like Andrew Hice or Gus Harris or David Davis assumed the lead briefly at one point or another, but only because they happened to be foremost in nerve or vehemence."⁹³ In Newark, Ohio, "no single individual seemed to command the ... strikers. They followed the sense of the meeting, as Quakers might say, on such proposals as one or another of them ... put forward. Yet they proceeded with notable coherence, as though fused by their common adversity."⁹⁴

The Great Upheaval was in the end thoroughly defeated, but the struggle was by no means a total loss. Insofar as it aimed at preventing the continued decline of workers' living standards, it won wage concessions in a number of cases and undoubtedly gave pause to would-be wage-cutters to come. Insofar as it aimed at a workers' seizure of power, its goal was illusory, for workers as yet formed only a minority in a predominantly agrarian and middle-class society. But the power of workers to virtually stop society, to counter the forces of repression, and to organize cooperative action on a vast scale was revealed in the most dramatic form.

It was not only workers who drew lessons from the Great Upheaval. Their opponents began building up their power as well, sym-

bolized by the National Guard armories whose construction began the following year, to contain upheavals yet to come.

Certain periods, wrote historian Irving Bernstein, bear a special quality in American labor history. "There occurred at these times strikes and social upheavals of extraordinary importance, drama, and violence which ripped the cloak of civilized decorum from society, leaving exposed naked class conflict."⁹⁵ Such periods were analyzed before World War I by Rosa Luxemburg and others under the concept of mass strikes. The mass strike, Luxemburg wrote, signifies not just a single act but a whole period of class struggle:

Its use, its effects, its reasons for coming about are in a constant state of flux ... [P]olitical and economic strikes, united and partial strikes, defensive strikes and combat strikes, general strikes of individual sections of industry and general strikes of entire cities, peaceful wage strikes and street battles, uprisings with barricades—all run together and run alongside each other, get in each other's way, overlap each other; a perpetually moving and changing sea of phenomena.⁹⁶

The Great Upheaval was the first—but by no means the last—mass strike in American history.