

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 (<http://railroads.unl.edu/topics/strike.php>)

The Great Railway Strike of 1877 brought the nation's commerce to a screeching halt, and the violence that erupted in Baltimore and Pittsburgh shook the nation. In the aftermath of Civil War and Reconstruction, the great strike seemed especially ominous. Railroad workers led this first national strike in American history, exploiting the very network that was the instrument of national unity. Compare the coverage, especially language, tone, and policy recommendations in the various newspapers.

This article in the July 18, 1877 edition of the *Baltimore Sun* notes the extent of the trouble on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the rioting at Martinsburg, West Virginia, and the militia's ineffectiveness.

THE BALTIMORE AND OHIO R. R. STRIKE.

Extent and Character of the Trouble—The Situation at Baltimore—Rioting at Martinsburg—Two Men Wounded—Disbanding the Militia—The Governor of West Virginia at Grafton, &c.

[Reported for the Baltimore Sun]

The strike on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, which has culminated in some violence, especially at Martinsburg, West Virginia, seems to be confined for the present to the firemen of the freight trains, though they appear to have a number of abettors in the line employes, who, like themselves, come under the ten per cent. reduction order lately issued. The strike is to resist this reduction. It is said that some few of the locomotive engineers are also among the strikers, and that others will join the movement. At present the chief difficulty exists at Baltimore, Martinsburg, Keyser, Grafton and Wheeling, having begun on the first and second divisions, which include Baltimore and Martinsburg. No disturbance is reported at Cumberland. So far as it has proceeded it is estimated that between 400 and 500 men are engaged in the movement. At Baltimore, yesterday, there was no disturbance whatever. A freight train was sent out in the morning and one at night, which passed the disputed ground at Camden Junction without any demonstration. Detachments of the police force, under Deputy Marshal Jacob Frey and Sergeants Hause, Handy and Bruchy, were stationed during the day at Camden Junction, Mount Clare and Riverside station, at Baltimore. The news of the disturbance at Martinsburg caused considerable excitement in the city, and fears were expressed that additional bloodshed might follow. First Vice-President John King, Jr., with Mr. Robert Stewart, superintendent of telegraph, were at Camden Station during the entire day and last night, and dispatches were constantly received and sent.

At 3 o'clock P. M. Hon. John Lee Carroll, Governor of Maryland, arrived in Baltimore and proceeded to Mr. King's office, where he remained for half an hour. The Governor was also at the depot later in the day. Brigadier General James R. Herbert, of the State forces, and one of the police commissioners of Baltimore city, was with Mr. King at the same time as the Governor. It is ascertained that no demand has yet been made upon Gov. Carroll for troops, as no necessity for their use exists in Maryland, but the conference had reference to what might be done should such a contingency arise. Gov. Carroll was non-committal, subsequently merely remarking that a great corporation would naturally be anxious where such large interests were involved, and would like to have military assistance to prevent their works from being stopped, but the question was one to be considered with just regard to the public welfare. He did not anticipate any difficulty in this State.

In view of the situation freight for shipment was in some instances refused to be received at Camden Station. About half-past two o'clock yesterday morning freight engine No. 161 and two cars of its train were overturned near the gas house, foot of Leadenhall street, South Baltimore, by a switch having been opened and locked back by some one unknown. The engine was driven by Samuel Musgrave, engineer, and August Sulkman, fireman. The train was mixed coal and freight cars, and was on its way to Locust Point, running not over five miles an hour. Mr. Musgrave saw that the switch was open and reversed his engine but was unable to stop entirely, and ran on a trestlework leading into the gas house. The engine struck against some coal hoppers and the trestle-work gave way beneath it. The engine and tender fell about eight feet, overturning also two coal hoppers and a freight car of the train. The engineer and fireman escaped with a few bruises.

The trestle and footboard of the engine caught fire from coals falling from the engine. An alarm was sounded from box 134, and the flames were extinguished by the city fire department. The engine and cars were considerable damaged. It is generally believed among officers of the railroad company that the switch was purposely misplaced by some of the strikers. The men, however, indignantly deny this, and denounce in strong terms any one who would be guilty of such an action. They say that the engineer and firemen were greatly liked by their fellows, and they certainly would not have attempted any thing to harm them.

The authority to use the police force out of the city at Camden Junction having been questioned, Deputy Marshal Frey stated that each man had been commissioned specially by the action president of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad under the plain authority conferred in the section 4, chapter 119, laws of Maryland, passed in 1860:

"And be it further enacted, That for the security of life and property on the line of said Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company, and on the branches thereof, and at the depot, shops, and warehouses thereof, it shall and may be lawful for the president of the company, for the time being, to designate and appoint such persons as he may deem necessary to act as policemen, and such persons so by him appointed shall have, on the line of said railroad, and on the branches thereof, and at the depots, shops and warehouses thereof, within the State of Maryland, all police powers which are by the common law devolved upon constables."

Gov. Carroll, upon nearly the same point, was clearly of the opinion that the Baltimore police force could be used in any county of the State by the summons of a magistrate as a posse comitatus, with commissions as special officers.

A meeting of railroad men engaged in and sympathizing with the strike was held last night in the hall corner of Sharp and Hanover Streets, which was entirely filled, there being probably sixty or seventy persons present. The proceedings were private, but the men stated that here were in it engineers and brakemen besides the firemen.

In conversation one of the men said that they expected the engineers would join the strike to-day, and expressed themselves as all solid and determined to continue the strike. They assert that the company will not be able to obtain experienced firemen to take their places, and that some of those put on Monday had no knowledge of the business. They say, too, that they have not been able to have and keep out of debt on the wages hitherto paid, and the reduction would be almost equivalent to starvation. As an average they say that a fireman can only earn from \$20 to \$27 a month, as they do not have all working days, and they have to pay their board along the road and sustain their families here also. It is reported that a meeting was also held in the western section of the city. The men say that the strike will be general all along the line, but they do not apprehend or desire any violence.

Telegraphic reports received at Camden Station give the main facts of the occurrences at Martinsburg yesterday, corresponding with the detailed statement of the special correspondent of The Sun annexed. After the collision between the military and strikers early in the day no attempt was made to start any freight train and last night the strikers were still in possession of the field. Officers of the company state that they have plenty of men to take the places of the strikers as soon as the West Virginia authorities can afford them protection. They still declare that at all points ten men offer their services where one leaves.

At Keyser, W. Va., the terminus of the third division, where large workshops of the company are situated, the firemen struck yesterday and threatened to shoot any of their number who offered to start a freight train, and no trains were sent out last night. At Grafton, terminus of the fourth division, and Parkersburg branch, the firemen struck and forced the new men from the engines. Three or four of the ringleaders were arrested by the authorities of the place. Gov. Henry M. Matthews, of West Virginia, arrived their last night from Wheeling, with the Matthews' Guard of 60 men, and expected to be able to quell the whole disturbance with that force.

At Wheeling there was also a strike and many men objected to leaving on the engines as their lives would not be safe in the present condition of affairs. In the event that Governor Matthews should not be able to put down the disturbance in West Virginia with the small militia force at his disposal, it is supposed that he might call on the President of the United States for aid, but that would rest with his discretion and on the actual existence of an insurrection which does not yet exist.

At Martinsburg the efficiency of the military company was destroyed by the fact that many of the members were railroad men, and were not willing to fire upon their old companions.

The situation last night was grave on both sides. The firemen were elated by the proportions the strike had assumed, and were confident the company would have to yield.

The officers of the railroad were perfectly cool and determined to do without the strikers, and equally confident that the vacant places would be supplied in a short time. There has been no interruption of passenger travel, and all trains ran as usual. It is certain, however, that the strikers at Martinsburg are greatly encouraged by the indecision of the military there, and the ease with which the commander found a way to disband his troops and leave the field.

This July 21, 1877 article from the *Baltimore Sun* gives an account of the Maryland Sixth Infantry Regiment firing into the crowd in Baltimore.

FIRING ON THE CROWD.

It was not the purpose of the officers to fire on the crowd, but after the first recoil, when Company I again moved to the door and were received with another terrific stone assault, the soldiers seemed to lose control of themselves so far as to think only of their own defense. The firing began at the door, and the officers claim that it was without orders from them. Company I, with fixed bayonets, moved on Front street toward Baltimore street and were followed at an interval of about thirty feet by Company F, who were also received with showers of missiles and responded with occasional volleys of musketry. A volley was fired along Fayette street towards the bridge, driving the crowd in that direction. These two companies marched by Front street to Baltimore street, and up Baltimore street to Gay, fighting their way at every step and doing sad execution with the Minnie balls from their rifles. By the time they had passed the corner of Baltimore and Harrison streets, one man [was] dead with a ball through the breast and three

others dangerously wounded, had been carried into Laroque's drug store at that point. The two companies continued up Baltimore street toward the Camden Station. Company B Captain [unclear], by order of Colonel Peters, being the last to leave the armory, marched by way of Front street to Gay street and up Gay to Baltimore street, and thence towards the depot. This route was taken to avoid the hostile crowd. While moving out of the armory Col. Peters directed the companies from the head of the stairs, going with the less experienced officers to the door, and once saying to a youth in one of the companies, who seemed on the point of giving way to his terror, "go forward and fight like a man," pushing him on.

Rutherford B. Hayes Comments on the 1877 Railroad Strike

In this 1877 excerpt from Rutherford B. Hayes' diary, the President notes the positive qualities of the railroad men who are on strike, but sees their actions as detrimental to those who wish to work. He also wonders what actions could be taken to "end or diminish the evil" of strikes.

August 2, 1877. Soldiers' Home. — On our return from our Boston and Harvard trip, the last of June, we came out to the Soldiers' Home for our summer residence. It is an agreeable abode for the hot weather. Our month here has passed away swiftly. Ruddy and Fanny went with Emily and Ruddy Platt to Ohio just as the strike was breaking out, about the 18th of July. They passed through Pittsburgh only about twenty-four hours before the dreadful events of that awful Sunday. Fanny will stay with Laura during the hot weather, either at Columbus or Gambier.

August 5. Sunday. Soldiers' Home. — Brown, a good artist, who painted General Clingman for the Corcoran gallery, finished a bust portrait of me Friday. It is, perhaps, the best yet painted. He painted [it] as a study for a full-length portrait for the Corcoran gallery. Thus far the best portraits have been painted by Witt (several), by — (three), Andrews of Steubenville, one, full-length, and now this, perhaps the best, by [Carl] Brown.

The strikes have been put down by *force*; but now for the *real* remedy. Can't something [be] done by education of the strikers, by judicious control of the capitalists, by wise general policy to end or diminish the evil? The railroad strikers, as a rule, are good men, sober, intelligent, and industrious. The mischiefs are: —

- 1. Strikers prevent men willing to work from doing so.
- 2. They seize and hold the property of their employers.
- 3. The consequent excitement furnishes an opportunity for the dangerous criminal classes to destroy life and property.

Now, "every man has a right, if he sees fit to, to quarrel with his own bread and butter, but he has no right to quarrel with the bread and butter of other people." Every man has a right to determine for himself the value of his own labor, but he has no right to determine for other men the value of their labor. (Not good.)

Every man has a right to refuse to work if the wages don't suit him, but he has no right to prevent others from working if they are suited with the wages.

Every man has a right to refuse to work, but no man has a right to prevent others from working.

Every man has a right to decide for himself the question of wages, but no man has a right to decide that question for other men.

I grow more conservative every day on the question of removals. On *ex parte* statements, I have made mistakes in removing men who, perhaps, ought to have been retained, and in appointing wrong men. Not many removals have been made. Less than by any new Administration since John Q. Adams. But I shall be more cautious in future; make removals only in clear cases, and appoint men only on the best and fullest evidence of fitness.

There are some points on which good men, North and South, are agreed — *generally* are agreed, — for it is not given to men that *all* good men should be agreed on any question relating to public affairs.

- 1. We agree that it is not well that political parties should be formed on sectional lines.
- 2. That it is not well that parties should divide on color lines.
- 3. That we should not divide on any line or principle of division which inevitably leads to (contest) conflict, which can only be settled by the bayonet.

August 8, 1877. *Soldiers' Home*. — A common slang word is "*polafox*" —to deceive, to swindle, or the like. In the Hayne debate I see that Holmes and Barton speak of Polafox (perhaps a character in Don Quixote). Is not this the origin of the word?

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON,
August 11, 1877.

MY DEAR S —:— I have yours. If anything can be done to remove the distress which afflicts laborers, and to stimulate enterprises, I am ready and not afraid to do my share towards it. Let me have your views.

Mr. Smith had written August 8: — "A new phase is given to the financial question by the labor troubles. . . . Capital is more timid than ever, and all enterprise seems to be dead. . . . It is claimed that the doubt as to the financial policy of the Government has much to do with this. The business men generally do not advocate inflation, nor do they favor resumption under the law. They want some sort of stability for a definite period, so they can know what to calculate on. Then they can go into business with confidence. How shall this end be reached? If capital is not employed, what will become of artisans, mechanics, and laborers of all kinds? . . . Here is presented to you a problem of greatest difficulty, involving the happiness of the people."

Sherman wrote to Jones [collector of the port at Chicago, asking his resignation] last Monday. Nothing from him yet. I shall be at White Mountains and Vermont next week—[to be] absent about ten days.

Sincerely,

R. B. Hayes.
HONORABLE WILLIAM H. SMITH