

The great railroad strike of 1877 essay



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United States railroad track total cover increased steadily and was at its peak at the end of the civil war. At the onset of the First World War railroads employed a significant number of Americans but were marred with bitter labor disputes. The most famous strikes of this era involved the railroad. The railroads built coast to coast and had the highest population of employees in the economy second only to agriculture needed large capital investments were therefore huge financial risks.

The first major strike in the United States history was The Great Railroad Strike of 1877. This violent strike shortly paralyzed America's commerce leading to the mobilization of militia by ten state governors to reopen the rail road traffic. This strike was extinguished after a few weeks but it succeeded in setting the stage for subsequent violent strikes such as the Pullman Strike and the Homestead Steel Strike near Pittsburgh among others (Omar 59-61).

This report aims to establish the linkage between the desperate actions by the Railroad companies and the resulting violent protests by the workers angered by these moves that precipitated the emergence of labor movements and labor unions in America. It is apparent and wise to acknowledge that a disgruntled heart will automatically respond in sometimes undiplomatic measures in order to register the inherent disgust to the concerned players. It is with this background information that this report seeks to highlight the ordeals of the workers albeit in a neutral perspective. The activities of the state will also receive equal mention.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 commenced in West Virginia when disgruntled Ohio and Baltimore Railroad workers downed their tools to go on

strike for the reason that the company had reduced workers' wages twice over the previous year. Trains could not run until the workers demand for the revoke of the most recent wages and price cuts.

The northern railroad was forced to cut the salaries and wages of its working in 1877 owing to the Financial Panic of 1873 that brought a lot of uncertainties prompting desperate measures by companies. Other railroads such as the Ohio and the Baltimore followed suit and cut the workers wages by a tenth. The most painful cut came from Pennsylvania Railroad, which is the nation's largest railroad. These moves motivated the commencement of a lasting strike response by workers. Freight trains were blocked giving way to only passenger train traffic near West Virginia and Baltimore by angry workers. In addition, many locomotive firemen and other workers walked away from their work station to join the striking workers.

The huge railroad corporations only aimed to making high profits at the expense of its workers. These corporations took advantage of the bank panic that owing to the financial crunch they had partly created to cut workers wages and jobs since many Americans were wage workers. These selfish actions precipitated and justified the striking actions by the workers.

The announcement by the Pennsylvania Railroad that it would not increase the size of its crew but double the length of all trains bound eastwards from Pittsburgh led to an even angrier response by workers. Railroad employees seized control of the rail yard switches and blocked the movement of all trains in and out of the stations (Dubofsky& Dulles 63-66).

Violent strikes then broke out in Chicago, Kansas, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and St. Louis. State militias were called out by Governors in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia. The troops sent by the governor refused to violently put off the strike since they were in sympathy with their fellow countrymen fighting to revoke their wages and job cuts. This made the task of quelling the strike more difficult since the striking workers took advantage of the situation to do more damage before other dedicated and uncompromising federal troops were sent in to do the job without any fear or favor.

In Maryland, the troops of militia mainly regiments from the National Guard were outnumbered forcing them to shoot onto the crowd that was attacking them killing about ten and injuring a number. The rioters on their part injured several of the militia, destroyed train and engine cars and burned parts of the train station. President Thomas A. Scott was compelled by the actions of the rioters to send reinforcement of federal troops and Marines to restore peace and order in Baltimore Headley (312-316).

Europe experienced an economic depression which spread to the United States after the downfall Jay Cooke and company, an important banking firm in America. This firm was in fact America's top investment banker and was the chief financier of the Northern Pacific Railroad as well an investor in a couple of other railroads. The failure of this company that had handled the largest share of the government's wartime loans was disastrous.

The U. S economy experienced a sharp decline and subsequently collapsed a short while after the demise of Jay Cooke and company. The New York

Stock Exchanged closed for almost a fortnight, factories closed shop and credits dried up completely. A significant number of railroads went bankrupt and numerous businesses failed. Unemployment reached an all time high with job cuts being inevitable. The workers who were lucky to keep their jobs were enlisted for only a six months period with an almost half a cut of their wages, just about a dollar everyday. This time in America's history is popularly referred to as the Panic of 1873.

President Grant and the United States Congress were blamed for poor handling of the economy by the public especially the monetary policy by Grant to contract the supply for money although the real problem had deeper underlying issues.

At the end of the Civil War, America experienced massive unregulated growth mostly in the railroad sector. The government awarded to the railroad companies enormous land grants and subsidies leading to overwhelming building of railroads and overinvestment by banks in the sector that precipitated the economic depression. Critical measures towards economic recovery needed to be undertaken to save the situation that had eaten almost all sectors of the economy.

The hotly contested election of pitting Samuel Tilden and Rutherford Hayes was also a trigger to the chaos. Tilden was the most popular candidate and achieved a clear victory but for the plurality of electoral votes. He failed to garner the majority voted as required in the United States Constitution. The House of Representatives that was supposed to decide the vote failed to reach an agreement. Congress then passed a law forming the electoral

commission comprising fifteen members to produce the elections winner. Alexander Scott brokered a deal that saw Hayes ascend to power much to the disgust of Tilden supporters who were mostly workers. Workers felt cheated and hopeless and therefore joined forces to register their disgust in the chaos.

The causes and the bitter results of the strike were ere attributed on a number of factors by a number of divergent groups: The following are some of the most cited factors: the environment was blamed for allowing a free market and capitalism while there was no social insurance in place German and bohemian groups were blamed for engaging in Xenophobiaa while pretending to be in support of the striking workers, Communist influence on the American mind. The socialist party associated with the Marxist movement in the whole of Europe was connected to communism even though it did not instigate the strike but supported it fully Although not fully developed, activities of trade unions such as the Brotherhood Locomotives firemen and Brotherhood Locomotive Engineers were significantly blamed as well. The idle people-unemployed who were blamed for the most of the disturbance by Governor Shelby.

There is no fully determined account of the economic losses caused by this strike. However it is largely acknowledged that millions were lost in the chaos with the workers losing significantly as well.

Politicians and businessmen felt the brunt of the Great Railroad strike and decided to take measures that would deter the repeat of such actions.

Conspiracy units of militias were established by a number of states as well as the construction of National Guard armories in several cities.

On other hand union organizers made plans for their next encounters. The strikes had demonstrated to the employers and workers the combined power of workers in challenge the status quo. They workers were motivated and were driven by the same spirit and one purpose and were justified in resorting to any means to break down the power of the corporations.”

The unions became more organized leading to the upsurge in the number of strikes in the wake of the great railroads strike. Consequently, business leaders and employers were forced to develop more rigid steps against unions. Despite this fact, the labor movement grew stronger and stronger Headley (312-316).

Public awareness about the grievances of the railroad workers increased after the strike. The B railroad, that used to pay the lowest the lowest wage rate among all major railroads, established the Baltimore and Ohio Employees' Relief Association to provided coverage for sickness, injury from accidents, and a death benefit. Later on, B&O offered pension plan and was the first major employer to offer such a noble provision.

It is paramount to acknowledge that any time men are pushed to their limits they will resort to show solidarity in strikes as witnessed by the solidarity shown by the countless unemployed and frustrated workers during the Great rail strike. The losses in terms of property and lives does not kill the sprit or deter in any way the fighting spirit within the workers to improve their overall welfare both at work and in the general society. The gains of any

strike are hardly noticeable since hard lined positions are taken at the onset by the different players.

Many skeptics were disapproved by the Great railroad strike since workers came together to fight for a common purpose. This was in sharp contrast to their claim that a socialist society was impossible in America since the working class and poor, who are the majority, are so fragmented and would never unite for a common struggle. Moreover, the continuous oppression of the working class by the capitalists shattered the hopes of many people for solidarity. The first steps towards defiance were therefore a long overdue spark that ignited the fires of a revolution. Critics hold that human nature prevents a socialist system from ever being successful. The truth is however that the human nature to strike back against oppression and exploitation when men and women are pushed to the brink is apparent even today. History is rich with examples of true heroism and sacrifices on the part of the working class to their struggle for a better world