Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Conclusion

What did the Great Strike of 1877 achieve? In the short run, probably very little. Some workers did win a repeal of the onerous wage cuts that had triggered the strike in the first place, but most employees were forced to return to work without a pay increase. Individuals singled out as strike leaders often found themselves fired and blacklisted for their participation in the uprising. Several hundred strikers faced arrest, although few of those charged ever went to trial. Only a handful were found guilty, and most received light sentences. In many communities, law enforcement officials, judges, and juries seemed to heed the advice of the *New York Sun* editorial writer, who urged "forbearance and conciliation" in the handling of arrested strikers: "Generosity will win more friends and secure better results than a stern assertion of the letter of the law against men who honestly believed they were contending for the bread of their wives and children" (Foner 205).

Clear limits to a conciliatory approach emerged, however. The strengthening of the police, state militia, and the United States Army to prepare for future conflicts became one of the most enduring legacies of the Great Strike. Within two weeks of the strike, Chicago authorities developed a plan to augment their police force and the Illinois militia. The governor of Pennsylvania completely reorganized the state's National Guard, better equipping it for future outbreaks and dismissing officers who had shown sympathy for the striking workers. Officials in numerous states authorized funding to construct battlemented armories in several large cities.

The Great Strike also set a strong precedent for the use of federal troops in labor disputes. Previously, American presidents had only rarely and reluctantly deployed the army to suppress strikes. Although the federal troops deployed during the summer of 1877 arrived after the most severe rioting had already ended, the scope and scale of the intervention marked an erosion of the prevailing laissez-faire ideology, which called for a hands-off approach by the government in labor disputes. While Congress refused to heed the call for a massive increase in the size of the standing army, presidents would repeatedly authorize the use of army troops over the next several decades to put down strikes of all types, but railway strikes in particular.

Despite repeated appeals for better preparation to meet another labor uprising, few Americans seemed interested in a sustained discussion about the larger forces that had led to the Great Strike in the first place. At a meeting held on July 31, 1877, President Hayes and his cabinet debated the idea of regulating the powerful and increasingly unpopular railroads. "The strikes have been put down *by force*; but now for the real remedy," he wrote several days later in his diary. "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" (Bruce 315). Although the Secretary of the Treasury John Sherman publicly advocated the idea of railroad regulation in a speech he delivered two weeks later, the Hayes administration quickly dropped the idea. Not until a decade later, in the face of mounting public indignation about industry abuses, did the Interstate Commerce Act finally provide limited federal regulation of railroads.

Another tangible long-term effect of the Great Strike was to energize the labor movement. "The railroad strike of 1877 was the tocsin that sounded a ringing message of hope to us all," declared labor leader Samuel Gompers nearly fifty years after the uprising (Bruce 318). The depression that began in 1873 had taken a deep toll on American trade unions, which boasted about 300,000 members earlier in the decade; by 1876 only 50,000 non-farm workers — approximately one out of a hundred — belonged to a trade union. In early 1878, the Knights of Labor held its first national assembly in Reading, Pennsylvania, one of the cities where militia troops had fired on striking workers. Welcoming members regardless of skill level, gender, or (after 1883) race, the Knights of Labor soon experienced phenomenal growth on the strength of a platform that advocated an eight-hour day, the abolition of child labor, and a graduated income tax. At its height in the mid-1880s, the Knights of Labor claimed a membership of more than 700,000 workers, before declining in the aftermath of the Haymarket Riot in 1886, which had led to a general repression of labor unions in the United States. At that point, the American Federation of Labor, an organization of skilled trade unions, took up the union banner. Under Gompers's leadership, the AFL claimed a membership of 1.7 million by 1904.

More than anything else, the Great Strike of 1877 signaled a breach between capital and labor in American society. The second half of the nineteenth century had witnessed the rise of the modern industrial order, complete with production on a massive scale, far-flung systems of distribution, the deskilling of labor, wild fluctuations in the economy, and the unprecedented concentration of wealth and

power. In 1877, America's working class lashed out in response to the wage cuts that had brought many workers to the brink of starvation and protested against the excesses of the new industrial order — long hours, economic instability, brutal exploitation, and the feeling that they served as little more than cogs in a giant machine. The *Washington Capital* captured a sense of the greater meaning when it declared, a month after the Great Strike, 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" (Foner 230).