

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

Introduction

During the summer of 1877, the United States found itself in the grips of its first national strike. In the fourth year of America's deepest depression yet, working men and women, blacks and whites, native-born citizens and newly arrived immigrants joined together to protest the poor wages they received and the miserable conditions under which they were forced to labor. The Great Strike of 1877 began on July 16 with Baltimore and Ohio Railroad employees in Camden Junction, Maryland, and Martinsville, West Virginia, and spread quickly along the rail lines crisscrossing the nation. Over the next two weeks, strikers staged massive protests, stopped rail traffic, and closed factories from New York City to San Francisco and nearly took over the cities of Chicago and St. Louis. In the words of one prominent critic of the strike, "It was everywhere; it was nowhere. . . . It was as if the surrounding seas had swept in upon the land, or some sudden central volcano had raised its ugly head and belched forth burning rivers that coursed forth in every direction."

In many communities, citizens who resented the growing power of the railroads and other large industrial corporations sympathized with the plight of the striking workers. Municipal authorities found themselves quickly overwhelmed by throngs of strikers and their supporters who took to the streets, destroyed company property, and clashed with police. Mayors urged middle- and upper-class citizens to take up arms, governors called out the national guard, and President Hayes sent in federal troops in an attempt to restore order and bring the protests to an end. By the time the strike had been suppressed in early August, more than 100 Americans lay dead, countless others were wounded, and over \$10 million of railroad property had been put to the torch.

This module explores the Great Strike of 1877, which marked a critical episode in U.S. history. Module evidence will help students understand why the strike broke out, how Americans and government officials responded to it, how the press covered the entire episode, and the extent of the Great Strike's impact on contemporary conditions.