

# **The Great Railroad Strike of 1877:**

## **Can One Compromise with an Avalanche?**

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Behind every major strike is an objective or something to protest, and its aftermath is a reflection of the state of labor. No avalanche comes without an imbalance in rocks. In 1877, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and the northeast quarter of the country were torn up (in an occasionally literal manner) by an avalanche of strikes, some violent. Although the initial strike protested a wage cut on the Baltimore & Ohio railroad, it spread across the northeastern quarter of America as workers from all over struck and sometimes rioted. But like an avalanche, the strikes were put down as quickly as they began and leaving rubble. Strangely, though, a strike spanning half of the nation and involving it as well initially made far fewer waves than expected(U.S. History, "*Industrialization and its Discontents: The Great Railroad Strike of 1877*"). And yet out of that rubble, slowly but surely, climbed the labor movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It isn't mentioned in the *History Alive!* textbook (Hart et al.) standard to the eighth grade at Glen Hills Middle School. It deserves more recognition, because it is an early example of workers who struck against an unfair situation during a time when no compromise was available.

The conflict, one over wage in this case, came four years before the strike began, with the Panic of 1873. According to *TeachingHistory.org's* article "Panic of 1873," the Panic stemmed from inflation and an influx of silver. But like many bank panics, it led to an economic downturn lasting the decade. In 1877, J.A. Dacus wrote *Annals of the Great Strikes*, a catalogue of the events with sympathy towards the workers. "Somewhere," says page 16 of *Annals*, discussing the strike's causes, "there must be something radically defective either in the system, or in the manner of its control." On page 21, however, it declares a wage reduction to be "the immediate, potent cause of the Great Strikes."

The initial point of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was to counter a wage cut among workers on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. It was likely that the wage cut was a response to the

economic depression surrounding the Panic, however. From 1873 to 1893, *TeachingHistory.org* reports at least 24% drop country-wide in financial productivity, impacting many industries, especially rapidly-expanding ones like railroads. However, *Annals* also reports on page 21 that most of the wage cuts were among low-tier workers, the kind who had no labor union. While labor unions existed among some branches of railroad workers, the strike came before labor unions stood a chance against railroad companies, because railroads could legally discriminate against union workers until 1898 (Social Welfare History, *Labor History Timeline*). The wages on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which had dropped continuously since the Panic, were reduced by ten percent. As well, working conditions were not ideal, with some men running dangerous “double header” cars with two engines (Britannica.com, *Great Railroad Strike of 1877*). Because of that disturbance in the rocks, the avalanche began. In July of 1877, workers on the very same railroad began to strike (Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* Page 35).

Now, stopping a railroad is a giant task by nature, because railroads were such a giant industry. According to page 19 of David O. Stowell’s *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* trains and their railroads were “the prime mover (and symbol) of capitalist industrialization.” Many who enjoyed the best part of the Gilded Age made their money with railroad companies, and similarly ran the companies, even if only through bribery and alliance (New York State Education Department, *The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 Historical Background*).

Nevertheless, according to *Annals of the Great Strikes*, workers stopped working first at Camden Junction, soon after in Baltimore and Martinsburg, and quickly across the whole railroad. As workers up and down the Baltimore & Ohio and other railroads, caught wind of this strike and joined in, railroad transport shut down. According to Foner’s *The Great Labor Uprising*, workers took control of individual cars and stored them in a nearby roundhouse, guarding them until their salaries were brought back to normal. Here lay the opportunity for compromise, a peaceful

resolution within the day, but it may have been stopped by the overwhelming number of similar strikes in the area. *Annals* reports that not only railroad workers went on strike, but within 10 hours of the initial strike, canners and sawyers stopped their work as well.

Because the workers managed to stop a railroad, they brought attention to their plight almost immediately. Shutting down a railroad meant shutting down the transportation of food, supplies, and sometimes people across the country. Camden Junction, situated in Maryland, sent trains out not only to Baltimore and Washington, D.C., but to most of the Midwest of the United States (Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*). Most famously, a few days after the first strike, news and sympathy spread to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

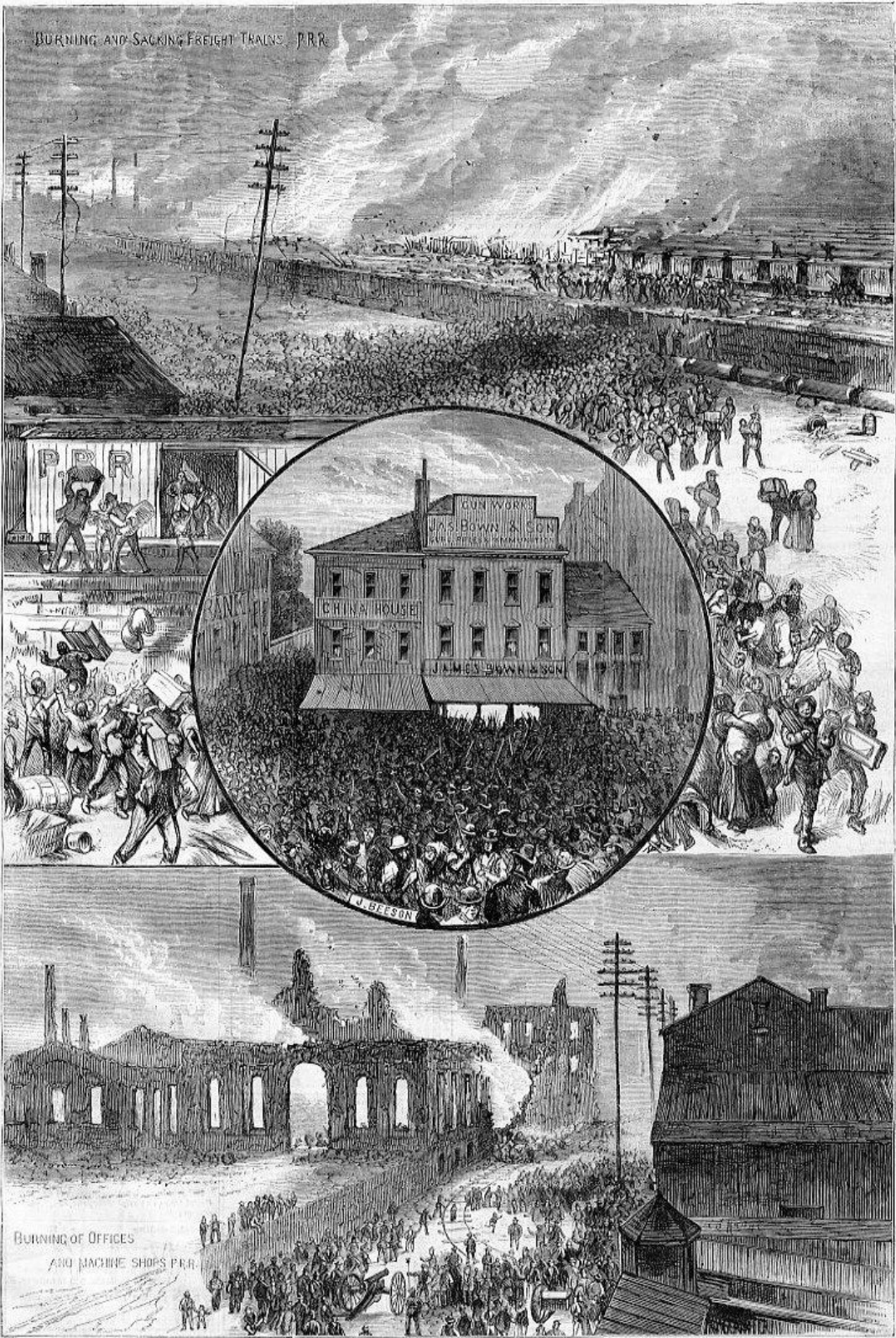
Depictions of violence in the Great Railroad Strike often star Pittsburgh, because it features the most dramatic accounts of violence. According to *1877: Year of Violence*, violence in Pittsburgh occurred not only amongst strikers trying to tear down the railroad, but the whole city, which was sympathetic to the strikers. Robert Bruce, the book's author, explains that railroads were antagonized in Pittsburgh for a long time before the strike. According to *1877*, because of the economic depression (caused by events such as the Panic of 1873), much of the city sympathized with the plight of workers in fear of their own prospective wage cuts. Because the city's disposition towards the strikers, militiamen from nearby Philadelphia were called in to disperse the people, who had halted control of trains. The conflict between the workers and their bosses had come without compromise at a crucial moment, and this was where the strike would become a battle .

*The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia's* article on the confrontation between Pittsburgh and the militia describes the conflict between them as beginning with a few thrown rocks and ending with a few shot bullets and at least thirty (likely far more) dead people. In the greater narrative of the strike, this is where the tide of conflict turns. Because of the relative rarity of

successful and widespread strikes, the inclusion of federal troops in a conflict the government arguably did not begin was an unprecedented one. Government troops were brought in to quiet a rebellion of the people, after an economic depression. The strike began as workers protesting a wage cut and militiamen; people supposed to protect their state killed its people. If the government or military opposes the cause of the workers, plans for a peaceful resolution are promptly defenestrated.

On and after July 21, riots began.

The military force in Pittsburgh became a self-fulfilling prophecy as crowds took up arson and destruction to combat the occupying militia. Contemporary artist John White Alexander drew a series of illustrations entitled "Pittsburgh in the Hands of the Mob" depicting various scenes of crowd risings. In it, Pittsburghers burn down train stations and loot trains.



THE GREAT STRIKE—PITTSBURGH IN THE HANDS OF THE MOB.—DRAWN FROM SKETCHES BY J. W. ALEXANDER AND JACOB BEESON.—[SEE PAGE 626.]

S.V. Albee, a photographer, depicts its aftermath, with torn-up railroad tracks and rubble near-everywhere. Given that strikers may not have committed the destruction of the tracks and were fired after the strike was over, the destruction of railroad tracks (as opposed to the halting of trains) signals the destruction of a job after the strike.



Albee depicts a torn-up railroad track in Pittsburgh. Taken in 1877.

After the turning point, the strike ended up fizzling to the federal government.

Britannica.com's entry on the subject describes strikes in other cities as stemming from the implementation of the National Guard, sent by then-president Rutherford B. Hayes (Ohio History Central, *Great Railroad Strike of 1877*). While the country sympathized with the strikers, the presence of the National Guard eventually overwhelmed any more attempts at resistance. Men went back to work at no greater pay and strikers responsible were fired. The chance at compromise had failed.

But beneath that, the potential lay for an organized labor movement. In the words of the Digital History Reader, in the following year, the Knights of Labor (an organization in support of

unions) held their first national assembly. The Social Welfare History project demonstrates a boom for union creation after 1877. Perhaps the compromise people needed, that of a slight raise, failed. But after falling down so disastrously to federal bullets, the movement of people learned how to get back up.

We ought to care, not only because it isn't talked about nearly enough and because it was the first attempt at compromise that swept the nation. It's a shame that the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 isn't pondered more. It is a story of continuously oppressed workers who found a tipping point, and, trying to regain their lost wages, ended up tumbling off a cliff. Pittsburgh likely got the worst of the fall. But the Great Railroad Strike is an event that spread quickly and died quickly.

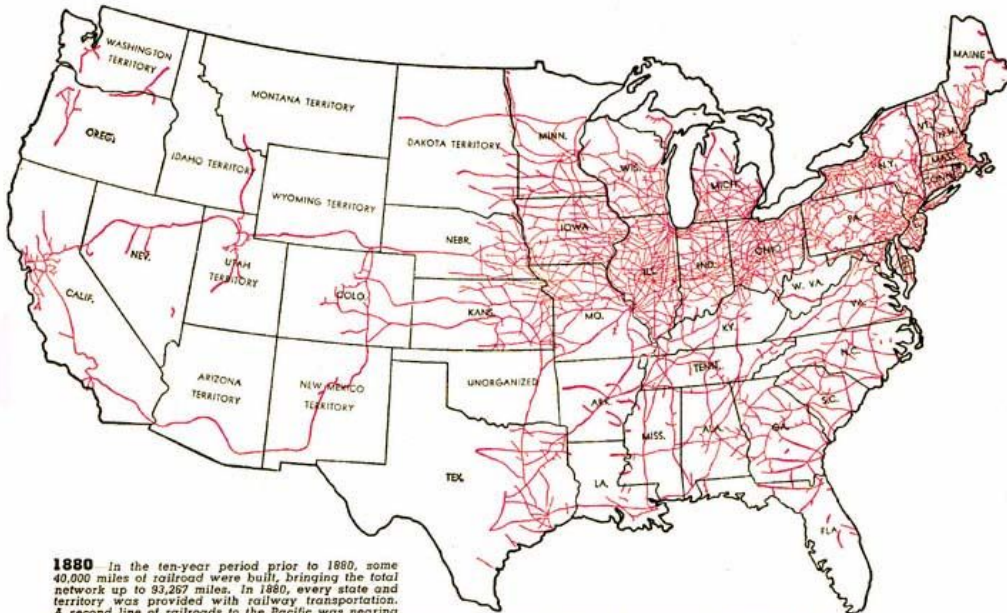
America itself is a country of railroads, crisscrossed coast to coast, but most of them were built in the period before labor unions and railroad companies were *capable* of reaching compromises. In the struggle for workers rights (such as a living wage), the country was on track to protest, even riot against employers. The country was so dependant on its trains, not only to run existing ones, but to run new ones being built, which may have lead to the interference of the National Guard. Between 1870 and 1880, railroads in the Midwest went from a spiderweb to a knit



pattern, attested to by The Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum's maps:



**1870** -Although the War Between the States temporarily halted railway development, many projects were resumed or initiated soon after the close of that conflict. The nation's network increased from 30,626 miles in 1860 to 52,222 miles in 1870. An outstanding development of the decade was the construction of the first railroad to the Pacific Ocean, making it possible for the first time to travel all the way across the country by rail. Railway development in the Mississippi and Missouri valleys was especially notable during this period.



**1880** In the ten-year period prior to 1880, some 40,000 miles of railroad were built, bringing the total network up to 93,267 miles. In 1880, every state and territory was provided with railway transportation. A second line of railroads to the Pacific was nearing completion, and other transcontinental railroads were under construction. Railway development was exerting a powerful influence upon immigration and agricultural and industrial growth throughout the country.

The people who worked on those railroads suffered at the hands of those who ran them, not only from events like the Panic of 1873 but from the decision to cut pay as a result. In the fullness of time, a strike would occur. While it by no means had to be, it was an avalanche that ran

down the mountainside faster than a compromise could be found. While it was over quickly, it should be remembered not only for its speed and destruction, but for the labor movement that clambered from the rubble.

## Bibliography:

Adamczyk, Joseph. "Great Railroad Strike of 1877." *Encyclopedia Britannica*,  
[www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Railroad-Strike-of-1877](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Railroad-Strike-of-1877). Accessed 26 Jan.  
2018.

Here, I obtained my information on double-header trains as well as obtained an overview on the story of the strike.

Alexander, John White. *The Great Strike- Pittsburgh in the hands of the mob*. 1877. *Digital Public Library of America*,  
[dp.la/item/8374dc79c9d31471228f1fbe435b5128?back\\_uri=https%3A%2F%2Fdp.la%2Fsearch%3Futf8%3D%25E2%259C%2593%26q%3Dgreat%2Brailroad%2Bstrike&next=13&previous=11](http://dp.la/item/8374dc79c9d31471228f1fbe435b5128?back_uri=https%3A%2F%2Fdp.la%2Fsearch%3Futf8%3D%25E2%259C%2593%26q%3Dgreat%2Brailroad%2Bstrike&next=13&previous=11).  
Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

This was the illustration I used on page 6 concerning riots in Pittsburgh. While it's probably on the side of the militia, I thought it was necessary to include illustrations from their perspective.

*Annals of the Great Strikes*. Arno & the New York Times, 1969; originally published in 1877.

I initially thought this was a secondary source, so I was surprised to find it was published in 1877.

I read specifically its portions concerning the cause of the strike.

Blanke, David. "Panic of 1873." *Teaching History*, Roy Rosenzweig Center for  
History, [teachinghistory.org/history-content/beyond-the-textbook/24579](http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/beyond-the-textbook/24579).  
Accessed 22 Jan. 2018.

This is a history of the causes and effects of the Great Railroad Strike, which was relatively important considering the lack of need for wage cut had it not existed.

*1877: Year of Violence*. Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1959.

Considering its title, I found my information concerning the violence in Pittsburgh from here.

Foner, Philip S. *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*. Monad Press for the Anchor Foundation, 1977.

I got the best picture concerning how the strike began here, as well as its immediate effects.

Stopping transportation seems slightly more important than typical now that I've read it.

"The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 Historical Background." *New York State Education Department*, [www.nysl.nysed.gov/teacherguides/strike/background.htm](http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/teacherguides/strike/background.htm). Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

Going to the state education department is usually not a bad idea. I was most interested here, in the causes of the strike as well as the control of the railroads over the country.

"Great Railroad Strike of 1877." *Ohio History Central*, Ohio History Connection, [www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Great\\_Railroad\\_Strike\\_of\\_1877](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Great_Railroad_Strike_of_1877).

While, due to the limited nature of this essay, I mostly focused on Pittsburgh, this was one of the first sources I found." It provided the information about Rutherford B. Hayes's involvement as well as told me the story.

Grubbs, Patrick. "Railroad Strike of 1877." *The Encyclopedia of Greater*

*Philadelphia*, Rutgers University, [philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/railroad-strike-of-1877/](http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/railroad-strike-of-1877/). Accessed 19 Jan. 2018

I found this after I heard about troops from Philadelphia, and wanted to find out there perspective. As it turns out, Philadelphia was significantly quieter than Pittsburgh. If there were more riots there, I suspect it would be a foolhardy move to transfer one's militia.

"Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877." *U.S. History*, [www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/us/mod05\\_industry/conclusion.html](http://www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/us/mod05_industry/conclusion.html). Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

I came looking for the aftermath here, and here I found it. I was confused as to how an event as large as the Great Railroad Strike would make so few waves. I learned about the story of the Labor Movement afterwards from this source.

"Labor History Timeline." *Social Welfare History Project*, Virginia Commonwealth University, [socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/labor/labor-history-timeline-1607-1999/](http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/labor/labor-history-timeline-1607-1999/). Accessed 24 Jan. 2018.

Because this came before many successful strikes, I took a look at the conditions surrounding the labor movement, and especially the railroads.

Map Showing the Progressive Development of U.S. Railroads 1870. 1951. *Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum*, [www.cprh.org/Museum/RR\\_Development.html#5](http://www.cprh.org/Museum/RR_Development.html#5). Accessed 23 Jan. 2018.

I found the graphics showing the railroads between 1870 and 1880 here.

Przbylek, Leslie. "Picturing Protest: The Great Railroad Strike of 1877."

*Senator John Heinz History Center in Association with the Smithsonian*

*Institution*, 19 July 2017, [www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/](http://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/)

[western-pennsylvania-history/picturing-protest-great-railroad-strike-1877](http://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/blog/western-pennsylvania-history/picturing-protest-great-railroad-strike-1877).

Accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

It was here I found S.V. Albee's photos. I was unsure whether I should cite Albee himself or the website, so I cited the website.

"Railroad Strike of 1877." *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, Case Western

Reserve University, [case.edu/ech/articles/r/railroad-strike-of-1877/](http://case.edu/ech/articles/r/railroad-strike-of-1877/).

Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

Here is another short story version of the strike. It spread to many states in the north and midwest, where protests were less publicized than specifically in Pittsburgh.

"Railroad Strike of 1877 Historical Marker." *ExplorePAHistory.com*, WITF inc,

[explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-1C1](http://explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=1-A-1C1). Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

This link (related to a Pennsylvania historical marker) explained the events in Pittsburgh.

Stowell, David O. *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877*, U of Chicago P, 1999.

I learned from Stowell's work about the importance of the railroad in everyday life and how it impacted much of the country.