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## Labor Day's radical roots: Rail revolt

by [Fredrick Kunkle](#)



*The cover of Harper's Weekly for Aug. 11, 1877, from a photograph by D. Bendann, depicts the 6th Maryland Regiment fighting its way through Baltimore en route to suppress the rail workers' strike. (Library of Congress)*

It started with a trainload of cattle.

In the summer of 1877, the United States endured an outbreak of labor unrest so widespread and violent that some thought a new American revolution was in the offing, this time tinged with the communist ideals that had just burned through France.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 began in Martinsburg, W. Va., on July 16 when railroad workers responded to yet another pay cut by shutting down the yard. Violent clashes broke out, and from there the trouble raced along the great railroad lines into Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago and St. Louis, building in ferocity as it went.

Nearly two square miles of Pittsburgh went up in flames. Mobs of police and mobs of rioters hunted each other down in Chicago. The strike disrupted the B&O, the Erie and the Pennsylvania railroads, swept up miners, iron workers, longshoremen and canal boatmen, and touched places as far apart as Worcester, Mass., and San Francisco, as far south as Nashville and Galveston, Tex. In some places, the strike erased the color line between white and black workers, at least for a while.

By the time the strike was put down, an estimated 100,000 workers had taken part and about 100 people had died. It was the closest the young nation had come to a nationwide general strike and pointed to the need for a more progressive future.

“[M]any Americans would look back to the summer of 1877 as a turning point,” writes Philip Dray, whose book “There Is Power in a Union” documents U.S. labor history.

The spark came when John W. Garrett, president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, signed off on a 10 percent wage cut. It knocked a brakeman’s daily wage to \$1.35 and was the second such cut in a year. It also came as Americans were still struggling after the Panic of 1873, one of the worst economic skids ever seen.

B&O workers in Baltimore tried to stage a protest but were thwarted by police. So the action moved down the line to Martinsburg, the terminus of a B&O section.

On July 16, a cattle train’s crew walked off the job, leaving the beef to roast in the heat. Then a brakeman led workers in decoupling trains so they couldn’t leave the yard. Police moved in but were driven off. West Virginia Gov. Henry M. Mathews called up the local militia.

The militia took command of the cattle train the next day and got it moving, but they were met by strikers, one of whom threw a switch to divert the train. Shots were exchanged: one striker was killed, and a militia member was wounded. Mathews called on President Rutherford B. Hayes to send federal troops. Hayes complied.

Maj. Gen. W.H. French arrived in Martinsburg with 200 soldiers of the 4th U.S. Artillery and the hope, Dray writes, that a show of bayonets would be enough to restore order. The soldiers, without help from B&O workers, got the trains running.

But the strikers began a low-grade guerrilla conflict. Railroad workers — joined now by miners, iron workers and boatmen from the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal — hid under bridges or behind blind curves, emerging to ambush trains with stones or block the tracks with debris.

Maryland Gov. John Lee Carroll, seeing a neighboring state in turmoil, called out the Maryland National Guard in Baltimore and dispatched them to Cumberland, a key B&O junction not far from Martinsburg. As 5th Regiment guardsmen marched from the city's armory to Camden Station, Baltimore factory workers came into the street to cheer — until word got out about why the soldiers were mobilized. Soon the cheering crowd became a stone-throwing mob.

More troops were summoned, only to make things worse. As the Maryland National Guard's 6th Regiment followed the same path, thousands of protesters, perhaps tens of thousands — “a mob, composed of the worst elements in the city,” as the New York Times put it — let loose with bricks. Some soldiers ran. Others fired into the air. Some fired into the mob, killing 10 people.

By now the rage had traveled the rails to Pittsburgh, the country's industrial heart. Trouble began after the Pennsylvania Railroad ordered that all trains go in “double-headers” — a configuration using two locomotives that forced one crew to do the work of two.

Not in Pittsburgh, the strikers said. Once again, police were powerless to intervene, and local militia stacked arms in sympathy with the strike. Pennsylvania Gov. John F. Hartranft summoned the National Guard from Philadelphia, the Iron City's cross-state rival.

The Philadelphia troops — many Civil War veterans — arrived in a train gouged by stones and chunks of coal dumped on them during the journey. They were heavily armed, with artillery and a Gatling gun. On Saturday, July 21, at the corner of Liberty Avenue and 28th Street, the soldiers clashed with a mob of about 6,000 people. Shots were fired, killing at least 20 people.

“Shot in Cold Blood by the Roughts of Philadelphia,” a local newspaper blared. “The Lexington of Labor Conflict Is at Hand.”

The crazed mob looted gun shops and weaponized freight cars loaded with coal, setting them on fire and rolling them downhill toward the roundhouse where the soldiers had sheltered. By the next morning, the soldiers had no choice but to flee under fire, and their Gatling gun was put to use. A chunk of the city had been put to the torch.

Chicago was next. Leaders of the Workingmen's Party — which was heavily influenced by Marxism and was a forerunner of the Socialist Party — addressed a crowd of 30,000 people in downtown Chicago to form a “Grand Army of Labor,” Dray writes. “Pittsburgh! Pittsburgh! Pittsburgh!” the cry went up. Then violence broke out, and 30 people died.

In St. Louis, a relatively peaceful general strike shut down everything — and for that reason most frightened the leaders of industry, Dray writes. Talk spread of an “American Commune,” and the Workingmen's Party led 10,000 in a parade singing “La Marseillaise.” But martial law was declared, arrests were made, and the Great Strike was on its way to becoming memory.

Afterward, the railroad barons were unrepentant. The B&O's Garrett thought the soldiers should have killed more strikers. Others dismissed the unrest as the doings of foreign subversives.

Politicians instead focused on strengthening the National Guard, often by building armories. But despite losing the strike, laborers had changed perceptions: In growing numbers, Americans came to believe that government should do more for social justice.

“What labor won was a new appreciation of its own strength,” Dray writes, “and of the power of the strike.”

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