

Railroad Strike of 1877

By the spring of 1877 the United States was entering its fourth Year of a depression closely related to a collapse in the railroad industry.

The railroads were the advance agents of industrialism, opening a national market for the first time and themselves providing a market for iron, steel, coal, and the products of related industries. Great wealth had been produced by the railroads in Illinois, and hundreds of thousands of people derived their support directly from the wages paid employees. Illinois led the states in miles of track, and Chicago was the railroad center of the United States.



But by 1877 construction of new track and rolling stock had virtually halted, related industries were sagging, and wages were slashed for railroad workers. In 1877 the Baltimore and Ohio railroads cut wages 10%, which was the second cut in eight months. The railroads also laid off large numbers of workers. Newspapers began to report cases of starvation and suicide attributed directly to unemployment and despondency. Many men became tramps and roamed the state seeking the means of survival.

Premonitions of things to come had caused the state to awaken its military forces from their post-war lethargy. A "Military Code" had been approved by the General Assembly in May, 1877. By its terms the Militia officially became known as the National Guard, and the troops were armed with efficient weapons and trained in modern methods of riot control.

The anticipated labor disturbances began in West Virginia in July and spread westward, gaining in violence and intensity. Action began in Illinois on July 21 in East St. Louis, where resentful workers halted all freight traffic. Three days later on July 24, mobs in Chicago made up largely of non-laboring gangs of ruffians roamed the railroad yards and shut down those of the Baltimore and Ohio and the Illinois Central. In some cases striking workers burned railroad cars, derailed trains, and committed other acts of sabotage. On the same day, strikers halted railroad traffic at Bloomington, Mattoon, Aurora, Effingham, Peoria, Galesburg, Monmouth, Decatur, Urbana, Carbondale, and other railroad centers throughout the state. Coal miners were already out of the pits at Braidwood, LaSalle,



Springfield, Carbondale, and other mining towns.



The mayor of Chicago successfully called for 5000 vigilantes to help restore order; the National Guard and federal troops arrived. Some violence broke out on July 25 between police and the mob, but events reached a peak on the next day. Bloody encounters between police and enraged mobs occurred. The Chicago Times headlined "TERRORS REIGN, THE STREETS OF CHICAGO GIVEN OVER TO HOWLING MOBS OF THIEVES AND CUTTHROATS." Order was restored,

however, at the cost of at least 18 men and boys dead, scores wounded, and millions of dollars of property lost.

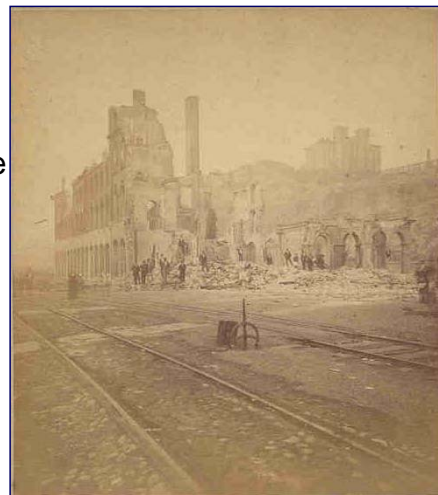
In East St. Louis the strike was put down by combining military force with a blanket injunction ordering workers not to interfere with the operation of railroads and establishing a pattern of suppression used for a half-century. The National Guard had been dispatched to Chicago, Peoria, Galesburg, Decatur, East St. Louis, Braidwood, and LaSalle in the hot July of 1877.

After it was over, Illinoisans explained the upheavals in various ways. Fear of foreigners was a factor, and whenever possible violence was blamed on German and Bohemian agitators. On the other hand, Gov. Shelby Cullom believed that "the vagrant, the willfully idle, was the chief element in all these disturbances." The attitude was that if a man was unemployed, it was because he did not want a job, rather than that there were no jobs available.

Others unrealistically attributed the Great Railroad Strike to Marxist influence and to the leadership of a handful of radicals throughout the state. More believed it was the fault of trade unions, and an anti-union attitude grew throughout Illinois.

While it has been labeled the first national strike, it is quite clear that trade unions were weak, small in numbers, and cannot be held responsible. More realistically, it was called the first national holiday of the slums, as those most directly affected by depression "pressed spontaneous discontent.

Whatever the reason, strikes continued throughout the 19th century as workers and industrialists attempted to adjust to a new era.



Roundhouse Burned by Striking Workers