

Some 100,000 workers had gone on strike, and countless unemployed workers in numerous cities had joined the strikers in protests against intolerable conditions. Farmers, who hated the railroad companies and their extortionate practices, fed the strikers.

More than half the freight on the nation's 75,000 miles of track stopped moving.

More than 100 had died and 1,000 had been jailed, although those imprisoned were not the ones directly responsible for the deaths.

The results of the Great Strike were mixed.

GUNS AND PROMISES

Even as they agreed to some worker demands, bosses were determined to never again allow workers the upper hand. "The railroads made some concessions, rescinded some wage cuts, but also strengthened their 'Coal and Iron Police,'" writes van Ophem. "In several large cities, National Guard armories were constructed, with loopholes for guns."

Working people learned that without strong unions and nationwide organization they could not defeat the alliance of capital and government. Not all drew the same conclusions from this lesson. For some, the experience justified the development of a conservative business unionism that would not challenge the boss or promote social change. For others, it meant organizing the all-inclusive Knights of Labor on a national basis and building labor parties that would reorient government.

America's Industrial Revolution was underway, and with it, born in the blood of men and women who yearned for a better life, a modern labor movement.

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COMMENTARY:

Baltimore's Forgotten Insurrection at Camden Yards Shows How We Are Disconnected from Our History

Today there are no hints of the 1877 rebellion. Nor are there any hints of the major events in the more recent past--such as the uprising of 1968 or the cataclysmic deindustrialization of the 1970s and early 1980s--that have shaped the Baltimore of today.

Rick Mercier

It was just after 6:30 on the evening of Friday, July 20, 1877, when Baltimore's new riot alarm, "Big Sam," was sounded. National Guardsmen reported to the city's Fifth and Sixth Regiment armories and prepared to be sent to Cumberland, where striking B&O railroad workers and their sympathizers had caused a disturbance.

When the Guardsmen from the Sixth Regiment started their march to Camden Station, they were met with "a shower of stones" from a crowd that expressed a general "dissatisfaction with the use of the regiment in behalf of the railroad. There were cries and cheers for the strikers," *The Baltimore Sun* reported.

But things took a sudden turn for the worse. Panic-stricken soldiers began firing on the crowd. When

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Thousands of Baltimoreans protested B&O wage cuts on July 20, 1877. Above, an old engraving shows militiamen (right) readying to quell demonstrators at Camden Yards. At the time, many local papers editorially sympathized with the strikers, but concluded the

the shooting stopped, 10 people lay dead; more than 20 others were wounded. Among the dead was 14-year-old William Haurand, a *Sun* newsboy working to support his mother and family. His "brains [were] blown out on the corner of Baltimore and Holliday streets," the *Sun* reported.

An enraged mob numbering about 15,000 converged on Camden Station and tore up track to prevent the soldiers from leaving the city. Part of the station's passenger platform was demolished, as were several engine cars. By 10 o'clock, the mob had started a fire that consumed the dispatcher's office, several sheds and a passenger car. Firefighters arriving on the scene were prevented from putting out the fire until soldiers and police dispersed the crowd with bullets.

Two days later, the Baltimore insurrection had been subdued with the help of federal troops dispatched by President Hayes. By then, however, other parts of the country were facing working-class revolts.

Signs of a Disconnect from History

People have hailed the historic quality of Oriole Park at Camden Yards ever since it opened in 1992. "The baseball park seems a throwback to a simpler time and place," a *Los Angeles Times* reporter rhapsodized when it was unveiled. The city's assistant planning director at the time told a national news magazine that the ballpark, with the B&O warehouse out in right field, offered "instant history, a linkage with Baltimore you can't escape."

B&O's first responsibility was to its stockholders, not its employees. Protests continued all along the railroad line for three more weeks. In the end, the B&O established a relief organization for its employees, and in 1884 instituted the nation's first pension plan. As a result of the strike, the Workingmen's party was formed; it garnered one-third of the popular vote in the Oct. 1877 mayoral election. Accused by opponents of being "communistic," candidate Joseph Thompson, "Blacksmith of Old Town," rejoined that he believed in respecting law and property, "even to the extent of punishing the Mortons and Gilmans of Society, where they defraud people of millions, as promptly and by the same mode as poor wretches who steal five dollars."

CHICAGO AND ST. LOUIS

The strike continued to spread. Reported *Harper's*, "On the morning of the 25th the strike had reached its height, when hardly a road was running, from the Hudson to the Mississippi, and from Canada to Virginia."

The strike reached Chicago, as workers on the Michigan Central followed the example of the men on the other lines. General Sheridan's calvary, newly recalled from the South, attacked a group of workers there, killing many and wounding many more.

The workers of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad joined the strike in St. Louis, where the Workingmen's Party coordinated a general strike. The Workingmen's Party had several thousand members. At one of its huge meetings, writes Marieke van Ophem, "a black man was the voice for those who worked on the steamboats and levees. He asked: 'Will you stand to us, regardless of color?' The crowd shouted in response: 'We will!'"

Not only did the trains cease running, but breweries, flour mills, foundries and other shops stopped operating as well.

As a result of this working-class solidarity, bosses agreed to pay raises and shorter working hours without a reduction in wages.

Then the military arrived — the U.S. Army and state militia, as well as armed vigilantes in the service of the bosses.

Although there had been no violence, St. Louis came under martial law. Strike leaders were thrown in jail. Bosses canceled the wage increases and the eight-hour day.

'SHOT BACK TO WORK'

Business leaders became better organized, rallying their political allies, who mobilized the might of the military. Tom Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad had recommended giving strikers "a rifle diet for a few days and see how they like that kind of bread;" in the end, the government's ability to inflict violence on strikers and supporters got the trains rolling again. As one worker put it, "We were shot back to work." By early August the strike had collapsed everywhere.

It had been an unforgettable event, and many railroad workers seemed to have been justifiably proud. "Without any organization they had fought with bravery and skill and the country had been behind them," wrote Boyer and Morais. "The strike had been as solid as it was spontaneous. There had been few desertions and few scabs."

and Morais, the strict Tom Scott's Pennsylvania Railroad "had the support even of busi, angry at the company because of extortionate freight rates." The pl local militia sided with the strikers, so the authorities had to a troops from Philadelphia.

When the militiamd and marched out of the station, they were met with the cries of an owd — and, according to Harper's, "a shower of stones." They emptirifles into the crowd, killing 20 men, women and children and w29. "The sight presented after the soldiers ceased firing was si' reported the *New York Herald*; the area "was actually dotted withl and dying."

A newspaper headli"Shot in Cold Blood by the Roughs of Philadelphia. The L of the Labor Conflict at Hand. The Slaughter of Innocents."

As the news reacherolling mills and manufacturing shops, workers came rushing to theVorkers broke into a gun factory and seized rifles and small arm: Boyer and Morais, "Miners and steel workers came pouring in frotskirts of the city and as night fell the immense crowd proved so mo the soldiers that they retreated into the roundhouse." By mHarper's said, some 20,000 surrounded the roundhouse, 5,000 armed.

Workers and soldienged gunfire throughout the night. The workers nearly succeeded in out the troops by sending a blazing oil car hurtling against a nilding.

'A NIGHT OF TE]

A Civil War veteranhe besieged troops told a *New York Herald* reporter that he hame "wild fighting" in that conflict, but "a night of terror such as lasnever experienced before and hope to God I never will again."

The next morning ti evacuated the roundhouse and fought their way out of town. Pipolicemen were among those reportedly taking aim at the strikebreie angry crowd then torched the railroad station, roundhouse, compas and scores of railroad cars. The *New York World* told its readittsburgh was "in the hands of men dominated by the devilish spirimunism."

Meanwhile, on Julydent Hayes had issued a proclamation warning strikers and their syers to disperse within 24 hours. The next day, Pennsylvania's gov'd ordered every regiment in the state to report for duty. Clashes beops and strikers in Reading added to the death toll among workers.

But Oriole Park, as well as the Inner Harbor area in which it is ensconced, is notable for the way it is disconnected from the city's "mobtown," industrial past. There are no hints of the 1877 rebellion at Camden Yards. Nor are there any hints of the major events in the more recent past--such as the uprising of 1968 or the cataclysmic deindustrialization of the 1970s and early 1980s--that have shaped the Baltimore of today.

Set amid an agglomeration of corporate-owned hotels and chain stores, which in turn are surrounded by decaying neighborhoods whose residents face declining opportunities for good jobs, Oriole Park offers a decontextualized, aesthetic experience of the city's blue-collar past.

Source: Sylvia Gillett, "Camden Yards and the Strike of 1877," in *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History* (1991, Temple University Press), edited by Elizabeth Fee, Linda Shopes and Linda Zeidman. (P.S.: 1877 was the year Meadow Mill opened.)

Why Baltimoreans Supported the 1877 Strike

It was no mystery why there was such strong support for the railroad strike, which started in Martinsville, W.Va., on July 16 after the B&O railroad company hiked stockholders' dividends by 10 percent while slashing wages by the same percentage. The country was in the throes of a depression following the stock market collapse of 1873 (partly the result of speculation in railroad stock). Industrial wages had plummeted by 25 percent and about 1 million people had been thrown out of work. Historian Howard Zinn recounts that in Baltimore-- "where all liquid sewage ran through the streets"--139 babies died the first week of July 1877.

A leader of the Baltimore strikers summed up the popular mood for a reporter: "The working people everywhere are with us. They know what it is to bring up a family on ninety cents a day, to live on beans and corn meal week in and week out, to run a debt at the stores until you cannot get trusted any longer, to see the wife breaking down under privation and distress, and the children growing sharp and fierce like wolves day after day because they don't get enough to eat."

The railroad workers, strike and attendant unrest spread quickly from Baltimore to other large cities, including Chicago, New York and Pittsburgh. In St. Louis, working people ruled the city for three days before authorities regained power. A wave of reaction would follow the rebellions. The government built new National Guard Armories all over the nation so that troops could serve as strikebreakers and police the homeland during times of popular insurrection.

In Maryland, Gov. John Carroll taxed Baltimoreans to pay off the costs of deploying troops. He also offered a bit of advice to workers: "No political platforms can be of any use to the working man or furnish him with work. In a free country like ours, the relations of capital and labor must always adjust themselves, and are regulated by conditions which politicians cannot control."

The Myth of Market Forces Continues

Today politicians and pundits routinely repeat a version of the free-market theology articulated by Gov. Carroll: We are told that market forces are natural and immutable, that it is pointless to regulate or resist them.

But even as this brand of fundamentalism was regaining ascendancy in the 1980s, the federal, state, and city governments were intervening in Baltimore's economy to help along market forces for the benefit of powerful private interests. The result of more than \$2 billion in public subsidies and tax breaks has been a "revitalized" downtown that stands as a monument to the appropriation of public funds for creation of private wealth.

And at the jewel of that renovated downtown, Camden Yards, crowds assemble to fulfill their roles as consumers and spectators, rather than as citizens and participants in history. These days the most notable labor-management conflict at the site of the 1877 working-class revolt involves employees who earn millions of dollars a year to hit, throw and chase a ball.



A contemporary artist's rendering of the clash in Baltimore between workers and the Maryland Sixth Regiment during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. The governor had called out the troops on behalf of the railroad company.

STRIKE SPREADS

But the strike was far from over. "Indeed, it was barely begun," reported *Harper's Weekly*. "As fast as the strike was broken in one place it appeared in another," wrote Boyer and Morais. The revolt against the powerful railroad companies spread into western Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Ohio.

Believing that strikers in Cumberland were stopping the eastbound trains from Martinsburg, Maryland's governor ordered out the state militia. Thousands of the jobless and underpaid in Baltimore clearly saw whose interests the governor's proclamation served.

Within a half hour of the call, "a crowd numbering at least 2,000 men, women, and children surrounded the [Maryland Sixth Regiment] armory and loudly expressed their feelings against the military and in favor of the strikers," according to *Harper's Weekly*. The crowd added bricks and stones to the curses hurled against the armory. The police were powerless.

Once the troops emerged for their march to Camden Station, shots were fired — and shots were exchanged. The militia killed at least 10 and wounded many others, among them curious onlookers. The Fifth Regiment was also attacked, although no shots were fired.

BATTLE IN PITTSBURGH

Sympathy for the strikers was even stronger in Pittsburgh. Here, said Boyer

President Hayes withdrew federal troops from the South, ending Reconstruction and its promise of political equality for former slaves. The troops would soon have other uses.

PAY CUTS

The Pennsylvania Railroad had already slashed wages by 10 percent when it cut wages by another 10 percent in June 1877. The following month that railroad company, the nation's largest, announced that the size of all eastbound trains from Pittsburgh would be doubled, without any increase in the size of crews. Angry railroad workers took control of switches and blocked the movement of trains.

Meanwhile, on July 13, the Baltimore & Ohio cut the wages of all workers making more than a dollar a day, also by 10 percent. The company also reduced the workweek to only two or three days, a further pay cut. On July 16 firemen and brakemen refused to work. The company tried to bring on replacements — many experienced men were unemployed because of the depression — but the strikers assembled at Camden Junction, three miles from Baltimore, would not let trains run in any direction.

The word quickly spread to Martinsburg, W. Va., where workers abandoned their trains and prevented others from operating them. The railroad company appealed to the governor, who called out the militia. Militiamen and workers exchanged gunfire. The scabs ran off, the militia withdrew — and the strikers were left in control of their idled trains.

The strike swiftly followed the rails to Wheeling and Parkersburg. As *Harper's Weekly* reported the following month, "Governor Matthews evoked the aid of the national government. President Hayes responded promptly." Federal troops armed with Springfield rifles and Gatling guns arrived in Martinsburg on July 19. The show of force got the trains running, releasing the 13 locomotives and 1,500 freight cars bottled up in Martinsburg.

Such is the evolution of an all-American city.

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"The following were invaluable sources of information on the revolt of 1877," says Mr. Mercier:

Robert Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*.

Sylvia Gillett, "Camden Yards and the Strike of 1877," in *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History*.

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*.

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THE GREAT STRIKE OF 1877



REMEMBERING A WORKER REBELLION

One hundred and twenty-five years ago, American workers exploded with rage — and the rulers of the nation feared the fury of the "terror" from within.

A headline in the *Chicago Times* in 1877 expressed the capitalists' anxious outrage: "Terrors Reign, The Streets of Chicago Given Over to Howling Mobs of Thieves and Cutthroats."

After three years, the nation still suffered through a major economic depression. A strike by railroad workers sparked a coast-to-coast conflagration, as workers driven by despair and desperation battled troops in the streets of major U.S. cities.

The foreign born were widely blamed for the unprecedented, collective expression of rage against economic hardship and injustice.

The ruling elite, badly shaken by the widespread protests, thought a revolution was underway. The *New York Sun* prescribed "a diet of lead for the hungry strikers."

When the fires turned to cold ash and working-class families buried their dead, no one — neither labor nor capital — would be the same again.

If there ever was such a thing, this was no ordinary strike. It was an explosion of "firsts."

The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was the first major strike in an industry that propelled America's industrial revolution. It was the first national

strike, stretching from Atlantic to Pacific. In some cities, especially St. Louis, the struggle became one of the nation's first general strikes. This was the first major strike broken by the U.S. military. Probably in no other strike had so many working people met a violent death at the hands of the authorities.

BORN OF DEPRESSION

The Great Strike was a creature of one of the periodic economic downturns that have caused misery for working people throughout U.S. history.

A bank panic on Sept. 18, 1873 disintegrated into depression. "Weekly the layoffs, wage cuts, strikes, evictions, breadlines and hunger increased," wrote Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais in *Labor's Untold Story*. The winter of 1873-74, especially in large cities, was one of great suffering for the tens of thousands of unemployed workers and their families who were starving or on the brink of starvation.

As the depression stretched into 1874, the unemployed demanded work and unions fought wage cuts. But the depression itself became a powerful weapon in smashing unions.

Millions suffered through months upon months of mounting misery. "By 1877 there were as many as three million unemployed [roughly 27 percent of the working population]," according to Boyer and Morais. "Two-fifths of those employed were working no more than six to seven months a year and less than one-fifth was regularly working. And the wages of those employed had been cut by as much as 45 percent, often to little more than a dollar a day." Newspapers reported cases of starvation and suicide.

FIXED ELECTION

Political crisis seemed to mirror the economic mess. Many Americans in 1877 believed their new president had reached the White House through fraud. Certainly Rutherford B. Hayes, a Republican, was not the man for whom a majority of voters had cast their ballots the previous year. Democrat Samuel Tilden overcame the Ohio governor in the popular vote but 20 disputed electoral votes from Florida and other states threw the election into House of Representatives.

Thomas Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad reached a deal with Hayes: in exchange for a federal bailout of his troubled investment in the Texas and Pacific Railroad, the millionaire industrialist would deliver Congressional votes to Hayes. As a further inducement, the Republicans promised to end Reconstruction, a blatant betrayal of African Americans. Southern Congressmen deserted Tilden, handing the election to Hayes.