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# Primary Source Analysis: The Great Rail Road Strike of 1877

45 points

On a separate piece of paper answer the “Questions to consider for each document

Due 1/15/16

# Allan Pinkerton, "Mendicant Tramps," 1878

The document below comes from the hand of Allen Pinkerton, the founder of a national detective agency widely known for thwarting labor organization and breaking strikes. Just before the Great Strike of 1877, Pinkerton's agency helped destroy the Molly Maguires, an organization of Irish-American coal miners in eastern Pennsylvania that resorted to intimidation, violence, and murder when their legal efforts to better their conditions of work and life were rebuffed. Pinkerton was also a vocal critic of the Great Strike of 1877.

**Questions to Consider**

* According to Pinkerton, why had the number of tramps increased in the 1870s?
* In this passage, does Pinkerton seem to be generally sympathetic to the plight of tramps or critical of their actions?

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While it is undoubtedly true. . .that the "tramp nuisance". . .is of no recent origin, I cannot agree. . .that our hard times have had no appreciable effect in increasing tramps; for I am certain, from personal observation and inquiry, that they have had nearly all to do in causing the country to be so filled with tramps as it is at the present time. The brotherhood of the road in some form has always existed, and years ago it appeared in America. But the great masses of our people were ignorant of the tramp or the tramp's character. The hard times which we have experienced have been universal. They have not only depressed our own industries that thousands of mechanics, clerks, and laboring men have been thrown out of employment here, but the same has been true of all European countries. America is the objective point for all classes who have been driven to the wall by poverty in every other part of the world, and thousands upon thousands have come to us without means of subsistence and without any possibility of securing a livelihood. What other recourse have these people had save to turn tramp, and beg and pilfer to sustain life? It is a pitiable condition of things, but there is not doubt that the majority of those now upon the road are there from necessity, and not from choice. If thousands are here from abroad who have been compelled to turn tramp, how many of our own people have been forced into the same kind of life as the only way left to live outside of the poor-house?

. . .[E]ver since the war, circumstances and conditions have been continually arising to transform respectable people into tramps. To bring this more forcibly to the mind of the reader, I would suggest that this book be closed for a moment, and that the reader then tax his own recollection for instances where men or women within his acquaintance, at one time enjoying a good position of good social standing, have, by some fault of their own, perhaps, but still oftener through ill-fortune, been bereft of their means of support, and, as a consequent, their friends, and in due time became wanderers and vagrants of the road. They may have lingered in the city for a time, but by and by every old friend's face is averted, every acquaintance's back is turned, and with a bitter heart and a discouraging, hopeless prospect beyond, they plunge into the country because they are compelled to, and, in nine cases out of ten, are from that moment tramps. I venture to say that nearly every one who will thus reflect upon the subject can recall several instances of this kind, and on further reflection it will be remembered that they have chiefly occurred since the war.

Source:   
Allen Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1888), 46-48.

# "Ten Per Cent. Reduction," 12 July 1877

**Introduction:**

The depression of 1873 caused widespread suffering across the United States as wages plummeted. Even those who managed to keep their jobs often found their wages cut sharply. Between 1874 and 1877, for example, workers on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad suffered reductions in wages of 50% from what they had earned before the depression began. Wages for B & O firemen dropped from $55 per month to $30, brakemen from $70 to $30, and conductors from $90 to $50. In November 1876, B & O President John W. Garrett had cut wages 10% in order to keep paying investors stock dividends at the 10% level. Seven months later came the announcement reproduced below, and the stage was set for a strike.

## Questions to Consider

* Whose wages were being cut? What reason was given for the wage cuts?
* How did President Garrett hope the workers would respond?
* If you worked for the B & O Railroad, how would you have responded?

## Document

The regular monthly meeting of the board of directors of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad was held at Camden Station yesterday, when the following preamble and resolutions making a reduction of ten per cent. in the salaries of officers and employees of the company were reported by the committee on finance and unanimously adopted:

Whereas the depression in the general business interests of the country continues, thus seriously affecting the usual earnings of railway companies, and rendering a further reduction of expenses necessary; therefore be it

Resolved, That a reduction of ten per cent. be made in the present compensation of all officers and employees, of every grade, in the service of the company, where the amount received exceeds one dollar per day, to take effect after July 16th, instant.

Resolved, That the said reduction shall apply to the Main Stem and branches east of the Ohio river, and to the Trans-Ohio divisions, and that it shall embrace all roads, leased or operated by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company.

Mr. John W. Garrett, president, has issued a circular embodying the above resolutions and adds: "It is hoped and believed that all persons in the service of the company will appreciate the necessity of, and concur cordially in, this action. The board postponed action until some time after its great competitors, the Pennsylvania, New York Central and Hudson River and New York and Erie Companies had made general and similar reductions in pay, with the hope that business would so improve that this necessity would be obviated. In this they have been disappointed. The president, in announcing the decision of the board, takes occasion to express the conviction and expectation that every officer and man in the service, will cheerfully recognize the necessity of the reduction, and earnestly co-operate in every measure of judicious economy necessary to aid in maintaining effectively the usefulness and success of the company."

Source:  
"Ten Per Cent. Reduction," Baltimore Sun (12 Jul 1877), 3.

**"Striking and Striking Back," Reading Daily Eagle (22 Jul 1877), 4.**

## Introduction

The editorial below, which appeared in the Reading [Pennsylvania] Daily Eagle, was equally supportive of the strikers. The day following its publication, troops from the Fourth National Guard arrived in the city and shot into the assembled crowd, killing eleven people and injuring several more.

## Questions to Consider

* How did the author of the editorial characterize the strike?
* Who did the author claim deserved blame for the strike?

## Introduction

The massacre at Pittsburgh provoked an angry response in Pittsburgh and the surrounding communities. The following article appeared in the Pittsburgh Critic one night after the Philadelphia militia fired on strikers and their supporters.

## Document

. . .The peculiarity of this strike is that it is a strike back. The railway employees have had their wages repeatedly reduced until their pay merely covered the bare necessities of living. The last turn of the screw cut into the live flesh, and they rebelled against the extortions and tyranny of the corporations which used their enormous capital for their own ends, regardless of the rights and sufferings of the working people. It was the corporations that struck the first blow, and though noiseless it fell with terrible effect on the heads and homes and hearts of hundreds of laborers. This fact must not be lost sight of in forming a sound judgment of the case.

The corporations have got a terrible advantage over their laborers in times like these. Labor is the under dog. The corporations can dictate their own terms, adopt what rules they please, pay just such wages as they see fit to allow, and the poor laborer can either accept what is graciously given or suffer the consequence, which is virtually starvation. The corporations have the law on their side. They own the Legislatures. They retain the ablest lawyers. They control the most of the newspapers and manufacture public opinion. And if the laborers protest in the only way that is left to them to exert their manhood, and contend for the inherent rights of human nature and American citizenship, they are branded as rioters, met by force of arms, provoked to violence, and then shot dead.

The case is two sided. Papers seem to be all arrayed against the laborers, who are merely striking back, with scarcely a whisper of rebuke to the rich and powerful corporations which were the first and real strikers in the case. The popular sympathy for the laborers is significant. It shows that the popular heart is sound. It is full of warning to the corporations to adopt a wise and kindlier policy in their dealings with their employees. America is a country of working people, and they will not see their fellows wronged and crushed continuously by despotic corporations without a resistance which the latter will repent having provoked.

Source:  
"Striking and Striking Back," Reading Daily Eagle (22 Jul 1877), 4.

**Carson, "Military Blunder — Uncalled-For Bloodshed,"**

## Questions to Consider

* How did Carson argue the strike should have been handled?
* What was his attitude toward the Pennsylvania Railroad Company?
* What was his attitude toward officials who had called in the militia?
* What was the point of his comparison between the lives of managers and workers?
* What did he predict would happen next?

## Document

Even at the moment of this writing, it is not difficult to perceive that a fearful blunder has been committed by the Governor and his ill-timed military advisers. It is impossible for us to conceive that the action of the railroad strikers, taking the worst view of either side of the case, justified the calling out of the military.

Time should have been allowed for a respectful parley between parties; time for the railroad company to properly consider the grievances complained of in the respectful petition of the strikers, and time for railroad employés to act in response. There is tyranny in this country worse than anything ever known in Russia, and it is time we should get at the gist of it.

Strikes are common occurrences, but it appears that it is only when the "great monopoly," the hated company, which discriminates against the interests of Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania, is subjected to one of these strikes, that the military are ordered out, and that, too, without a moment's consideration, as though the Pennsylvania railroad was more important than the peace and order and the lives of half the citizens of the State.

There is no use disguising the matter. The people of this city sympathize with the strikers. They are incensed beyond measure, with the cold, corrupt legislation which has fostered the colder and more corrupt organization known as the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. But we cannot disguise the legal technicalities which appear to brace up that company as against the people. All that we say and care to know is, that a fearful blunder was made by the constituted authorities, who from Governor down to General Pearson and Sheriff Fife, appeared to be only the willing tools of a giant oppressor.

We hold that the reckless haste of General Pearson and Governor Hartranft makes them the prime ringleaders of what promises to be the bloodiest riot with which the Commonwealth has ever been visited. The insane policy of calling Philadelphia troops to this city to quell a domestic quarrel is reprehensible beyond degree. . . .

The railroad magnates claim and protest their inability to carry on their business with profit without the much vexed [wage] reduction. All the employés can say is, we must starve at these wages. Now, granting that on the one side or the other there must be suffering, which, is it equable, should suffer? . . .

The officials can build palaces, the laborer can rent a hovel. The one can roll along in the bustling splendor of a four-in-hand, the other cannot hide the burnt and frost-bitten foot. These railroad authorities can afford salaries that will secure the costliest luxuries and sustain an apish aristocracy, that cannot extent the salary to meet the commonest necessaries of life, to the beggared, starving, crushed laborer and his family. All these magnates will talk of the impossibility of running business without further curtailing the wages of the poor laborer. Arrogant impudence! Unbearable tyranny! Why, it has come to this, that labor is servitude! That a poor man must delude himself to satisfaction at the thought of starving, and respectfully take a pittance called wages. The millions must stand off and die smilingly, and look pleasurably at the outstretched arms of a few like Tom Scott grasping, robbing, paralyzing, crushing our industries, even our lives. Capital has raised itself on the ruins of labor.

The laboring class cannot, will not stand this longer. The war cry has been raised, and has gone far and wide. It will not confine itself to the narrow, nor even long stretch of the railroads. Labor will assert itself. It must have its equality, and that it will, sooner or later, amicably, it is desirable, forcibly, if necessary. Certainly rebellion against lawful authority is never lawful, but the principle that freed our nation from tyranny will free labor from domestic aggression.

Source:  
J. M. Carson, "Military Blunder — Uncalled-For Bloodshed," Pittsburgh Critic, 22 July 1877, reproduced in Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July, 1877 (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, State Printer, 1878), 817-819.

The Great Railroad Strike," New York Times (21 Jul 1877), 4.

## Introduction

As the previous author suggested, most newspapers feared the growing strike and strongly condemned the violence associated with it. This editorial from the New York Times is typical of that response.

## Questions to Consider

* What term did the writer use to describe the strike?
* According to the author, what was the "fatal weakness" of the strikers?
* To what did the author compare the workers' wage demands?
* In his view, to what were the railroad companies entitled?

## Document

It is not certain whether the feebleness of the West Virginia authorities, or a previous understanding among railroad employees, is at the bottom of the present general railroad strike. The disaffection, which is almost a rebellion, is spreading. From the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the trouble has been communicated to the Pittsburg[h] and Fort Wayne Road, and to the Western Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The Western Division of the Erie Railway, with head-quarters at Hornellsville, is also in a state of insurrection, and there are rumors of similar difficulties on the Lake Shore Road. There are indications that the rebellion, if such we may call it, will affect most of the lines of railroad travel between the East and the West, and will seriously impede the movement of freight, which, at this time, is a matter of very great importance. If the strikers have been watching for an opportunity to strike when they could most seriously embarrass the roads, they have certainly hit on the right time. On several lines the passenger business is also interrupted or wholly suspended.

Generally speaking, the interruption of freight and passenger traffic would not be great if the strikers simply quit work without ado. But, as is the case of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the strikers, not content with leaving their posts without warning, oppose the employment of men who would take their places, on any terms. This is a fatal weakness in the cause of the strikers. So far as heard from, in every case of insubordination, the issue is merely a question of wages. The firemen, engineers, and brakemen insist upon being paid a certain rate of wages. If they are not paid at this rate, they will not only quit work, but they will prevent others from taking their places on any terms. This is the tyranny of trades-unionism. There is something about it which is so antagonistic to the proverbial Anglo-Saxon love of fair play that most fair-minded men refuse at once all sympathy with the movement. If these so-called strikers can buy flour cheaper in Hornellsville than they can in Martinsburg, other things being equal, they will buy in Hornellsville. They would think it monstrous is anybody should attempt to compel them to buy dear flour when they can buy cheap flour. But they now, by force of arms, are trying to coerce the railroad managers into employing them at rates which only they, the insurgents, are willing to accept.

Back of this, of course, lie many questions of general management of the railroads which cannot now be discussed. It is said, for example, that some of the men who have struck on the Baltimore and Ohio Road have been earning a sum hardly sufficient for subsistence, and that the proposed reduction would leave them less wages than are adequate for the support of life.  If this is true, it is deplorable, both as regards the condition of the men and the condition of the railroad corporation. It is no less deplorable that men needy enough to accept the reduced terms can now be found. Just now, however, this is not the question. Ours is a free country, and the right of a man to get the best price he can for his work necessarily involves the converse of this proposition: a man or corporation may procure labor at the lowest possible cost. It is a pretty bad state of things when able-bodied men are obliged to work for three or four dollars a week, and pay extra expenses for board out of that. It is worse, however, when any considerable body of men, armed, belligerent, and violent, insist, at the pistol's muzzle, that they shall be paid certain wages, and that no man shall work for less at the peril of his life. As well might a striker go into a grocery store and insist that the dealer sell him provisions at a certain price or have his head shot off.

As at is, the passenger and freight business on several great roads is impeded and confused by unlawful acts of men who insist on being employed at certain wages. The corporation for which they have worked, though it may be ill-managed, and even dishonestly managed, is under no obligation to employ them at any rate of compensation which is not acceptable to both parties. But a strange hallucination seems to have seized the men, who fancy, because they have worked for the corporation, they have a standing claim for employment at wages which they may dictate. The hallucination, unhappily, extends to many unthinking people outside the ranks of the employed. In Baltimore, for example, a regiment marching to the scene of disorder was fired upon by a crowd of sympathizers with the strikes. The fire was returned and several people were killed. This is simply a revolt against law and order. How soon it will end, we cannot tell. That it can only end in one way is absolutely certain. The railroad companies are entitled to the protection of the law in the pursuit of their lawful business. Nobody has a claim upon them for employment. Any interference with them, or with their employe[e]s, must be prevented, whatever it may cost.

Source:  
"The Great Railroad Strike," New York Times (21 Jul 1877), 4.

# "The Great Railroad Riot," 26 July 1877

## Introduction

The editorial that follows, which appeared in the New York Independent, condemned the strike even more strongly. Even its title is suggestive of its critical stance toward the events of the previous ten days.

## Questions to Consider

* According to the author, how did most Americans view the strikers?
* What did the author view as the right of labor? of employers?
* What role did the author see for the government in labor disputes?
* What terms did the author use to describe striking employees who prevented others from taking their place?
* According to the author, how should the government respond to the strike?

## Document

The railway riot which last week began in Martinsburg, in Western Virginia, and for the suppression of which the governor invoked and obtained the aid of the president, increased from that point until at the close of the week it had acquired frightful and horrible dimensions. Whether this is due to a previously-concerted plan among railroad employés or is the effect of sudden and unthinking passion awakened by the first disturbance, we are not able to say; yet the rapid and widespread diffusion of the riotous temper, involving the peace of society in several states, blockading railroads, destroying property, suspending the intercourse of travel and business on some of the great trunk lines of the country, and resulting in desperate fighting and the loss of millions of property and scores of lives, is the fearful fact to which the last few days bear melancholy witness. To all sensible and law-loving persons the spectacle is simply one of horror. They look upon the rioters not only as maniacs, drunk with ignorant passion, and in the end doing themselves more harm than anyone else, but also as criminals that deserve to be punished.

It is an American principle, almost too familiar to need a statement, that every one has the natural and legal right to fix his own price for his labor, and not to work unless he can get it, and peaceably to combine and co-operate with others for this purpose, subject to the limitation that such combination and co-operation shall not be a virtual conspiracy against the general good and safety of society. Nobody in this country disputes this right. It is equally true that every employer, whether an individual or a corporation, has the same right to fix the rate of wages to be paid for labor. If the parties cannot agree as to wages, then the one may innocently refuse to work, and the other may just as innocently refuse to give employment to labor. Each simply does what he has a legal right to do, whether it be wise or not; and with neither, when so doing, should civil society interfere. There may be and almost always will be questions of equity, fair dealing, and good conscience as between the parties; yet they are of such a character as not to admit of legal cognizance or adjustment without infringing upon the freedom of contracts and producing more harm than good. Government cannot wisely undertake the task of regulating the relations of labor and capital, beyond the simple duty of enforcing contracts. England for a long series of years tried the experiment, and finally abandoned it, as hopeless of good and productive of only evil. These principles have among the American people the character of political axioms.

When, however, laborers combine not only to discontinue work, and in this way embarrass their employers, and, if possible, force them to a compliance with their demands, but also by threats and violence, as in the present case, to prevent others from working at wages which they decline, and to wreak their vengeance on their employers, then the question ceases to be one of allowable conflict between capital and labor, and instantly becomes an issue between law and anarchy. Laborers are then criminals in intent and criminals in fact. They are rioters and public enemies, and worse than wild beasts turned loose upon society. They are entitled to no sympathy and for them no apology whatever can be made, whatever may have been their grievances as the sellers of labor. Their resort is to the principle of brute force, without and against the authority of the law; and, so far as they are successful, society is disorganized and reduced to the state of chaos. The passions of hell are unchained, and every man's life and property are at the mercy of a mob.

This being the state of things, then civil society at the time has but one duty to perform, and this duty is absolute and immediate. It must be done at once. Rioters, no matter what may be their alleged grievance, should promptly receive fair warning by the constituted authorities; and, unless they promptly heed it and discontinue their riotous proceedings, the remedy of bullets and bayonets should be applied to them, in no half-way manner, without hesitation and with an energy and force that will be quickly felt. This is the direct and imperative duty. It is stern and merciful at the same time. The difficulty with most riots is that they are tampered with in the outset, and that adequate measures of repression are not used until they get under fearful and destructive headway. Such was the fact at Martinsburg, and still worse at Pittsburgh. If the disturbance there had been summarily crushed, even at the price of life, that probably would have been the end of the whole affair. Let it be well understood that society will shoot rioters down, unhesitatingly; let there be one or two distinct and impressive examples to this effect; and to those who furnish the material for riots will be quite sure to take counsel of their own fears. This is the only kind of logic that they clearly understand. . . .

"**Good Advice to Working Men," New York Times (25 Jul 1877), 3.**

## Introduction

As the strike spread across the United States, it provoked a growing national controversy. While some communities clearly supported the strikers, many feared the disorder and violence that seemed inevitably to accompany their protests. Others, like the laborer who authored this letter to the editor, worried about the long-term economic consequences of the strike.

## Questions to Consider

* What advice did the author offer?
* What justification does he give for his advice?
* How did he respond to those claiming that capital and labor were enemies?

## Document

To the Railroad and Working Men:

Comrades: Stand still where you are, and think before you go further in the troubles around us. An hour's work may cost millions of money and hundreds of lives! All the lives lost will not be on one side only, and the money will come back on the people to be paid for out of the taxes of us all. Powder burns more than one hand when it is used. Don't burn your own hands with it!

These strikes are doing great damage to business, and will cost a great deal of money. Neither capital nor labor can afford to stand such heavy losses, and it is better to work on, knowing that a peaceable and honorable course will gain in the end, than by doing wrong to get an advantage which cannot last.

Keep on the side of the law, and keep the law on your own side!

There is a great deal of talk about capital being the enemy of labor. This is not true. Capital and labor must work together. There capitalist and the laborer are partners in business, and it requires good faith on both sides to make business profitable. Neither can prosper alone.

Beware of men who talk violence, riots, and bloodshed! There are your worst enemies. All the expenses, and losses, and damages, will be paid by the City or State, and only add so much more to your taxes. Every working man who talks about riots is preparing to lay more taxes on his own shoulders. The times are hard now. Will you make them harder? The best way to go is to go to work, keep the wheels moving in all branches of business, and avoid everything that makes an unfriendly feeling with those who have all the risks of the business, both for themselves and you.

Turn away from bad advisers, and above all "don't unchain the tiger!"

Source:  
"Good Advice to Working Men," New York Times (25 Jul 1877), 3.

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