# Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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

50 points (including industrialization questions)

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

Due 2/9 (If not finished in Class)

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# “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.

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?

## 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

* 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…

The railroad magnates claim and protest their inability to carry on their business with profit without the much vexed [wage] reduction. All the employees 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.

## "The Great Railroad Strike," New York Times

## Introduction

This editorial from the New York Times is typical of most newspapers that feared the growing strike and strongly condemned the violence associated with it Questions to Consider

* According to the author, what was the "fatal weakness" of the strikers?

## 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.

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 employees 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.