

Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Evidence 7: B & O Worker's Manifesto, 20 July 1877

A

Introduction

On 15 July 1877, one day before the latest round of wage cuts was to take effect, B & O President Garrett announced that the railroad was again paying its usual 10% dividend to stockholders. The next day, B & O workers at Camden Junction, two miles outside of Baltimore, and Martinsburg, West Virginia, an important relay station, went out on strike. Railroad employees stopped the movement of trains in both locations. Government officials called in the militia and requested federal troops to break the strike. In both communities, the B & O was unpopular, and local citizens quickly joined in the protests. At Camden Junction, a large assembled crowd began throwing stones at arriving militia troops, who responded by firing into the crowd. Eleven bystanders were killed, while many others were wounded; angry protesters responded by torching B & O buildings and trains in the vicinity. That same day, the manifesto reproduced below began appearing in stations along the more than 2,700 miles of the B & O line.

Questions to Consider

- What specific threat did the workers make in the manifesto?
- What justification did it provide for their threats?
- Who did the workers claim would support them?

Document

Strike and live! Bread we must have! Remain and perish! Be it understood, if the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company does not meet the demands of its employees at an early date, the officials will hazard their lives and endanger their property, for we shall run their trains, and locomotives into the river; we shall blow up their bridges; we shall tear up their railroads; we shall consume their shops with fire and ravage their hotels with desperation.

A company that has from time to time so unmercifully cut our wages, and

finally has reduced us to starvation, for such we have, has lost all sympathy. We have humbled ourselves from time to time to unjust demands until our children cry for bread. A company that knows all this, we should ask in the name of high heaven what more do they want—our blood!

They can get our lives. We are willing to sacrifice them, not for the company, but for our rights. Call out your armed hosts if you want them. Shield yourselves if you can, and remember that no foe, however dreaded, can repel us for a moment. Our determination may seem frail, but let it come. They may think our cause is weak. Fifteen thousand noble miners, who have been insulted and put upon by this self same company, are at our backs. The working classes of every State in the Union are in our favor, and we feel confident that the God of the poor and the oppressed of the earth is with us. Therefore let the clashing of arms be heard; let the fiery elements be poured out if they think it right, but in need of our right and defence of our families, we shall conquer or we shall die.

Source:

Labor Standard 3, no. 12 (28 July 1877): 1.