

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

### Evidence 13: "The Great Railroad Riot," 26 July 1877

# A

#### 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 cooperate 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. . . .

Source:

"The Great Railroad Riot," *New York Independent*, 26 July 1877, 16.