A nationwide rebellion brought the United States to a standstill in the summer of 1877. Eighty thousand railroad workers walked out, joined by hundreds of thousands of Americans outraged by the excesses of the railroad companies and the misery of a four-year economic depression. Police, state militia, and federal troops clashed with strikers and sympathizers, leaving over one hundred dead and thousands injured. The Great Uprising inaugurated a new era of conflict over the meaning of America in the industrial age.

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THE WHO BUILT AMERICA? MATERIALS

1877: The Grand Army of Starvation and nine other documentaries are a part of the Who Built America? series, which explores the central role working women and men played in key events and developments of American History. See also the two-volume Who Built America? textbook, Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution, a high school text on the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the WBA? interactive CD-ROM.

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1877: The Grand Army of Starvation— In the summer of 1877 eighty thousand railroad workers went on strike and hundreds of thousands soon followed. The Great Uprising began a new era of conflict about equality in the industrial age.

Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire— The story of the Philippine War (1899-1902) and turn-of-the-century world’s fairs reveal the links between everyday life in the U.S. and the creation of a new expansionist foreign policy.

Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl— Framed by the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike, this program presents a panoramic portrait of immigrant working women in the turn-of-the-century city.

Up South: African-American Migration in the Era of the Great War — Narrated by a Mississippi barber and a sharecropper woman, Up South tells the dramatic story of African-American migration to industrial cities during World War I.
WHAT WAS “THE GREAT STRIKE” OF 1877?

In the summer of 1877, a nationwide upheaval brought the United States to a standstill. 80,000 railroad workers stopped work. Hundreds of thousands of other Americans soon followed: men and women, black and white, native- and foreign-born. It was America’s first national strike; many observers thought a second American Revolution was at hand.

The strike started in Martinsburg, West Virginia, on July 16, and spread along the rail lines. During the next two weeks, strikers took over Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis and exercised new power in scores of smaller cities, such as Hornellsville, New York, and Louisville, Kentucky.

The Great Strike of 1877 marked the end of America’s first century and the beginning of a new age of industrial conflict and change. New industries were bringing wealth to some Americans and hardship to others. By striking and rioting on a massive scale, “ordinary” Americans launched a new debate over the meaning of equality—who should reap the benefits of the industrial age?

Since photographs of the Great Strike are rare (and photography at the time could capture only static poses and not action), 1877: The Grand Army of Starvation relies on wood engravings from magazines and books of the 1870s to illustrate the events. We tinted and occasionally retouched the pictures for this film. The words of strikers in the film come from historical documents such as newspapers and government investigations.

“Police, state militia, and federal troops battled strikers in dozens of cities and towns, leaving more than one hundred dead and thousands wounded.”

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“It was everywhere, it was nowhere. It was as if the surrounding seas had swept in upon the land from every quarter, or some sudden central volcano had . . . belched forth burning rivers that coursed forth in every direction.”

—ALLAN PINKERTON, FOUNDER OF THE PINKERTON NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY, IN STRIKERS, COMMUNISTS, TRAMPS AND DETECTIVES (1878)
When they challenged the railroad companies, the 1877 strikers confronted the largest, most powerful corporations Americans had ever known. A symbol of both progress and peril, the railroad spurred rapid and far-reaching changes in post-Civil War American society.

Supported by government funds, railroad building boomed after the Civil War. There were only 2,000 miles of track in 1850; by 1877 there were nearly 80,000 miles in use. Railroad owners controlled tens of thousands of employees and hundreds of millions of dollars in assets. Companies such as the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad bought coal mines, built iron mills, and consumed whole forests. Larger than some state governments, the railroads pioneered the form of the modern corporation.

Crossing the wilderness, carrying people and freight at unheard of speeds, the railroads changed the ways Americans thought and lived. As distant cities and towns were linked together, Americans increasingly identified themselves as citizens of a whole nation, not merely a single state. For the first time, people in different parts of the country could read the same news and buy the same products. Such basic concepts as time and distance took on new meanings—in 1883, the railroads forced America to adopt its first national time zones.

The railroads accelerated the pace of the Industrial Revolution. New technologies, such as machine building and iron and steel production, advanced to meet the demands of railroad growth. By providing cheaper and faster freight delivery, the railroads helped create (continued on page 3)

“An incident on the plains.—A passenger train on the Pacific Railroad attacked by a war party of Indians.”
What does progress mean? Progress for whom? While the railroad symbolized progress for many people, Native Americans had a different view. As railroads carried new settlers West, the Army forced nomadic Indians onto reservations.

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, July 9, 1870
a new national market. Consumer goods such as clothing and cast-iron stoves manufactured in the East and Midwest could now be sold nationwide.

A few large factories, mainly textile mills, had been operating in New England since the 1820s. Now, as the national market developed, businessmen invested in large factories around the country. Competition for markets grew fierce. “Robber barons” such as Standard Oil’s John D. Rockefeller squeezed out smaller businesses and built corporations that would eventually overshadow even the railroads.

A few businessmen profited greatly from the new economic system. Railroad owners such as Cornelius Vanderbilt and Leland Stanford assembled the largest fortunes America had yet seen. The gaudy display of wealth by the newly rich led Mark Twain to label this the “Gilded Age.”

"The new aristocracy of wealth" (detail).
A cartoon portrays New York Central Railroad owner Cornelius Vanderbilt as a monarch.

New York Daily Graphic
The Industrial Revolution swept American society, in the words of one contemporary, like “a mighty river” in flood. Over the space of a few decades, countless jobs once done by individual craftsmen were integrated into the factory system where labor on a product was divided into smaller tasks performed by many workers. Millions of Americans now faced new conditions of work and life.

Working men and women were crucial to the growth of the railroads and the new industrial system, but they shared in few of its rewards. Railway workers labored an average of 12 hours a day, six days a week. Sometimes they worked 16 to 20 hours without a rest. Their average wage was $2.50 a day.

Railroad work was difficult and dangerous. For example, brakemen coupled train cars by hand, often losing fingers in the process. When trains needed to stop, brakemen had to climb on top of each car to set the brakes. One slip could mean death. In 1889, the first year a count was kept, 2,000 railway workers were killed on the job, and 20,000 were injured.

Men and women in other industrial jobs faced similar hardships. Coal mining, with the constant threat of explosions and collapses, was even more dangerous than railroad work. Factories were cramped, dark, noisy, and hazardous, the machinery without safety features and no regulations regarding toxic materials or unhealthy conditions. Victims of industrial accidents received little or no compensation. For nearly all workers, whether or not they worked in...
the new factories, hours were long and pay low. The quality of housing, education, and health care available to workers was shockingly inferior, even by the poor standards of the era.

The growth of large industry affected all Americans, and to many it seemed to threaten the nation’s basic values. Prior to the Civil War, small farmers and skilled craftsmen represented the essence of American democracy and equality. In the ideal “free labor” system, working for wages was seen as only a temporary step towards owning one’s own workshop or farm. Economic growth seemed to offer every man a chance to become his own boss (women’s opportunities remained much more restricted).

This “republican” vision of a community of productive, independent families inspired many Americans, especially in the North and the growing Midwest. During the Civil War, farmers, workers and businessmen united to protect the “free labor” system against the threat posed by slavery. This free labor coalition built the Republican party and filled the ranks of the Union army.

By the mid-1870s, however, the Republican coalition was splitting apart. Some businessmen supported the growth of large industrial corporations. But many working people (along with some small entrepreneurs) saw giant corporations squeezing out small businesses and workshops, and felt their dreams of independence slipping away. They feared the “free labor” vision was disappearing, meaning they would never escape from the factory or the wage system.

Some farmers and middle-class Americans also felt that their ability to shape their own lives was threatened. The railroads and other national corporations represented a new kind of power—distant, shadowy, irresponsible, and unaccountable.

On the evening of December 29, 1876, the bridge over Ohio’s Ashtabula River collapsed. Eighty-three people died and sixty more were injured after the train crossing the bridge plunged into the river and caught fire. The frequency and escalation of railroad accidents and general failure of the companies to insure passenger safety were persistent issues during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, January, 1877
From 1873 to 1878, America was struck by its first nationwide industrial depression. Unrest caused by unemployment and hunger would fuel the protests of 1877.

The depression began when railroad owner Jay Cooke was found to have issued millions of dollars of worthless stock. Investors panicked and banks closed. The unbalanced, overextended new economy collapsed.

The depression affected Americans across the country. Families from Massachusetts to Missouri watched their children go hungry. Unemployment in New York City approached 25% in the winter of 1874. Nationally, millions were out of work. A Philadelphia worker wrote, “Famine has broken into the home of many of us, and is at the door of all.” Meanwhile, despite the depression, a small class of bankers, industrialists, and railroad owners continued to prosper.

The federal government took no steps to end the depression or alleviate the suffering it caused. Many Americans believed that government “interference” in the economy was wrong. Misrepresenting Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection in evolution, some politicians, religious leaders, and reformers argued that the growing gap between rich and poor was inevitable; following nature’s law, economic law demanded the strong be rewarded and the weak be eliminated. Even working people, influenced by free labor ideals, feared that charity would lead to dependence and moral decay.

After the Civil War, working people built the first large labor movement in America. Shoemakers, coal miners, iron molders, and other skilled workers organized by craft, often on a local basis. But owners fought unionization, and white male trade unionists limited unions’ potential strength by refusing to unite with African Americans, women, and unskilled workers.
During the depression, unions tried to protect members and their families. Using strikes to protest layoffs and wage cuts, they also urged the government to create public employment programs. But owners used blacklists, lockouts, and the police to crush labor. On the eve of the Great Strike, mine operators smashed the miners union by linking it to several brutal murders carried out by a secret Irish organization called the “Mollie Maguires.” Nationwide, total union membership fell from 300,000 in 1870 to 50,000 in 1876.

Membership in the railroad unions also plummeted. After growing in the 1860s, they suffered major defeats in 1873 and 1874. The Brotherhood of Engineers won minor victories, but did not represent most railroad workers. By 1877 no railroad union, including the new “Trainmen’s Union,” could effectively oppose the railroad owners.

“Is the working class oppressed? . . . Is not a dollar a day enough to buy bread? Water costs nothing. A man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live.”
—REV. HENRY WARD BEECHER, 1877
The Great Strike of 1877 was largely spontaneous and without national organization. Unions played a minor part in the upheaval. Backed against the wall by wage cuts and increased work loads, railroad workers stood up for what they felt were their rights as Americans, and in doing so set off a nationwide chain reaction.

The strike was supported by diverse groups. In large cities such as Chicago and Pittsburgh, immigrants, African Americans, and other men and women hurt by the depression denounced the privileges of wealthy residents. In smaller towns, where the “free labor” ideal still flourished, workers, farmers, small shop owners, and even local sheriffs sympathized with workers’ struggle and came out to protest against the giant railroads.

The violence of the strike was shocking even by Gilded Age standards. Many contemporaries and some later historians blamed the violence on “the senseless savagery of the mob.” However, nearly all crowd violence occurred in response to police or militia attacks against strikers. And once aroused, the crowd was not unthinking. Crowd activity had specific targets: the militia (usually sent from other localities), the property of railroads and other big corporations, and local symbols of wealth and privilege.

Once the strike was underway, the socialist Workingmen’s Party of the United States (WPUS) tried to direct it. They were most successful in St. Louis, where a non-violent, interracial general strike shut down factories citywide. But neither the WPUS nor any union could link local strikes together into one unified nationwide uprising.

Railroad owners called the strikers “un-American,” and linked liberty to property rights. Many newspaper editors joined the attack. The National Republican blamed the strike on “Communism—a poison introduced into our social system by European laborers.” Some editors recalled the “Paris Commune” of 1871, when the workers of Paris led a city-wide revolt and set up a new government.

(continued on page 9)
Yet strikers thought they were defending America’s heritage of equality and independence. Pointing to government funding for railroad construction, they claimed owners had betrayed the nation’s trust for the sake of higher profits. “Capital has overridden the Constitution,” said one St. Louis workingman. “Capital has changed liberty into serfdom, and we must fight or die.”

Railroad owners called for the U.S. army to suppress the strike, but they had a hard time winning over Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes, a Civil War hero. Though friendly with railroad owners, Hayes knew his party had long depended on workingmen’s votes. Furthermore, since revolutionary times Americans had seen strong government and a standing army as threats to the rights of free citizens. Many Americans had criticized the growth of the federal government during the Civil War—how would they react if the Army was now used against working people?

Finally Hayes took action. For the first time in American history, the Army was used to break a strike. Hayes’s action not only sealed the fate of the strike, it set a precedent for future industrial disputes: federal troops and court injunctions became powerful weapons for employers.

“The black man has been fought for, and we have given him the ballot... Now why not do something for the workingman? I was through the war, I fought for the big bug capitalists, and many of you have done the same. And what is our reward now? What have the capitalists done for us? The way to bring them to our level is with powder and ball. Powder and Ball!”
—IRISH UNION ARMY VETERAN SPEAKING TO CHICAGO CROWD, 1877

John Donaghy, “Pennsylvania.—The railroad riot in Pittsburgh—The Philadelphia militia firing on the mob, at the Twenty-eighth Street crossing, near the Union Depot of the Pennsylvania Railroad, on Saturday afternoon, July 21st.”

After the militia from Philadelphia fired into the crowd composed of strikers, sympathizers, and the curious, Pittsburgh strikers and residents rioted and destroyed the Pennsylvania Railroad’s trainyards.
By August 5, 1877, a little more than two weeks after it began, the Great Strike had collapsed. Scattered activity continued through August—black female laundry workers struck in Texas, and miners struck throughout Pennsylvania. But working people were not prepared to fight a long battle against the Army. Soon, owners everywhere regained control of the railroads.

What did the strike achieve? In the short term, some workers won minor gains, such as the repeal of wage cuts and oppressive work rules. There were even a few pay raises; the Michigan Central Railroad increased wages by 12 percent. Though some workers lost their jobs, there were surprisingly few firings or criminal prosecutions. Still, most of the wage cuts and layoffs that provoked the strike remained in effect.

Most importantly, the Great Strike had a profound impact on American attitudes about industrial society. After 1877, workers and big businessmen increasingly divided into separate camps. Some newspaper editors lumped workers, immigrants, and communists together as “enemies of progress.” There were calls to reorganize militias, to build armories in cities to house troops and their munitions, and to strengthen the standing army. Meanwhile, working Americans searched for new forms of national organization to counter the growing economic and political power of industrial corporations.

In the years following the Great Strike, workers set up several national unions, each with its own approach. The largest was the Knights of Labor. Founded in secret in 1869, and organizing openly after 1879, the Knights grew rapidly, reaching a membership of over 700,000 by 1886. (continued on page 11)
The Knights built local labor assemblies, which included all workers, regardless of occupation, skill, sex, or race (although excluding Chinese workers). While using strikes and boycotts on issues of pay and working conditions, the Knights also proposed a larger change—a new type of industrial society. They set up worker-owned businesses and called for a “cooperative commonwealth” where everyone could work for and own a share of a small productive enterprise.

Meanwhile, some skilled workers organized national unions representing specific crafts. In 1886 they founded the American Federation of Labor and put cigarmaker Samuel Gompers at its helm. AFL unions tended to concentrate on short-term goals, such as winning more pay for their members.

The final decades of the nineteenth century saw countless battles between capital and labor. At stake was the shape of the emerging industrial society. Who would control the new industries? Who would pay the costs of industrialization, and who would reap its benefits? What would equality and independence mean in the new industrial America? Through the Knights, the AFL, and other organizations, working Americans asserted their right to a voice in one of the most important national debates of the era.

“While we are disorganized, we are only a mob and a rabble; when organized we become a power to be respected. If the working men had been organized in every city the strike would be more successful. . .”

—JOSEPH MCDONNELL, EDITOR, LABOR STANDARD

“Grand demonstration of workingmen, September 5th—The procession passing the reviewing-stand at Union Square,”

In the 1880s, the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor demanded the eight hour work day. The campaign crested on May 1, 1886, when hundreds of thousands of workers across the country held a day-long strike. Chicago police broke up a workers meeting at Haymarket Square and someone threw a bomb, killing several policemen. Albert Parsons, who had spoken to the Chicago crowd in 1877, was one of several leaders falsely accused and later executed for the bombing.

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, September 16, 1882

Election poster.
In the aftermath of the 1877 railroad strike, Workingmen’s, Labor, and Socialist party candidates were elected to local offices in a few large industrial cities.
The Great Strike received wide coverage from the media of its day. Most of the illustrations and cartoons used here and in the 1877 documentary were originally published in weekly illustrated news periodicals such as Harper’s Weekly (daily newspapers carried no illustrations, with the one exception of the short-lived New York Daily Graphic). This rich graphic record should, however, be examined with a critical eye.

In their editorial cartoons illustrated periodicals were critical of both strikers and the railroads, and called for a general return to public order. This New York Daily Graphic cartoon illustrates a common view, showing trade unionists, immigrants, and tramps—joined by Native Americans—as symbols of disorder and opponents of progress.

The press also criticized railroad company excesses, but overall the illustrated newspapers would not tolerate strikes.

But some periodicals depicted The Great Strike in different ways, depending on their readerships. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, whose readers ranged from workers to entrepreneurs, presented a number of perspectives of strike events, often portraying strikers and sympathizers as victims of the railroads and troops.

On the other hand, Harper’s Weekly, with a more genteel readership, depicted the strike in more starkly chaotic terms.

With no photographs of the actual events of 1877, Americans only had access to the engravings of the weekly illustrated press for a source of visual information. A combination of editorial opinion, type of readership, and artist skill and perspective determined the nature of the pictorial news of the day.


