

## Allan Pinkerton Describes the Great Railroad Strike of 1877

The 1870s witnessed a series of strikes that were unprecedented in size and violence. The Depression of 1873 devastated many workers. The 1877 railroad strike, which grew out of workers' increasing discontent, was the country's first nationwide strike. The following document tells the story of this strike from the viewpoint of Allan Pinkerton, one of the founders of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. Among their other duties, Pinkerton detectives were hired by railroads to patrol their trains and set up security systems. After the Civil War, the Pinkertons often served as strikebreakers, as described in the following account of the 1877 strike.

*After ascertaining that such action was of extreme necessity, in June, '77, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company announced a reduction of ten per cent upon the wages of all officers and employees receiving more than one dollar a day the same to take effect on and after the first of July following. This order and the subsequent introduction of what is known as the "double-headers," or freight trains composed of a larger number of cars than the single train, and drawn by two engines, which economized labor, and consequently displaced a few employees, constituted the "grievances" which resulted in the reorganization of the Trainmen's Union, and eventually the strike and its terribly disastrous results.*

*No sooner had these measures for economy in the company's management gone into effect, than the class, and only the class—utterly worthless employees—to, began their secret meetings and their seditious efforts. But it is an established fact that the great body of employees accepted the reduction with good grace. . . . In fact, more than three-fourths of the employees of the road, and immeasurably the most deserving, capable, and valuable class of its employees, had received the reduction in an appreciative and manly way. . . .*

*At noon of Thursday, July 19th, the unexpected blow was struck; and, illustrative of the powerlessness of our State laws and imbecile inefficiency of local authorities, a handful of men, who might have been subdued by a determined corporal's guard, were permitted to precipitate what led to the most deplorable riots in history. . . .*

*So swiftly did this striking fever run through the worst element of the trainmen lingering about, that scarcely an hour had elapsed before a crowd of fully five hundred employees had gathered, and all efforts at starting trains proved ineffectual..*

*Quick work was now made, and a sudden end put to all order and authority. Trains were run upon side-tracks and left there. Then matters on the main tracks were taken in hand, and all trains east or west were stopped. Those coming from the east were allowed to proceed into the city after the situation had been explained and their crews so thoroughly threatened and otherwise frightened that they sacredly promised to "go out," or join the strikers, as soon as Pittsburgh proper had been reached, which under the circumstances they invariably did. . . . At night a strong guard of strikers patrolled the tracks, and complete possession had been taken of the Western Division of the road. . . .*

*The foolish men who had inaugurated the strike, as well as the cowardly officials who had permitted it to grow into these alarming proportions, now helplessly saw that they had unlocked the floodgates of anarchy and riot. From every quarter . . . men with hate in their desperate faces gathered in groups, and in low tones plotted and threatened. The slums and alleys turned out their miserable inhabitants—with faces of brutes, women with faces of demons. Every fresh accession of communistic laborers and communistic loafers was welcomed with an intelligence only begot of murderous hate in one common purpose; . . . that ignorant envy always gives to insolent outlawry. . . .*

*The streets filled up with surging masses, the morning lengthened, and an ominous dread came down upon the city. Business men who had been loud in their denunciation of the Pennsylvania Railroad now shrank within their offices and stores, regretting the criminal "sympathy" they had extended to a handful of lawbreakers, out of a sickly, mawkish sentimentality, but all too late realized that the coming carnival of riot could not be checked. . . .*

*At eight o'clock on the previous evening, Major-General R. M. Brinton, of Philadelphia, . . . received telegraphic orders . . . to move his entire division, cavalry and artillery dismounted, to the scene of trouble. . . . Nearly one thousand men were gathered together. . . .*

*A determined set of men had met a desperate set of men. For fully five minutes the soldiers slowly advanced, making but little progress in their work. The thousands of rioters behind, with yells and jeers, pushed and jammed those in front down*

*upon the troops, who stood like a wall for a time, never uttering a word in response to the diabolical threats of their opponents, but using all their force to keep the fiends at bay. . . . But now a striker here and a ruffian there began to grasp the guns and lay hold of the troops roughly. This was the signal for like action all along the mob's front. At this the troops were compelled to gather back, bring their arms to a charge, and use their bayonets, when a few of the rioters were wounded. In another instant, over to the left from between the ears, a pistol-shot was heard. This was followed like a flash by the discharge of other pistol-shots and showers of stones and pieces of coal from the now infuriated mob. . . .*

*Right and left the wounded soldiers began to fall, and some one poor fellow, goaded beyond forbearance, discharged his musket. In a moment more the firing became general. The mob as hotly replied with pistols, muskets taken from the Pittsburgh regiments on the hill, and every manner of missile that could be lifted or hurled. But the Philadelphia troops knew how to shoot as well as to drill. The effect of their repeated volleys was terrible. The mob retreated aghast, rallied, retreated, rallied again, and through and through their numbers the deadly bullets mowed wrinkled and crumpled swaths, until upon the hill and along the tracks the wild and frenzied rioters precipitately withdrew. . . . But they left only to return in the blackness of the night with fury and forces increased, to bring, with them arson and flame, destruction and ruin, until the city of Pittsburgh should for a time be like some doubly accursed spot to undergo the scourge of myriads of demons from the regions infernal.*

*. . . Within five days from the breaking out of the riot, Governor Hartranft . . . had brought together nearly six thousand troops that were admirably located at different points within the city and along the line of the Pennsylvania road, in commanding positions upon the hills, and at points where the lawless elements would be most likely to gather. . . .*

*The strike really ended Sunday, July 29th, when the first freight train, after the abandonment of work by the trainmen, was moved. This train was put in motion on the Pennsylvania Central road, and successfully sent to its destination. No person would have imagined a strike had existed, save for the murmurs of a few disaffected men. . . .*

*So ended the strike at Pittsburgh. What had seemed a revolution resulted in a most imbecile fiasco.*