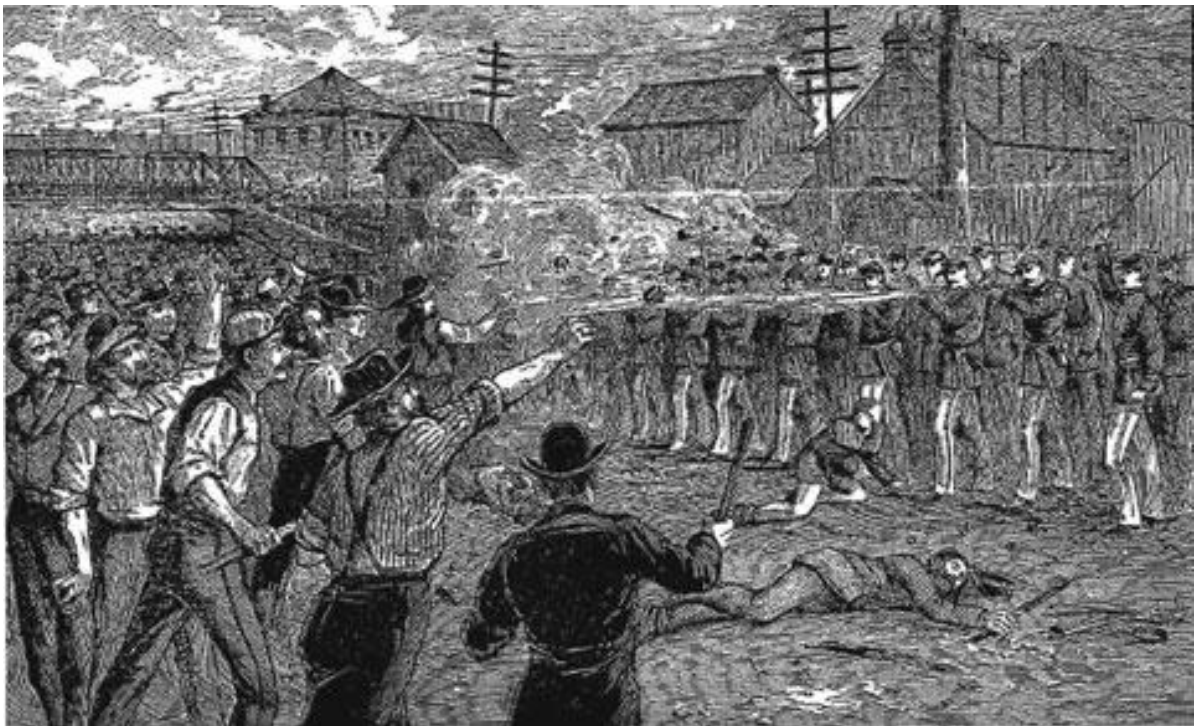


Class Conflict and Workers' Self Activity on the Railroads: 1874-1895

Self Negation



ABSTRACT: The years 1874 through 1895 saw intense class struggle, much of it centering on the railroad industry. This struggle often took the form of working class self-activity, action organized by workers from the bottom up and carried out independently. Railroad workers did not wait for instructions or guidance from labor leaders, who often advised caution and conciliation with capitalists, but took action themselves. In doing so, boundaries between different occupational groups became less important, often leading to greater unity. This unity sometimes extended beyond the railroad industry and even the traditional working population. Women, youths, and unemployed men stood in solidarity with railroad workers. In a few cases, black and white workers worked together to further the strikes. This self-activity is significant because it led to such broad-based solidarity, but also because recognizing its full extent and importance has implications for how scholars look at unions and the labor movement in general.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse around “the labor movement” often centers on unions and their leaders; the A.F.L., the Teamsters, Samuel Gompers and Walter Reuther. It is commonly assumed that when strikes occur they are “called” by labor leaders. In this sort of discourse, bureaucratic institutions are the main actors which enter into the class struggle on the workers’ side, and the workers wage their struggles primarily, if not exclusively, through such institutions. It was not always so. Complaining of the anti-union tendencies of railroad managers, one late nineteenth century labor leader could not understand why they were

prejudiced against the Brotherhood...If they expect to overcome all liability of having a “strike” by proscribing society men, then they most assuredly are sadly mistaken, as the history of “strikes” proves conclusively that the most desperate and serious “strikes,” have occurred where there was no previous organization among the strikers.

He went on to offer the following anecdote in support of his notion of unions (“societies”) as preventing the most violent manifestations of class struggle:

The North Adams Shoemaker after trying non-society men and failing to prevent “strikes,” thought “Yankee” like, of a sure thing as a preventative against all future ills, as regards “strikes.” He employed Chinamen... One day John Chinaman got on a “strike,” and not having the advantages of a “society” training he tries to enforce his demand at the point of the shoe

knife (bayonet). We claim for the Brotherhood that it is doing all that reasonably can be done to prevent “strikes.”¹

This little story is likely fictional, but it was written down to make an essential point that many modern scholars have overlooked: the absence of a labor union does not mean the absence of class conflict or industrial action. In fact, the union can play a mitigating role in this conflict. Without a union, workers were more likely to resort to drastic means—“the point of a shoe knife”—to get what they want. The moral of the story, that the absence of unions does not guarantee class harmony or worker obedience, must be taken into consideration in any serious study of the labor movement.

In this essay, I seek to restore working class self-activity to its central place in the history of labor movement, specifically the labor movement in the American railroad industry between the years 1874 and 1895.² This is impossible to do from within the confines of the important schools of labor history. “Old” and “new” labor histories both circumscribe their ability to understand the American labor movement by limiting what they study; the former focuses single-mindedly on trade unions, while the latter ponders working class culture and identity. Both, in fact, miss the full implications and extent of worker self-activity in American history. Worker self-activity is the tendency of workers to assert their class interests through direct action such as strikes, riots, property destruction, and the temporary expropriation of private property from capitalists for the workers’ own purposes. Contrary to the thinking of many labor historians, this self-activity often occurs in spite of, not because of, trade unions. Worker self-activity consists both in taking direct action with or without the aid of unions, and in carrying out such activity even if there is opposition from trade union hierarchies. Such activity was frequent and significant, and it often challenged capitalist institutions such as private property, the rights of management, and wage labor. The most important attribute of self-activity, however, is that it

¹ Charles Wilson, “The Strike,” *Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers’ Monthly Journal* 7 no. 12 (December, 1873), 579-580.

² For an article that outlines the broader history of proletarian self-activity in American history see George Rawick, “Working Class Self-Activity,” *Radical America* 3 No.2 (1969): 23-31.

is action carried out and controlled by the workers themselves and not by labor bureaucrats or political parties.

In the next section I will provide a very brief overview of labor historiography, in order to situate my arguments in the context of other scholars' work and to show how the premises and concerns of some scholars make it difficult to re-integrate proletarian self-activity into the discussion of the labor movement. In the section that follows I will discuss some of the most important and prominent labor movements on American railroads during the period under discussion, namely the strike wave of 1873-74, the great strikes of 1877, the strikes on the southwest system during 1885-86, and the Pullman Strike of 1894. At the same time I will argue that in all these cases self-activity tended to broaden class struggle, both in the sense that workers from diverse backgrounds participated in such movements and that they spread over a wide geographical area. In the third section, I will discuss the role of centralized leadership in these movements, arguing that bureaucracy limited working class self-activity. Finally, in my conclusion, I will argue that an understanding of proletarian self-activity and the function of labor bureaucracy as a brake on struggle should inform our view of labor movements and labor history.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Up until the 1960's and 70's, labor history was dominated by an institutional, union-centered approach practiced by thinkers like John Commons and Selig Perlman. The "old labor history," as this tendency has been called, is focused mainly on trade unions, prompting one critic to call for a labor history that was "more than the rise and fall or the failures and the successes of organizations." Even though the tone of that statement is dismissive, it is accurate in the sense that American labor history in

its early years *was* focused almost entirely on organizations and their exploits.³ Despite its name, many thinkers are still influenced by the “old labor history.” Howard Kimeldorf and Judith Stepan-Norris, for example, study “the contested past of organized labor” but also wish to emphasize “the primacy of economic and political struggles waged between and within classes.”⁴ What is striking here is the tacit assumption that (intra)class struggle is primarily waged through the apparatus of trade unions— “organized labor.” Otherwise, why would scholars interested in class struggle and “labor movements” choose to focus solely on the history of and historiographical controversy surrounding trade unions?⁵

This vein of labor movement discourse stands in contrast to the “new labor history,” a move away from institutionalism and towards an emphasis on culture, community, and individual consciousness.⁶ For instance, Herbert Gutman speaks of “nonindustrial *cultures* and work habits” (my emphasis) which “thrived and were nourished by new workers alien to the protestant work ethic.”⁷ In the words of Nick Salvatore, “Gutman explored the varied activities of working people, the great majority of them unorganized in any union...[he recognized] the daily experiences of working people as important for study as the trade unions...”⁸ His goal, in the words of another historian, was “to study workers not only where they worked, but also where they lived, voted, worshipped, and played.”⁹

³ Thomas A. Krueger, “American Labor Historiography, Old and New,” *Journal of Social History* 4 no. 3 (1971): 277-281.

⁴ Howard Kimeldorf and Judith Stepan-Norris, “Historical Studies of Labor Movements in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology* vol. 18 (1992): 495.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 502-503, 508. Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris, having criticized the “received view” of trade unions as exerting a conservative tendency and invoking a positive correlation between strikes and union organization, admit that causation in any direction is difficult to prove. Nonetheless their historiography of American “Labor Movements” focuses exclusively on organized labor and this is clearly where they believe the important “economic and political struggles” between classes are occurring. In contrast to this approach, my paper will assert that union organization, at least in the railroad industry during the period I am studying, did not facilitate strike activity or class struggle and in fact often inhibited it.

⁶ David Brody, “Reconciling The Old Labor History and the New,” *Pacific Historical Review* 62 no. 1 (1993): 1-7.

⁷ Herbert Gutman, “Work Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919,” *The American Historical Review* 78 no. 3 (1973): 532.

⁸ Nick Salvatore, “Herbert Gutman’s Narrative of the American Working Class,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 12 no. 1 (1998): 25-26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

Gutman and the strand of labor scholarship he falls within place less emphasis on the workplace, on industry, and on economic institutions than “the old labor history” and newer scholars who share its concerns such as Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris, who assert that “the industrial arena is of course the life-blood of labor organization...the dynamics of the work place remain essential to understanding labor movement development.”¹⁰ While I disagree with much of what Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris have to say, I accept their concept of the workplace as essential to labor history and I see the shift towards culture and community as a retreat from the most direct arena of class conflict, the workplace. Nonetheless there is much in the new labor history to be admired. Most importantly, these historians have succeeded in getting out from under the single-minded focus on unions that marks older labor history scholarship. The shift towards culture and the community and the focus on “the worker” as an individual, however, are potential obstacles which provide little help in understanding class conflict and the worker’s movement overall.

Despite these flaws in the “new labor history,” I would like to highlight one of its concerns as central to my own project. Gutman was very dissatisfied with how the “old labor history” ignored non-unionized workers. Since “few workers belonged to permanent trade unions before 1940, its overall conceptualization excluded most working people from detailed and serious study.”¹¹ The new labor historians endeavored to correct that mistake; they “widened the focus of research from unionized workers to American wage-earners as a whole.”¹² They have made an undeniable contribution, but there is still much left undone. The critique of the conceptual framework of old labor history is a valid one; all too often “the working class” and “the labor movement” are assumed to be synonymous with trade union organizations and workers without a union are excluded *a priori* by this sort of scholarship.

¹⁰ Kimeldorf and Stepan-Norris, “Historical Studies of Labor Movements in the United States,” 500.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 536.

¹² Lawrence T. McDonnell, “‘You Are Too Sentimental’: Problems and Suggestions for a New Labor History,” *Journal of Social History* 17 no. 2. (1984): 632.

On the other hand, the conceptual tools proposed by the new labor history are inadequate for the task of restoring the importance of non-unionized workers to the labor movement. By ceding the field of industrial conflict and the workplace to the old labor historians, Gutman and his colleagues seemed to agree that workers could only play a meaningful role in industrial class struggle through trade unions. While the new labor history's decision to focus on non-union workers is admirable, their turning away from industrial conflicts in favor of cultural habits and individual beliefs is less so.

In contrast to the approaches outlined above, I wish to carry out a different scholarly task. Instead of shifting attention from the workplace to the community, the workplace will remain the central site of the phenomena under study. Rather than culture or individual consciousness, collective behavior will be the subject of my analysis. Although collective behavior will be my starting point, I will reject the union-centric approach of the old labor history. As Gutman points out, unionized workers were always a minority in the American proletariat and looking solely at the unions misses the class struggles waged independently of trade unions. There has not been enough of an acknowledgment of the importance of independent action by workers without an official trade union, which is usually seen as an aberration. Yet many strikes and labor actions, some quite well organized, occurred without any union involvement whatsoever.

Another phenomenon I wish to highlight is vertical tension within trade unions. Unions were often plagued by rebellious members who insisted on doing what they thought best rather than what their union leaders asked—or ordered—they to do. Remarkably, despite the frequent reoccurrence of such tensions, some writers continue to conceptualized unions as homogenous entities. For instance, Paul Michel Taillon, the author of a thoroughly researched history of the railroad brotherhoods, lauds the brotherhoods for their “success in maintaining the loyalty of their members,” and “commanding the loyalties of thousands of. . . railwaymen.” In arguing against dismissing the brotherhoods for their

conservatism, Taillon warns us that doing so “distorts our understanding of the ways in which ordinary Americans responded to...industrial capitalism,” and that “understanding skilled workers” requires taking the brotherhoods seriously.¹³ In the first two phrases quoted, Taillon exaggerates the internal coherence of the brotherhood organization. Certainly many members were loyal and obedient to the higher-ups in the organization, but others were perfectly willing to defy them and sometimes did so on a mass scale, as I will show in my paper. In the second two, Taillon reveals an essential flaw in his analysis: he treats the brotherhoods as simple organizational manifestations of the interests and desires of skilled workers. In fact, “ordinary Americans responded to. . . industrial capitalism” in a variety of ways. Often, when the “ordinary Americans” were brotherhood members, the brotherhood took issue with their response, so while one might ignore the brotherhoods and miss the ‘response’ they represented to industrial capitalism, one might also focus on them too much and end up excluding working class self-activity from the picture, which Taillon’s book unfortunately does. Certainly the brotherhoods should be taken seriously (they were often a serious impediment to strike action on the railroad system), but they were only one way in which “skilled workers” like railroaders responded to capitalism.

An essential point that I believe scholars like Taillon usually overlook is that, for a variety of reasons, groups of rank and file workers had different priorities and goals than the union officers. Often the rank and file would press for strike action while the leadership urged caution. I will explore this kind of tension and argue that the way rank and file union members responded to it has a great deal in common with the activity of non-unionized workers. Even workers with unions often had to fight their

¹³ I will cite several instances of rank and file brotherhood members coming into conflict with their union leaders. Another example of a scholar ignoring conflict and division between unions and workers is this statement from Reed C. Richardson explaining the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers’ stance against alliances with other labor groups and lack of solidarity with strikes that did not involve them: “engineers...were separated physically and socially from ‘outsiders,’ as workers outside the railroad industry would be termed. A natural result was the desire to go it alone.” Here Richardson displays a pronounced lack of subtlety, treating “the engineers” as a homogenous group and asserting that the Brotherhood’s conservative policy was direct result of the “natural” isolation and conservatism of the Brotherhood rank and file. Paul Michel Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 4-7. Reed C. Richardson, *The Locomotive Engineer, 1863-1963*, (Ann Arbor: Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Michigan, 1963), 187.

own leaders in order to use the power of the organization for class struggle. Because of this dynamic, many strikes ostensibly carried out by unions are better understood as originating from militant groupings within them rather than the union as an organization.

When internal pressure fails to result in a union-sanctioned strike, however, a wildcat is often the result. Union-centered accounts of labor history persistently ignore the phenomenon of the wildcat strike, or if they talk about individual wildcats ignore the fact that they were indeed wildcats. Wildcat strikes, the phrase often rendered in quotes in academic literature as if to convey doubt about the validity of the concept itself, are a persistent and widespread feature of American labor history. A wildcat strike is a strike carried out without permission and backing by a trade union. Therefore, wildcats encompass both strikes by non-union workers and strikes by union workers who do not have the backing of the union. The line between a wildcat and a “legitimate” strike can be blurry; for instance, trade union locals will often back a strike while the national leadership of the union rejects it. Regardless of such ambiguous cases, wildcats were (and continue to be) a very common phenomenon. On the railroads during the late nineteenth century, they may have in fact been the majority of all strikes. Shelton Stromquist, author of the definitive account of the labor movement in the nineteenth century railroad industry, gives statistics for union support of strikes between 1881 and 1894. According to Stromquist’s reading of government documents, 1894 was a high point of union support for strikes, with fifty three percent having union backing—meaning forty seven percent were wildcats. In 1881, only eighteen percent of strikes had union support, meaning eighty two percent of all railroad strikes in that year were wildcats.¹⁴ While these figures seem to show increasing trade union participation in strikes and decreasing wildcats, Stromquist states that the brotherhoods and other railroad unions “were forced to sanction increasing numbers of strikes.”¹⁵ In light of this, highlighting the internal

¹⁴ Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

contradictions within the unions is essential to understanding increasing class struggle on the railroads, which did not originate from above but arose from the rank and file. While it may at first appear that unions as institutions were growing more militant, it is just as viable to assert that an increasingly militant rank and file, spurred on perhaps by successful wildcats, forced the union to support more strikes institutionally.

SELF-ACTIVITY AND SOLIDARITY ON THE RAILROADS

One of the defining features of craft unionism was its narrow focus.* Craft unions like the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, in fact, made exclusionism an important principle which informed their decisions. “Much of our success as an organization,” wrote Grand Chief Engineer Peter M. Arthur, “is mainly due to the fact that we have always kept aloof from all entangling alliances with other classes of labor.”¹⁶ Labor disputes were to be settled within the confines of particular trades. The B. L. E., at least during its early years, strived when possible to restrict disputes to one area, rarely resorting to solidarity strikes or secondary boycotts.¹⁷

In contrast to the limited scope for action set by unions like the Brotherhood, the self-activity of railroad workers, even that of the high-status engineers, tended to spill over across geographical and occupational lines. When one examines the history of spontaneous class struggle on the railroads, whether this struggle was initiated by non-union workers or by rank and file members of a union

* Craft unionism is trade union activity which seeks to unite workers in an individual occupational group or “craft.” This is opposed to industrial unionism, which seeks to organize all the workers in a given industry. So rather than a single union for workers in the construction industry, craft unionists would propose separate unions for plumbers, carpenters, electricians, etc.

¹⁶ Quoted in Richardson, *The Locomotive Engineer*, 186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 178. When the national leadership of the Brotherhood got involved in a local labor dispute it was usually to limit the scope and intensity of strike action, not to spread it further. Later on the Brotherhood did attempt secondary boycotts against the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad during an 1888 strike, but this appears to be an exception in Brotherhood history and the tactic was quickly abandoned.

impatient with their leaders' timidity, a consistent pattern emerges. Unlike actions which were directed from the top down, spontaneous actions among railroad workers tended to benefit from broad-based working class solidarity. These struggles often snowballed as they picked up momentum, drawing in diverse participants and supporters. Often the barriers between the different skilled running trades—the engineers, firemen, brakemen, and conductors—would collapse in such circumstances and many if not all workers in the “running trades” would support each other, despite the strong stances of their various organizations against “entangling alliances.” Sometimes this solidarity would extend even further, to encompass not only railroad workers outside the running trades—the laborers who laid and maintained the railroad tracks, the shopmen, the switchmen—but workers in different industries entirely and even members of the working class who were not, in fact, “workers,” such as the unemployed, housewives, and youths.

In 1873, for instance, engineers, machinists, and firemen launched a wildcat strike against the twenty percent wage cut imposed on them by the East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia Railroad.¹⁸ The engineers had shown their solidarity with the other workers, whose pay was lower in the first place and who were more affected by the wage cut, by “going off with the excited crowd.”¹⁹ For this they were roundly denounced by their leader, Charles H. Wilson, for they had broken “the rules of the organization of which they had formed a part, by engaging in a ‘strike,’ without first obtaining the advice of all other Sub-Divisions.”²⁰ In fact it was not the other Brotherhood divisions which needed to be consulted—with almost ten thousand members in 1873, consulting every branch would have been next to impossible anyway.²¹ It seems clear that the engineers of Division No. 115, in Knoxville, Tennessee, had erred by failing to consult their national leadership, not other locals—Wilson’s ire makes sense only as the rage of

¹⁸ Herbert Gutman, “Trouble on the Railroads, 1873-1874: A Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?” *Labor History* 2:2 (1961): 218.

¹⁹ Wilson, “The Strike,” *Monthly Journal*, 579.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gutman, “Trouble on the Railroads,” 216.

an authority figure who had been defied. His reaction demonstrates how union bureaucrats did their best to confine the labor struggles of those who they purported to represent.

The railroad strike wave that began late in 1873 and continued into 1874 contained many instances of similar behavior. Finding the established Brotherhoods inadequate for their needs, railroad workers in Hornellsville, NY, and elsewhere along the Eastern seaboard established a new organization, the Brakeman's Brotherhood. Despite its name this new union was neither exclusively for brakemen nor modeled on the Brotherhoods which claimed to represent the skilled running trades workers. The chief organizer of the union, in fact, was not a brakeman but a conductor, and the organization was known to contain engineers, track laborers, and workers in the repair shops which periodically serviced the train cars and engines.²² With the help of this union, workers in Hornellsville were able to overcome the separation engendered by the railroad's complex hierarchy of trades and the craft unions which exacerbated this hierarchy and separation. Railroad strikes in Hornellsville in the 1870s involved all groups of railroad workers, although the less-skilled workers tended to take a leading role. It is a testament to the unity of these workers that when management offered to concede to the demands of all occupational groups except the track laborers the strikers stood firm and didn't give in until management conceded to the track hands as well.²³ While the Brakeman's Brotherhood was involved in supporting and organizing for the strikes, most of the important decisions were in fact made at mass meetings and by elected committees rather than unaccountable union bureaucrats.²⁴ Rather than controlling the strikers, the Brakeman's Brotherhood was used by them as an instrument for more effective organization; this stands in stark contrast to the traditional Brotherhoods, in which union

²² Shelton Stromquist, "'Our Rights as Workingmen': Class Traditions and Collective Action in a Nineteenth-Century Railroad Town, Hornellsville, N.Y., 1869-82" in *The Great Strikes of 1877*, ed. David O. Stowell (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 60-62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-59, 65.

leaders tried to discipline their members and control their activities to fit the priorities of the national organization.

In 1874, brakemen, switchmen, and track laborers all along the Erie line went on strike against a ten percent wage reduction that had been forced on them by the company.²⁵ The strike centered in Hornellsville, where much of the town's working class population supported the strike regardless of their occupation or social status. For instance strikers' wives and children assisted the strikers in preventing trains from leaving the town. Strikers and their families coated a steep section of the tracks to the west of town in liquid soap brought by the women of the community. Then, when the train reached that section and began to lose momentum due to the slickness of the soap, strikers and strike supporters, including women and children, jumped onto the train in order to increase the weight of the train so the engine wasn't able to crest the hill to the west of town. At this point, strikers disabled the brakes of the train and pulled out the pins that coupled the train cars to the engine, sending several fully loaded freight cars hurtling back down the hill and into the Erie's rail yard.²⁶ The same tactic was used in Hornellsville during the nationwide railroad strikes of 1877.²⁷ Clearly workers in Hornellsville, unlike the leaders of the various railroad Brotherhoods, understood that industrial action was most effective when it drew on the combined strength of the entire working class community.

The Lehigh Valley Railroad also faced a strike in 1874, which took place on a coal line which ran from Waverly, NY to Pittston, PA. The strikers stopped freight and passenger traffic in Waverly. In order to accomplish this, they "set brakes, removed brake wheels, switched track, and allowed only mail trains

²⁵ Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads," 219.

²⁶ Stromquist, "'Our Rights as Workingmen'," in *The Great Strikes of 1877*, ed. Stowell, 63.

²⁷ Ibid. Phillip Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (NY: Monad Press, 1977), 83-84.

to pass.”²⁸ The strikers, who were comprised of every occupational group on the railroad except for engineers, helped passengers stranded by their strike find shelter.

Another strike which drew in multiple occupational groups was the December 1873 strike of the engineers along the western roads of the Pennsylvania Central Railroad. Following a wage reduction, the engineers walked out and brought many firemen with them.²⁹ Hostlers (workers in charge of moving engines around inside the train yards) were also involved in at least one location. The strike involved thousands of workers and extended to Pittsburgh, Chicago, Louisville, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and other cities. Not only was the division between firemen and the better-paid engineers challenged, but the strikers attracted many supporters to their cause, who packed the railroad depots and heckled strikebreakers.

The strike wave of 1873-74 showed the contours of proletarian self-activity on the railroads and demonstrated the possibility of labor action which drew in a diverse array of working class groups rather than simply defending the privileges of a particular craft in a particular place. The 1877 “great strikes” were a resounding example of this possibility on a larger scale. They galvanized workers of varying occupations and sparked broad-based working class solidarity which could only be defeated by the application of overwhelming military force.

From the very beginning of the “great strikes,” workers on the railroads had to collaborate and seek unity with each other across occupational lines in ways that their unions—largely because of the attitudes of the leaders of these unions—were unable to do. Railroad workers attempted to find points of commonalities between their own struggles and those of workers in other railroad crafts and other industries. Unity was essential because it spread the struggle and therefore put more pressure on the company to concede to worker demands. It also prevented strikebreaking. As wage cuts became

²⁸ Gutman, “Trouble on the Railroads,” 219.

²⁹ Ibid., 221-222. “The Engineers’ Strike,” *The New York Times*, December 28th, 1873.

endemic and conditions in the industry worsened, labor action became increasingly outward looking and broad in scope, casting a wider and wider net and enjoying the benefits of solidarity from a greater range of supporters and strikers.

The first attempt in 1877 to move beyond the narrow confines of craft unionism was carried out within the unions themselves by elements of the rank and file who ignored the emphasis their leaders placed on exclusivity and avoiding “entangling alliances.” On May 22nd, 1877, a meeting was called by the Newark, NJ division of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers to discuss the ten percent reduction in wages which had recently been announced by the Pennsylvania Railroad. In Jersey City the following day the engineers also met. Despite the lack of action from the national leadership of their respective unions, engineers, firemen, and conductors, using their union locals as an organizational platform, agitated against the pay cut. They appointed a committee to demand the pay cut not take place, but after they met with Tom Scott, the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, they had been convinced—or as Brecher puts it “intimidated and cajoled”—into accepting the cut, much to the fury of many of those who had elected them, especially the militant and poorly paid brakemen.³⁰

In the wake of this failure, however, the railroad workers did not give up. Their next move was to organize a secret labor organization, the Trainmen’s Union, that would unite all members of the running trades—a union “to get. . . engineers, conductors, brakemen, and firemen. . . into one solid body.”³¹ The Trainmen’s Union was a direct attempt by railroad workers to overcome the separation between the trades which made their actions less effective. However, it proved inadequate as a vehicle for industrial action; the union was quickly infiltrated by company spies and many of its leaders fired. On June 24th a mass railroad strike against the wage cuts was attempted but the effort was quickly aborted

³⁰ Robert V. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 46-51. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*. Boston: South End Press, 1997), 17-18.

³¹ *Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Railroad Riots in July 1877* (Harrisburg: Lane S. Hart, State Printer, 1878), 671. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 29-31. Brecher, *Strike!*, 18.

when part of the union's leadership was fired, causing some leaders to declare the strike off.³² It is interesting to note that a significant factor in the defeat of the Trainmen's Union was a hierarchical organizational structure and strike plan which made local branches of the union dependent on instructions from the central leadership and incapable of acting independently.

Compared to the way the Brotherhoods usually handled grievances, which isolated the trades from one another and confined disputes to the locales in which they arose, these organizing efforts were impressive and innovative, uniting as they did the various running trades. Next to what followed, however, the Trainmen's Union and the grievance committee of the brotherhood locals pale in comparison. As I will show in the following pages, the great strikes of 1877 are a perfect example of proletarian self-activity and, by virtue of this, drew in a base of support and participation that extended far beyond the skilled white workers or even unskilled white workers that the railroad labor movement typically involved.

A few weeks after the failed strike by the Trainmen's Union, on July 16th, the day the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad followed the Pennsylvania Central's example and slashed wages ten percent, strikes developed both in Camden Junction, just outside of Baltimore, and the small town of Martinsburg, West Virginia. The strike in Camden Junction was sparked by a single fireman, who walked off in disgust and was followed by many of the other firemen. This outbreak was quickly suppressed by the police and three firemen were arrested. Trains were still leaving Camden Junction. That evening, however, in Martinsburg, railroad workers upped the ante. The crew of a cattle car walked off and a crowd of workers and citizens quickly gathered. The strikers uncoupled the engines from the trains and moved them into the roundhouse, declaring that no trains would run through Martinsburg until their pay was restored. The mayor, who owned a hotel which derived most of its clientele from the railroad, tried to

³² Brecher, *Strike!*, 18.

persuade the workers to end the strike. After being booed by the crowd, he tried to have several “ringleaders” arrested. This too failed; the police prudently decided that enforcing the mayors order would be impossible with given the large crowd which had assembled and the defiant mood they were in.³³

Thus, from the very beginning, the wildcat railroad strikes that swept the United States during the second half of July, 1877 drew in a far broader group of supporters and participants than even the most forward-looking attempts at solidarity organized from within the Brotherhood infrastructure or by other trade unions. While the Trainmen’s Union and the rank and file Brotherhood militants had succeeded in producing a tenuous unity between members of the running trades—engineers, firemen, conductors, and brakemen—the spontaneous strikes that followed in the wake of these movements’ failure saw the participation of women and black workers, groups usually excluded from the American labor movement. At Martinsburg, women and children swelled the crowd at the depots, lending their voices and bodies in support of the striking railroad workers.*³⁴ The Baltimore Sun noted that a “singular part of the disturbance is the very active part taken by the women, who are the wives and mothers of the firemen.”³⁵ In fact, later in the strike there were several cases of women persuading their sons,

* The participation of women in the movement is highly significant. The norm in the American labor movement at this time was institutionalized sexism and exclusion of women. The brotherhoods included women in the labor movement only through the “ladies’ auxiliaries” which functioned as social clubs and benevolent organizations rather than being involved in the actual struggles of the labor movement. So to have women involved directly in supporting strikes was very unusual, and is suggestive of self-activity’s character. Women took advantage of the situation to further their own interests and support male workers. In this period workers of both genders sometimes temporarily overcame social taboos and exclusions in the service of greater working class solidarity. For information on women’s auxiliaries associated with the brotherhoods see Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men*, 60-64.

³³ Ibid., 13-14. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 35. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*, 76. Foner claims the strike in Martinsburg was only initiated by “a score of firemen,” but Bruce and Brecher both indicate that all or almost all of Martinsburg’s running trades workers joined the strike immediately.

³⁴ Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*, 76.

³⁵ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 37.

fathers, or husbands not to scab on the other workers, and two women were seen guarding a railroad crossing in Martinsburg alongside six strikers, all of them hefting clubs.³⁶

Not only did women take an active role, but solidarity from non-railroad workers was very strong and helped the railroad strikers maintain the freight blockades. Some chose to strike with the railroaders, other simply assisted them in their efforts to halt rail traffic. The day after the strike began, the 17th, the shopmen and machinists in Martinsburg's repair shops were persuaded to quit along with the other workers.³⁷ In Baltimore, boxmakers and tin can makers joined the strike.³⁸ Boatmen in particular, workers who transported goods on canals, aided strike efforts. On July 18th, when federal troops were on their way to Martinsburg, over a hundred boatmen from the surrounding area who were on strike were on hand to help defend the freight blockade. Boatmen also halted a train under heavy military guard which had managed to escape the blockade at Martinsburg and pelted it with rocks, while another train in Cumberland, MD, was uncoupled by "a crowd of boatmen, railroaders, and others,"—in fact, many trains were halted in Cumberland by a large crowd which included not only boatmen and railroaders but youths as young as fourteen, unemployed rolling mill workers, and tramps.³⁹ When one train managed to clear Cumberland and continued down the line, a mob in the town of Keyser, West Virginia, ran it off the main tracks and dragged the strikebreaking crew off by force.⁴⁰ Workers of all kinds, not just railroaders, acted in support of the B.&O. strike. But occupational divisions were not the only divisions within the working class which were challenged; in at least one instance, at Keyser, "white and Black railroad workers met and voted to join the strike."⁴¹ This type of cross-race solidarity,

³⁶ Ibid., 43.

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Ibid., 35.

³⁹ Ibid., 42. Brecher, *Strike!*, 19. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*, 98-100.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42. Brecher, *Strike!*, 19.

* Once again, this sort of thing is remarkable given the general state of the labor movement, which was explicit in its violent exclusion of non-whites. Most labor unions admitted only whites, and cross-race solidarity in labor struggles was rare. The brotherhoods were especially racist. See Taillon, *Good, Reliable, White Men*, 53-59. When one notes the existence of such brief glimpses of working class solidarity across racial boundaries, one should not

considering the region and the time period, was remarkable. J.P. McDonnell, a Marxist and editor of a labor newspaper, later stated, “It was grand to see in West Virginia, white and colored men standing together, men of all nationalities in one supreme contest for the rights of workingmen.”⁴²

In the nearby town of Piedmont, the working class solidarity brought on by the strike was no less effusive. Miners in the area resolved to go to Keyser and help reinforce the blockade, and, joined by others, they were true to their word despite the presence of U.S. troops.⁴³ This group, comprised of other workers as well as miners, was described as “a motley crowd, white and black.”⁴⁴ A handbill was posted that declared, “let the clashing of arms be heard... in defense of our families, we shall conquer or we shall die.” The language used by the anonymous author makes clear the level of desperation that railroad workers were feeling by 1877. This person warned that

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. . . has lost all sympathy. We have humbled ourselves from time to time to adjust 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. . . and the working classes of every State in the Union are in our favor. . .⁴⁵

believe that racist attitudes ceased to exist in the white working class, but rather that racial enmity was put aside temporarily for the purposes of united action against the common enemy of the railroad corporations.

⁴¹ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 37.

⁴² Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 122.

⁴³ Brecher, *Strike!*, 20.

⁴⁴ Brecher, *Strike!*, 20.

⁴⁵ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 44-45. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*, 98. Bruce and Brecher only refer to the document, titled “WE SHALL CONQUER OR WE SHALL DIE,” being posted in Piedmont, but Foner, who reproduces it in full, claims it originated in Westernport, MD, and was subsequently posted all along the line.

As it turned out, the author of this manifesto was correct both in the support the strike had among the wider working class and in claiming that workers were willing to give their lives to fight against the degradation imposed on them by the railroads.

On the 20th, by which time the strike had spread to other railways and was well underway as far afield as Pittsburgh, the governor of Maryland called out the National Guard to break the resistance at Cumberland.⁴⁶ As the guard was assembling, however, a large crowd formed near Camden Station, where the troops would depart. When they neared the station, the crowd began pelting them with bricks and rocks, some of which were thrown “from windows by shrieking women.” At least twenty five soldiers of the Fifth Regiment were injured by projectiles; they were ordered to fix bayonets and charge the crowd blocking the station, who got out of the way but sent another hail of bricks at them while a few fired pistols at the soldiers. This crowd was composed of factory workers who had just gotten off of their shift interspersed with women, children, and youths.⁴⁷ Few, if any, of them were employed by the B.&O. Railroad; they acted out of sympathy for the cause of the railroad strikers despite the very real danger they were putting themselves in.

That the danger was real was demonstrated by the Sixth Regiment, who were cornered in their armory by an enraged crowd which smashed every window on the ground floor of the building. The guardsmen selected to march to Camden station and put down the rebellion in Cumberland were greeted with a hail of projectiles as they tried to leave the armory and quickly rushed back inside the building. When they were ordered out again, they started shooting; the violence of the national guardsmen that night claimed the lives of eleven workers and bystanders and severely wounded at least forty others. This crowd was also a diverse one, with youths, factory workers, and unemployed men being its primary constituents. One of the people killed was Willie Hourand, a fourteen year old

⁴⁶ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 46-47. Brecher, *Strike!*, 20-21.

⁴⁷ Brecher, *Strike!*, 20-21. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*, 103-104.

newsboy.⁴⁸ The B.&O. strikers, of course, repudiated the actions of the mob, who not only fought the soldiers but wrecked a B.&O. telegraph office, forced the crews off of the trains ready to transport the national guardsmen to Cumberland, and set fire to B.&O. freight cars and buildings.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the actions of the mobs in Baltimore, Keyser, Cumberland, and elsewhere demonstrated the solidarity and breadth of support the 1877 railroad strikes elicited.

The most significant fact about the 1877 strikes, often hidden beneath the sensational acts of government violence and mob retribution, was that they were examples of self-activity. No centralized group directed the workers' actions. The workers didn't ask anyone's permission: they simply acted. This was not, however, *random* action, contrary to what many contemporary commentators believed. While they were not centrally directed, the strikes and blockades were organized from the bottom up in a systematic fashion. Examining the unrest of 1877, every characteristic of proletarian self-activity is discernible; the lack of a bureaucratic element controlling the actions, the self-organizational abilities of ordinary workers, and the diminishing importance and efficacy of the many boundaries that divide the working class.

This unrest began in Maryland and West Virginia but rapidly spread all over the country. A similar pattern to the one discernible in those regions emerges in Pennsylvania, especially in Pittsburgh, which became the scene of a massacre even bloodier than the one in Baltimore. Like the strikes at Martinsburg and Camden Junction, railroad workers in Pittsburgh walked out spontaneously, without orders or directions from union leaders. Three workers who walked off a "double-header" train in disgust sparked a wider strike, and the railroad officials could not find a crew to take any train out of Pittsburgh. Two days after the strike had begun, in another parallel to the events in Maryland and West Virginia a crowd of supporters backed the strikers up as they halted freight traffic. This crowd included

⁴⁸ Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*, 104-108. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 46-47.

⁴⁹ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 48-49.

unemployed workers, miners, children, women, Pittsburgh militiamen who had been ordered to suppress the strike but instead fraternized with the strikers, and iron and steel workers.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, the ruling classes of Pennsylvania understood that this outbreak of proletarian self-activity was a threat to their dominance. That day, July 21st, more reliable troops were brought in from Philadelphia. As they neared the Outer Depot where the strikers and their supporters were assembled the crowd hissed and yelled, and “the women lead the hissing.” When the crowd refused to let policemen accompanying the militia arrest unnamed “ringleaders” of the strike, the militia was ordered to charge with fixed bayonets, and several people were stabbed. In response, stones were thrown by some boys in the crowd, and the militia opened fire. It is indicative of the broad-based support the strike received that among the twenty dead were a Pittsburgh militiaman, three small children, and a woman.⁵¹ The killing sparked further unrest, as “thousands of workers from the rolling mills, coal mines, and factories hurried to the scene of the killings.”⁵² These enraged men and women—for women were still mixed in with the crowd—drove the Philadelphia troops back into the railroad’s roundhouse and set fire to Pennsylvania Railroad buildings and freight cars, many of which were looted before they were burned. An eyewitness recalled looters carrying off “webs of cloth, silk, brooms, hams, bacon, umbrellas, liquor of every kind. . . many women were carrying flour in their aprons and anything else they could get a hold of that might be of useful . . .”⁵³ Women brought coffee to a group of men who were torching freight cars. A group of men began breaking into the freight cars and throwing their contents out, to be taken by anyone, and many teenagers of both genders began carrying goods back to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 57, 61. Stowell, ed., *The Great Strikes of 1877*, 5-6.

⁵¹ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 62-63. This was not the end of the bloodshed meted out by the repressive forces serving at the behest of the Pennsylvania Railroad; the next day, twenty more workers were killed, as well as two or three soldiers. Ibid., 66.

⁵² Ibid., 63-64, 66.

⁵³ Ibid., 64.

their homes.⁵⁴ One witness remarked that a few of the looters were probably railroaders, since they appeared to know exactly how to handle the cars.⁵⁵

Pittsburgh was not the only place where the railroad workers received solidarity from other groups. The Reading Rifles, who were called out to help break the railroad strike in Reading, PA, stated that “if ordered to fire they will lay down their arms; that they are workingmen and do not desire to kill other workingmen.” Even more remarkably, railroad passengers who were stranded by the strike in Erie, PA, despite the personal inconvenience no doubt caused by the strike, signed a statement condemning the railroad and commending the strikers, who had helped pay for their accommodations.⁵⁶

The solidarity expressed by Pittsburgh workers towards the railroad strikers was not expressed solely through battling the militia and destroying or stealing railroad property. By Monday, the 23rd, the railroad strike had broadened. Workers from the National Tube Works, a company that manufactured steel tubes and pipes, joined the strike and spread it further by visiting the other steel mills and shutting them down by persuading the workers in them to strike. As a result, “iron and steel workers and coal miners, as well as railroad workers, were now out in a giant strike.”⁵⁷ The strike continued to spread; machine shop workers and carpenters employed by the Pennsylvania Railroad at Allegheny City, an important railroad center close to Pittsburgh, joined the strike. So did firemen and brakemen in Philadelphia and steelworkers, miners, firemen, and brakemen in Scranton.⁵⁸

The strike spread like wildfire in other areas as well. Factory workers in Buffalo, NY, walked out in solidarity with striking railroaders.⁵⁹ In Chicago, crowd actions spread the railroad strike to packinghouses, ironworks, mills, factories, and businesses of every kind; Czech lumber shovers joined

⁵⁴ *Report of the Committee...to Investigate the Railroad Riots*, 244-245, 253.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

⁵⁶ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 74, 70.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70, 75.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

the strike without being asked and proceeded to shut down the brickyards. The strike in Chicago was virtually city-wide. Czech women wielded clubs and hurled stones at the police; an Irish mother outdid the Czechs and shot at them from her tenement window. Czech, German, and Irish workers forgot their differences temporarily as they fought the common enemy.⁶⁰ In St. Louis, a general strike developed and shut down the city's industries.⁶¹ At one mass meeting, following an assertion that "we are determined to have our rights," the issue of race was raised;

" 'Negroes too?' someone asked. 'Yes!' the crowd shouted back, and a Black steamboat man was called upon to speak. He described the plight of the Black roustabouts: 'We work in the summer for \$20 a month, and in the winter time can't find the man we work for.' After telling his story, he asked the crowd: 'Will you stand with us regardless of color?' 'We will! We will! We will!' the crowd responded."⁶²

Collaboration between black and white workers was extensive in St. Louis. Black and white workers, with "the negroes predominating," boarded a steamship which was about to leave and demanded wage increases for the crew. After the captain agreed to their demands, they boarded other ships and did the same thing. Striking black levee workers also played a prominent role in shutting down steel works and other factories in the southern part of the city.⁶³

African American workers played a leading role in other strikes as well; black sewer workers in Louisville precipitated "what could only be called a general strike," drawing in workers from many of Louisville's industries, presumably both black and white. Although, according to the sources quoted by Hoffman, black workers predominated in many of these actions, there were some whites participating as well. After a crowd of black workers containing "very few white men" rampaged through Louisville, looting stores and smashing the windows of a sewing machine company, the railroad depot, and the homes of well-to-do citizens, the police arrested two white workers and one black worker who they

⁶⁰ Ibid., 144-154. Schneirov, "Chicago's Great Upheaval of 1877," in *The Great Strikes of 1877*, ed. Stowell, 85-94.

⁶¹ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 170-184.

⁶² Ibid., 173.

⁶³ Ibid., 176-177.

suspected of being ringleaders.⁶⁴ Black workers also struck in Memphis, Cairo, New Orleans, and Galveston.⁶⁵ Of course even the extremely limited solidarity shown by white workers towards their black counterparts during the great strikes was a radical departure from the prevailing white supremacist paradigm whereby racism trumped any sense of class identity across racial lines.

Most of the events of July 1877 unfolded along the same lines as the strikes in Pennsylvania, Baltimore, and West Virginia. They were initiated from below, with little or no involvement by union leaders. They showed a tendency to spread rapidly across occupational boundaries, encompassing railroad workers from different “running trades,” railroad workers outside the running trades, and workers in other industries. They weakened the everyday separations between ethnic groups created by the racism of the white working class. The strikers were supported by unwaged members of the working class, including many women, unemployed men, and children. Community support in general played an important role. The history of the great strikes demonstrates proletarian self-activity was a real alternative to the exclusionary and timid methods practiced by the railroad brotherhoods and other craft unions, and that workers were quick to utilize this alternative given a chance.

The 1877 great strikes were drowned in blood and for the most part failed to achieve their goals of restoring workers’ wages. However, they did demonstrate in a dramatic and irrefutable way that broad-based solidarity was possible, that working class people from many different regions, occupations, social groups, and ethnicities had an instinctive understanding of their common interests as workers. This lesson was to reverberate throughout the American labor movement throughout the 1880’s, and many labor organizations began to think creatively about how to unite disparate occupational and regional groups to take action. Despite the growing openness of unions to various

⁶⁴ Hoffman, “Looking North,” in *The Great Strikes of 1877*, ed. Stowell, 115-125.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

alliances, there continued to be conflict between the tendency of proletarian self-activity to broaden class conflict and the tendency of labor leaders to contain it.

An economic recovery in 1879 inaugurated a period of rapid expansion for the railroads. As a consequence of this, railroad labor, especially skilled labor, was in high demand, and the B.L.E. was able to negotiate wage increases without resorting to industrial action.⁶⁶ Ironically, considering the union leadership's reaction to those events, they also reaped the benefits of the 1877 labor rebellion. In the aftermath of this massive insurrection which had thrown the ruling class into a frenzy of rage and fear culminating in the killing of over a hundred workers nationwide, "the carrot of promising to discipline railwaymen and the stick of implied disruption was enough to bring a number of railroad corporations to the bargaining table. Yet, by the end of the 1880s, the brotherhoods' reliance on labor market scarcity, as well as the inter-brotherhood tensions born of craft exclusiveness, would prove their undoing."⁶⁷ The Brotherhood leadership, of course, failed to understand this. They had become "convinced of their own indispensability and believed they were capable of acting alone to protect their interests."⁶⁸ In fact, the Brotherhood victories were the results of transitory market phenomena and capitalist fear which lingered in the shadow of 1877.

The B.L.E. and the other brotherhoods—who were generally even more conservative* and less interested in industrial action—were not the only game in town, however. They were joined on the railroads by the Knights of Labor, a union which, in most of its principles, could not have been more

* Throughout this paper I use the terms "conservative" and "radical" in the sense that they are most frequently used in the discourse around the labor movement. Conservative unions tended to accept the status quo and believe in private property as an institution as well as accept capitalist control over production. Radical unions tended to challenge capitalism in principle and contest management's power. To what extent unions who were radical politically were also more militant industrially is a question that is open for debate. My analysis of the Knights of Labor points to the possibility that politically "radical" unions might not be any more militant industrially, at least in the higher layers of the bureaucracy. It is still instructive, however, to refer to unions' political orientations as "radical" or "conservative", however.

⁶⁶ Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 56.

⁶⁷ Tailon, *Good, Reliable White Men*, 70.

⁶⁸ Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 56.

different from the brotherhoods. The Knights, founded in Philadelphia in 1869, believed in solidarity amongst all workers regardless occupation, race, religion, or gender—although this kind of tolerance and solidarity did not always exist in practice. They also refused to accept capitalism and “the wage system” as inevitable and natural, and envisioned the reform of existing conditions to an ideal cooperative society as their long-term goal, another characteristic which put them at odds with the brotherhoods and other conservative craft unions.⁶⁹ They did not come into their own as an organization until the 1880’s, but starting in the middle of the decade they grew at an astounding pace, going from around 70,000 members to 729,677 members in a single year.⁷⁰

While the Knights were quite radical compared to much of the existing labor movement, their leaders nonetheless adhered to one conservative principle which would become extremely important as the union grew in size and power; Terence Powderly, the head of the union, made it quite clear that, “I will never advocate a strike.”⁷¹ In this regard his views were similar, if not even more puritanically opposed to industrial action, to those of brotherhood leaders. Yet the day-to-day activity of the Knights was nothing like that of the brotherhoods. K. of L. members did in fact participate in and organize massive strikes. The ability of the rank and file knights to practice self-activity was rooted in the practical autonomy local branches of the union were able to exercise. A contemporary journalist explained that “while the order is opposed to strikes, the first news we are likely to hear after [a strike’s] close . . . is of the union of the men with the K. of L.”⁷² Unlike the Brotherhoods, which maintained a fairly tight bureaucratic structure capable of enforcing top-down discipline through expulsions and other punishments, the leadership of the Knights seemed unable to bring their unruly members in line behind the official policy. The result was that K. of L. assemblies served as excellent vehicles for working class

⁶⁹ Brecher, *Strike!*, 42-45.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷² *Ibid.*

self-activity. As the quote above states, workers would often, “strike first and then join the Knights of Labor.”⁷³ This did indeed happen in one of the most significant series of strikes of the 1880s; the strike on Jay Gould’s Southwestern System.

The Southwest strike was rooted in previous class struggles that had erupted on Gould’s railroad empire which spanned much of Texas and Missouri. In 1885, a wildcat strike broke out among shopmen on the Wabash Railroad and quickly spread to the other roads of the Southwestern System. The Knights on the nearby Union Pacific sent money and an organizer to them in the course of the strike and they began to join the Knights in droves. With the help of running tradesmen—who were later told to “withdraw from the Order,” by Peter Arthur, head of the B.L.E.—some of the workers won their demands.⁷⁴ The Missouri Pacific soon rescinded the wage cut, but on the Wabash the Knights were locked out and the railroad shops were seized by armed strikebreakers. In response, all of the Wabash Knights struck.⁷⁵ Out of fear that the strike would spread and shut down the whole Southwest System, Gould agreed to restore the fired Knights to their positions and respect their organization.

Even the comparatively democratic and de-centralized Knights of Labor was not without its leadership, however, and the attendant conflicts between rank and file workers and the heads of the organization. In order to win the Wabash strike, the strikers and strike sympathizers on the Southwest System had to vociferously demand that the General Executive Board call out the remaining Knights on the Wabash and enact a boycott against Wabash stock. They only agreed very reluctantly.⁷⁶

The victory on the Southwest did not remain unchallenged for long. Management harassment continued against the Knights, and inevitably another strike broke out. Railroaders stopped strikebreaking trains and “killed” them, sabotaging the complex mechanisms of the engines so they

⁷³ Ibid, 42.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 40-41. Ruth Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, (Austin: The University of Texas Publication, 1942), 33.

⁷⁵ Brecher, *Strike!*, 41.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, 30, 33.

could not be run.⁷⁷ Violence between strikers and strikebreakers and acts of property destruction like arson became widespread in Texas and elsewhere in the southwest.⁷⁸ Joseph Buchanan, a K. of L. leader, pleaded with the other workers of the Southwest System not to join the strike on the Texas Pacific as it would lead to “armed revolution.”⁷⁹ Buchanan was ignored, however, and “shopmen, switchmen, trackmen, and telegraph operators . . . coal heavers and miners,” as well as farm hands, joined the strike.⁸⁰

The strikers stood firm, but just as in 1877 they were quashed through the use of ruling class violence. Deputies shot and killed nine in East St. Louis as they attempted to halt a train.⁸¹ Close to Fort Worth, an Old West-style gunman who had been appointed sheriff, despite the fact that he had been previously convicted of killing squatters, started a shootout with strikers that caused casualties on both sides.⁸² In the end, the strikers were defeated and blacklisted, forced to move to get more work.⁸³ But violence alone did not defeat the Southwestern Knights. The B. L. E. did its part as well, with Arthur actively urging engineers to help break the strike even though they had been sympathetic to the cause before his intervention.⁸⁴

Only two years after the crushing of the Southwest strike, B. L. E. members “faced their own Waterloo,” as Stromquist puts it. In 1888, the Brotherhood went on strike against the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. Unfortunately for some of the rank and file members who had defied their leaders by practicing solidarity with other railroad worker on strike, the Brotherhood leadership’s policy of encouraging strikebreaking had embittered many workers, who were only too happy to go to

⁷⁷ Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, 73-75.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁹ Brecher, *Strike!*, 49. Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, 132-133.

⁸⁰ Brecher, *Strike!*, 49.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁸² Allen. *The Great Southwest Strike*, 78-80.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁸⁴ Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 56-57.

Chicago and return the favor.⁸⁵ The stance against “entangling alliances” had caught up to the Brotherhood, although it undoubtedly hurt the rank and file more than the leadership. One B.L.E. officer, rather in the manner of a repentant sinner, mourned the fact that

we have stood by the companies [during labor disputes with non-engineers] being ready and willing to go out the moment the companies get SCAB LABOR to fill [the railroad strikers’] places. The brakemen have had strikes, and we have gone out with one brakeman on the train, and that a scab. You have held the train with your engines; you have worked with scab switchmen and learned them the yard.⁸⁶

This defeat, however, did not stop them from playing the same role they had in the 1877 great strikes and the Southwest strike during the Pullman strike and boycott of 1894. The brotherhoods actively recruited strikebreakers to sabotage the strike and were praised for it.⁸⁷ The behavior of the brotherhoods, however, cannot be solely blamed for the defeat of the Pullman strike in 1894. Although the American Railway Union leadership’s support of the strike was more extensive than any support given by labor leaders to the 1877 strikes or the Southwestern strike, the hesitancy and timidity of the leading bureaucrats still helped ensure the strikes’ downfall.

While the Pullman strike and boycott is discussed, it is often associated with Eugene Debs, the leader of the American Railway Union who would later run for president on a socialist ticket and participate in the founding of the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World. The idea of Debs “leading” the Pullman strike is, in some ways, erroneous. He did, of course, do a great deal of the organizational work the strike entailed. But in terms of actually pursuing the strike it was the rank and file workers who led and the “leaders” who followed.

That the motive force of the strike was the rank and file rather than the leaders was obvious at the time. On April 23rd, the Chicago Herald remarked that the A.R.U.’s leaders “will have to be men of

⁸⁵ Ibid., Richardson, *The Locomotive Engineer*, 262-263.

⁸⁶ Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 57.

⁸⁷ Brecher, *Strike!*, 107-109.

the greatest firmness and good judgment in order to keep their followers in check.” They “will have a difficult task in controlling” these followers, who “demand aggressive action.”⁸⁸ Vice President Howard of the A.R.U. offered “counsels for moderation” and advised Pullman workers to continue negotiations and propose arbitration rather than a strike if their demands for a restoration of wages to the level they had been at in 1893 was refused.⁸⁹ In fact, the high-level A.R.U. officials, including Debs, campaigned strongly against the strike.⁹⁰ On the day the grievance committee’s demands were refused, “some of the men were in favor of bolting the union and going on strikes, others wanted to strike right away, but Mr. Howard [vice president] of the Railway Union held them in check.”⁹¹ Howard knew that his ability to do this was tenuous. He warned that “I cannot say whether the men will accept my proposition” for arbitration.⁹² On the eve of the strike, newspapers declared that “conservative counsel alone prevented a large number of the employés of the Pullman Company from bolting their organization yesterday and declaring an immediate strike” and that “it is doubtful if the men would heed [the A.R.U.’s] counsel” if they advise against striking.⁹³ On May 9th, a brief wildcat, “not sanctioned by the union leaders,” broke out amongst Pullman freight-car builders.⁹⁴ When the workers finally did decide to strike in earnest despite the “conservative counsel” of their leaders, it was clear that while the A.R.U. facilitated the strike and made it possible, the anger of the rank and file workers had been the real impetus that led to the strike, and the influence of the A.R.U. was actually a restraining one; “some of the men are in favor

⁸⁸ *Chicago Herald*, April 23rd, 1894, Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁸⁹ *Chicago Herald*, May 5th, 1894, *Chicago Times*, May 6th, 1894 Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁹⁰ Brecher, *Strike!*, 99.

⁹¹ “No Strike at Pullman,” *Chicago Journal*, May 5th, 1894, Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁹² “Will Not Strike at Pullman,” *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, May 7th, 1894, Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁹³ “Trouble at Pullman,” *Chicago Record*, May 8th, 1894, “Pullmen’s Men Rebel,” *Chicago Journal*, May 8th, 1894, Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁹⁴ “May All Quit Pullman,” *Chicago Times*, May 9th, 1894, Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

of bolting the union altogether, and unless the union advises the men to strike, it is not unlikely that a majority of them will strike anyway.”⁹⁵ Debs and the A.R.U. had in fact *followed* the Pullman workers into the strike.

A month or so later, the Pullman strike grew a great deal more serious when Pullman workers appeared at the first-ever A.R.U. convention and appealed for help. Once again class conflict on the railroads was ratcheted up against the will of the A.R.U. leadership as the assembled delegates voted to support the strikers with a boycott on all Pullman cars. Only two days after the boycott was declared, at least four railroads out of Chicago were completely shut down—the number would soon climb to include almost all of Chicago’s twenty-six railroads—and thousands of railroad workers were out on strike. Where were Debs and other top A.R.U. officials during all of this? They lobbied strenuously against the boycott, attempting to limit the class struggle to the Pullman works instead of spreading it across the railroads of the nation.⁹⁶

As the strike spread across the country violence followed in its wake as state troops, Federal troops, police and private security forces, serving the interests of the railroad companies, repressed strikes in various places.⁹⁷ Solidarity was apparent throughout the working class, especially Chicago. Newsboys in Chicago dropped anti-strike newspapers in the sewers and several local unions struck in sympathy of their own accord. After the intervention of the government, a massive general strike was the only thing that could have salvaged victory from the jaws of defeat. Yet, while they had the opportunity to do so and there is a good chance most workers would have responded, Debs and other

⁹⁵ “Pullman Trouble Grows,” *Chicago Journal*, May 9th, 1894, Pullman Company Archives, (Pullman Case 12/00/03, Strike Scrapbooks Series 03 vol. 1 Reel 11), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁹⁶ Brecher, *Strike!*, 97-102.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104-108. For an idea of the severity of the unrest, one can consider the fact that thirty four people were killed nation-wide and federal or state troops were called out in Illinois, California, Nebraska, Iowa, and Oklahoma.

A.R.U. leaders hesitated in calling for a general strike.⁹⁸ This turned out to be fatal for the strike, which faltered as Chicago was placed under martial law and Debs and others were arrested.

The strike of workers at Pullman and the subsequent boycott and strike wave that engulfed the country in 1894 was the last movement of proletarian self-activity to sweep the nation's railroad system during the period under discussion. Some might question the idea of the Pullman strike as self-activity. After all, it had been facilitated by the impressive organizational capacity of the American Railway Union. Certainly, compared to the movements of 1873 and 1877, which had seen virtually no union support, and the Southwestern strike of 1886, in which the Knights' General Executive Board had almost refused to recognize the strike, the events of 1894 were marked by far more unity and cooperation between the rank and file and the upper levels of union officialdom. Yet the movement was still one of self-activity. Workers in Pullman went on strike against the advice of leaders like Debs, and workers both in and out of the railroad industry, in Chicago and further afield, put themselves on the line for the Pullman workers despite the leadership's desire to contain the strike to its original proportions. When the time was right for a Chicago general strike, Debs and other officials backed down, afraid of the consequences of a general strike with the potential to spread all across the country. As I have shown above, in 1894 the rank and file led the way while the leaders tried to keep up or even slow things down. While, to their credit, the A.R.U. leaders were much more compliant with the wishes of their members, respecting their desire for action and helping to facilitate it by throwing the weight of the organization behind them, 1894 still must be considered a year filled with worker self-activity. Despite the militancy and principal of the A.R.U. leaders, they still played the role union leaders often play; limiting and slowing down the struggle. It is this role that I will explore in depth in the next section.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 109-114.

THE ROLE OF BUREAUCRACY

As I have argued above, railroad labor action has often taken the form of proletarian self-activity, and this form of activity contrasts strongly with labor activity directed from the top down in that the former tends to broaden the scope of the struggle to include wider working class participation, both geographically and socially, while the latter tends to limit it. However, these two types of action were not simply two possible paths that labor struggles could take. They were also two tendencies in the labor movement which frequently, if not perpetually, came into conflict with each other. Trade union leaders and bureaucracies, as well as political parties, attempted to control labor struggles and mold them to fit their conceptions of what was appropriate, realistic, or morally correct. On the other hand, rank and file militants and radical factions were constantly running up against these constraints and occasionally bucking them completely. Of course, there are many actions and movements which fall somewhere in between these categories or are somewhat ambiguous; nonetheless, top-down control and proletarian self-activity are the two poles which labor movements oscillate between.

In nearly every major instance of proletarian self-activity on the railroads between 1874 and 1895, union bureaucrats and others who styled themselves leaders of the workers' movement acted in one of two ways; either they took an overtly hostile stance and attempted to crush it, or they tried to reign in the activity by taking control and stifling its spontaneity and creativity.

The attitude of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers leadership towards the 1873-74 strike wave is illustrative of the former way of doing things. After the 1873 strike on the East Tennessee, Virginia, & Georgia Railroad, the engineers who had previously belonged to Division 115 of the Brotherhood were denounced in the pages of the *Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers' Monthly Journal*. Grand Chief Engineer Wilson was quick to his readers that "the Brotherhood that it is doing all

that reasonably can be done to prevent 'strikes.' . . . It is idle talk, and gross misrepresentation of the truth, to say that the Brotherhood favors any unlawful act, or any interference with a company's property or men." The Brotherhood, if allowed to thrive by the railroad managers, would "effectually prevent all 'strikes' by substituting REASON" for what Wilson considered the strikers' unacceptable use of "brute force"—even though, according to the General Manager of the road, who certainly had no incentive to protect the reputations of the strikers, "no ill temper," let alone actual physical violence, "was exhibited by anyone."⁹⁹ Despite his disgust with how the workers "became infatuated by this false prophet *force*," [emphasis in the original] he returned from Knoxville confident that his "visit would be productive of some good."¹⁰⁰

As Wilson was stomping on the last embers of one fire, however, another one arose in a different part of the country. The Pennsylvania Central strike, which, as mentioned previously, involved thousands of engineers and firemen, had begun by the time he returned from his trip to Knoxville. *The New York Times* was convinced the strike "has been precipitated on [the strikers] by orders of the central organization, and it remains to be seen whether the very large number of men affected will be willing to yield obedience to this arbitrary authority."¹⁰¹ In fact, almost the exact opposite was occurring. The unauthorized strike, Wilson declared, "induced me, or I might say compelled me, to denounce the men. . ."¹⁰² Far from ordering the strike, Wilson, the leader of the Brotherhood's "central organization," expressed his opinion that "it is no disgrace for any man to take a job that has been vacated by one of our members," essentially authorizing strikebreaking against the workers he supposedly represented.¹⁰³ Wilson's article on the Pennsylvania Central strike is worth quoting further, as it is an excellent example

⁹⁹ Wilson, "The Strike," *Monthly Journal* 7 no. 12 (December, 1873), 579-580. Wilson, "The Situation as It Is," *Ibid.*, 8 no. 1 (January, 1874), 28-30.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, "The Situation as It Is," *Monthly Journal* 8 no. 1 (January, 1874), 28-30.

¹⁰¹ *The New York Times*, December 28th, 1873.

¹⁰² Wilson, "The Situation as It Is," *Monthly Journal* 8 no. 1 (January, 1874), 30.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

of the tension within his own union and the effort of the leadership to control the self-activity of rank and file engineers. Wilson warned that

Dissensions, and a disregard for our most sacred rules, threatens [sic] the existence of our organization. . . A feeling has grown up in the minds of some of our members that your Grand Chief does not have the best interests of the organization at heart, this feeling has no doubt been stimulated by ambitious and designing men. The same party. . . are not content to abide by the rules of this organization but are continually. . . encouraging unwise and illegal measures . . . if willful mistakes have been made by [Wilson, referring to himself in the third person] your rules are ample to punish, and remove him from office. . . With this feeling of disrespect for your rules, and the hue and cry raised against your Grand Chief, several Divisions have got into serious trouble, claiming that the Brotherhood did not protect them, and assuming power to act on important questions. . . some of the Committee, and many of the Engineers, had made open threats that they would break up the Brotherhood, and organize a new one.¹⁰⁴

Wilson went on to say that the Brotherhood had settled disputes “in a quiet and harmonious manner,” and that therefore the Pennsylvania Central engineers should have shown “patience” towards the company, despite the fact that the company had violated the contract which had been drawn up two years prior. These facts were not important to him, however, and “no reference is had in regard to the merits of their trouble with the Company. We simply argue the matter as it effects [sic] . . . our organization.” For Wilson, the affair had nothing to do with the Pennsylvania Central Railroad or their wage cut; it was about the temerity of a section of the union to defy the central leadership and act to protect their own interests when no action was taken by Wilson against the wage cuts. No wonder some engineers wanted to tear down the Brotherhood and start from scratch. Although Wilson found the strikers’ actions “inexplicable,” there was nonetheless a rationale behind them. From the strength and extent of the strike and the fact that the strikers were willing to defy Brotherhood rules, it is clear that many of the rank and file engineers did not view the organization as being fully “theirs” and acted in order to force the organizational structure of the union to serve their needs when it mattered most.¹⁰⁵

In a refrain that would repeat itself in subsequent conflicts between labor leaders and the rank and file

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 28-30.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

members of the unions, Wilson accused the Pennsylvania Central strikers of not caring about the organization which they had worked so hard to build up. He emphasizes the fact that at a prior assembly of the Brotherhood, the delegates had resolved to “use every means in their power to build up an organization that promised so much.”¹⁰⁶ In Wilson’s eyes the organization itself, and the rules that guaranteed his power to grant or deny workers the ability to strike, were more important than the needs of a particular group of members at one time. Conversely, the strikers viewed the union’s proper function as that of a vehicle for their needs, and were perfectly willing to defy its leadership in order to make it serve this end.

Wilson had stated that if the engineers did not agree with his leadership they could remove him from office, and that was exactly what happened. A groundswell of anger at the union’s betrayal of the East Tennessee, Virginia, & Georgia and Pennsylvania Central strikers manifested itself in the impeachment of Wilson by a nearly unanimous vote of division delegates. A “reform” candidate Peter Arthur was elected in his place, who promised to run the union as a fighting organization which would stand up to any further attacks on engineers’ wages.¹⁰⁷ Arthur’s tenure was emblematic of the second approach union leaders took to the problem of proletarian self-activity. Unlike Wilson, Arthur did not simply attempt to stop all or most strikes. Instead, he took control of these struggles as they occurred, attempting to limit them.

There was a real change after the expulsion of Wilson. The union actually did conduct several important and successful strikes after 1874. However, the new militancy of the Brotherhood should not be viewed as emanating from the top down. The change in the Brotherhood’s administration was a reaction to proletarian self-activity which threatened to break the power of the union leadership; instead of being made irrelevant, the higher ranks of the Brotherhood opted to adapt and accepted the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 24.

effective use of strikes as a legitimate union activity. It was the rank and file, not the bureaucrats, who briefly transformed the Brotherhood into a genuine fighting union.

This is clear when one takes the Brotherhood's strike in early 1877 on the Boston & Maine under consideration. Like many railroads were doing at that time, the B.&M. cut wages by ten percent and the engineers took issue with this. A committee discussed the reduction with the superintendent, who would not budge and maintained the wage cut. The engineers' next step was to call upon G.C.E. Arthur, who happened to be in Boston, perhaps believing that the power and prestige of the national Brotherhood organization, as embodied by Arthur, would be enough to restore their wages. They were disappointed, however. Arthur discussed the reduction with representatives of the company and failed to make the company concede. He "acquiesced, and the matter seemed settled. . . however, the men do not seem to have felt satisfied. A spirit of restlessness and discontent existed among them. . ." A few days later, the committee presented a list of demands to the president of the railroad. A few days later another "informal" committee met with the superintendent of the B.&M., and continued to demand a wage restoration and changes in seniority rules. By this point the matter had become serious and Arthur had returned to Boston. In a letter to the president of the B.&M., he noted that the rules of the B.L.E. "require them. . . when a question arises between them and their employers which they cannot settle satisfactorily . . . it is their duty to send for the Grand Chief Engineer," who would "effect a peaceable adjustment and prevent any difficulty from occurring between the engineers and the company . . . I have come, not in the spirit of coercion or dictation, but as a mediator. . ." President White declined to meet with Arthur, however, and "Mr. Arthur, after expressing to the committee of engineers the great reluctance he felt in having recourse to a strike, for which they seemed eager, advised them to present their demand in a modified form." After doing so and being rejected once again, the committee

informed Arthur that “it only remained to acquiesce or strike. He then gave them permission to strike if they saw fit.”¹⁰⁸

The strike happened despite Arthur’s involvement, not because of it. He tried multiple times to negotiate some sort of settlement so the engineers would not have to strike. After the first round of negotiations he was entirely willing to allow the B.&M. to slash wages. It was only because of the engineers’ persistence that the dispute continued after that. What Arthur had undoubtedly considered a dead issue was revived by the continuing demands of the workers of Division 61, who were not content to merely request the wages be restored and, having been rejected, simply accept the reduction. Arthur saw himself as a “mediator” between the workers and the bosses, not an unswerving advocate of the workers’ interests, and it behooves historians to think of him and others like him in the same way. He was there to “prevent any difficulty from occurring.” Even observers as conservative as the Massachusetts Railroad Commissioners had to admit that Arthur was reluctant for the strike and the impetus for it came from below. That he deigned to grant the workers “permission” to protect their interests does not mean Arthur was a militant leader. It is quite likely that, contemplating the fate of his predecessor, he decided that letting the workers’ self-activity play out and allowing the strike was the best move for his career. Despite his more “militant” stance, he played a mitigating role in the class conflict on the railroads at this time much as Wilson had, although the restraints he put on the rank and file were far more subtle.

Under Arthur’s leadership, the B.L.E. central bureaucracy oscillated between co-opting industrial actions and repressing them outright. Just a few months after the B.&M. strike, the great strikes of 1877

¹⁰⁸ Commissioners Charles F. Adams Jr., Albert D. Briggs, Francis M. Johnson, “The Strike of Engineers on the Boston and Maine Railroad, February 21st, 1877,” Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad Company Archives, 33 1880 9.24, Modern Manuscripts Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill. This report from 1877 was reprinted by the C.B.&Q. corporation on March 12th, 1888. The report can be found reproduced in full in *A History of Boston Division Number Sixty-One Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers*, ed. Wilton F. Bucknam (Boston: A.T. Bliss & Co., 1906), 88-103.

broke out, and any Brotherhood members who participated in these actions were expelled and condemned vociferously in the pages of the *Monthly Journal*. Arthur blamed the “prejudice” against the Brotherhood on

. . .the hasty, ill-advised, unwarranted actions of a portion of the members and the strikes. We have no desire to conceal or cover up the misdeeds of the members. Many of them have done wrong, and we have no apology to make or excuse to offer for them. They have disgraced themselves, their families, and the society of which they were members. It is mortifying to think that we had such characters in our midst, and I hope we are forever rid of them.¹⁰⁹

grew even more pronounced during the 1877 great strikes. According to Paul Michel Taillon, the B.L.E. “had engaged in a series of strikes since its inception, but after defeats on the Boston & Maine and Reading railroads in early 1877, it moved decisively away from support of industrial action.”¹¹⁰

The B.L.E. was not the only organization to behave in such a way, although it offers a particularly flagrant example of betrayal and cooption. Other bureaucratic organizations, where they were involved at all, also tried to control and in some cases repress the activity of the 1877 strikers. The strike at Martinsburg was the call-to-arms that galvanized workers across the country to stand up against the continual assaults on their working conditions precipitated by the depression. It was not the work of any “leader” or organization directing things from on high, but the direct result of a group of disgruntled workers who had seen all attempts at organized resistance fail and taking matters into their own hands. While almost all of the Martinsburg railroaders were members of the Trainmen’s Union, on July 16th they acted on their own initiative entirely; Robert Ammon, the leader of the Trainmen’s Union, admitted he had no idea the strike was going to take place.¹¹¹

Ammon’s organization, which had failed to strike effectively against the wage cuts largely because the local union branches were dependent on the central leadership and were incapable of

¹⁰⁹ Stromquist, “‘Our Rights as Workingmen’,” in *The Great Strikes of 1877*, ed. Stowell, 66.

¹¹⁰ Taillon, *Good, Reliable White Men*, 37.

¹¹¹ Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 35. *Report of the Committee...to Investigate the Railroad Riots*, 673-674.

taking action without them, was revived during the strike wave. While striking railroad workers in Allegheny City, an important railway center near Pittsburgh, were happy to use the existing organizational structure of the Trainmen's Union to facilitate their strike and accepted Ammon's leadership. When he decided the strike should be called off after the riots in Pittsburgh, however, the Allegheny City strikers refused to go along with the plan and shouted him down at the meeting of the union until he gave up and resigned as leader of the strike.¹¹²

In Allegheny City, the self-activity of the strikers overwhelmed the limits set on the struggle by conservative "leaders" and the strike continued. In other places, bureaucracy completely stifled the initiative of rank and file workers. The Workingmen's Party of the United States, an American socialist political party, provided an organizational platform for the great strikes in many cities. In Chicago and St. Louis especially, the W.P.U.S. played a central role by calling mass meetings in support of the strikers to the east. These meetings became extremely important as they were utilized by rank and file militants to organize the strikes in those two cities. In Chicago, however, after a wave of wildcat strikes spread across the city, facilitated by militant crowd action where masses of workers and supporters went from workplace to workplace calling out the workers and shutting them down, the W.P.U.S. released a statement saying that all workers should, "under any circumstances keep quiet until we have given the present crisis a due consideration."¹¹³

In St. Louis, after the general strike facilitated by the mass meetings called for by the W.P.U.S. shut down the entire city, the Executive Committee who had put themselves in charge of the strike, which was dominated by W.P.U.S. members, decided not to call for any more mass meetings or processions. In a handbill they appealed to the workers to, "have patience. The Executive Committee are now busily organizing the various trades-unions." Many workers, lacking the "patience" called for,

¹¹² Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising*, 69.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 147.

wanted to organize and arm themselves to resist the massive repressive force that they knew would be brought to bear against them. The day the strike was broken, in fact, an angry crowd assembled outside the meeting hall where the Executive Committee was deliberating, demanding the arms they believed the Committee had stockpiled—some workers even forced their way in and threatened to hurl the Committee members out of the windows if they didn't. But the W.P.U.S. was staunchly against any action of that kind, and even chased a speaker off the stage at one meeting when he called for workers to arm themselves. While the Executive Committee called off their meetings because they were afraid of the mass meetings would "get out of control," the rank and file wanted to spread the strike further and defend it by force.¹¹⁴ Stopping the meetings and calling for "patience" were not the only ways the Executive Committee and the W.P.U.S. tried to stifle the self-activity of the workers. They also tried to sabotage working class unity between whites and blacks. The W.P.U.S. refused to allow black workers to join their organization and a prominent St. Louis W.P.U.S. member who had been active in the strike condemned black participation and used racist slurs against black workers, even though they had led some of the most militant and effective actions of the strike.¹¹⁵

How the Trainmen's Union and the Workingmen's Party of the United States related to proletarian self-activity is revealing of a wider dynamic in the labor movement. Both groups were used by the workers to coordinate their actions and provide an underlying organizational structure, a skeleton which could help facilitate working class self-activity. But both groups were also organized hierarchically, with a centralized leadership attempting to make sure the organization didn't step outside of the bounds they felt appropriate. Thus, with varying outcomes, a common feature in the history of proletarian self-activity is vertical conflict within unions and other organized groups. The rank and file tries to use the resources and established networks of the organization to further their struggle.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-185.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The central leadership of the group tries to contain the activity of the workers into the limits of “acceptability” and, if it falls outside these limits, to sabotage, undermine, or subvert it, with varying degrees of success.

This dynamic was certainly present in the Knights of Labor. There was a great deal of tension within the Knights between militant workers who wanted take industrial action and the leaders of the organization, who had made it clear in the early years of their organization that they did not endorse strikes.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, the Knights became one of the most important unions in the country because of their involvement with successful strikes in the mid 1880’s, with such a massive influx of militant, strike-oriented workers that the leadership attempted to halt the growth by suspending the organization of new local branches.¹¹⁷ Unlike the railroad brotherhoods, where self-activity was usually extinguished rapidly, such attempts at internal control were largely failures. The General Executive Committee was reluctant to endorse the Wabash strike and Joseph Buchanan attempted to limit the extent of the Southwestern strike.¹¹⁸ But nonetheless, K. of L. assemblies became effective vehicles for proletarian self-activity, despite the fact that Powderly and other high-ranking leaders in the K. of L. were reluctant to sanction strikes and viewed militant Western workers as troublesome.¹¹⁹

The American Railway Union was the site of similar conflicts. As shown at the end of the previous section, Eugene Debs and other A.R.U. leaders tried to dissuade the Pullman workers from striking, and when they sent a delegation to the A.R.U.’s convention, tried to persuade other railroad workers from enacting a boycott of Pullman cars and going on strike in solidarity. At the height of the strike, the leadership spoke out against calling a general strike in Chicago. While the A.R.U. offered more consistent support to its members than the K. of L., and certainly the brotherhoods, did, there was

¹¹⁶ Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, 17

¹¹⁷ Brecher, *Strike!*, 42-43, 54-55.

¹¹⁸ Allen, *The Great Southwest Strike*, 30, 33, 132-133.

¹¹⁹ During the Southwestern Strike, Martin Irons, an important local strike leader, admitted that even if he called off the strike he doubted that the strikers would desist their efforts. *Ibid.*, 70, 46-47.

nonetheless a bureaucratic tendency in the organization that tried to put the brakes on working class struggle just as it was picking up momentum. It is this tendency, shared with all the other unions under discussion in this essay, which must be better understood if students of labor history are to put unions in their proper conceptual place.

CONCLUSION

The history of class struggle on the railroad system in the late nineteenth century presents a turbulent panorama of rebellion, repression, and violent conflict that often shook the social order to its foundations. The 1873-1874 strikes, the massive strike wave of 1877, the Southwest strike of 1886, and the Pullman strike and boycott of 1894 all provoked hysteria from the newspapers as well as interest and solidarity from working class people. While the latter two strike movements saw greater participation from unions, largely because worker self-activity was pushing them in a more militant direction, all of these movements were examples of working class self-activity in which rank and file workers took the lead in their own struggles. These strikes saw participation of both organized and unorganized workers and workers who were often excluded from the labor movement, such as women and black workers. In many labor actions, successful and unsuccessful, workers battled wage cuts, poor working conditions, long hours, and abusive treatment. They also initiated conflicts by demanding higher wages or even going on strike in solidarity with other workers. In addition to workers in the traditional running trades taking labor action, there were strikes from shopmen and track laborers, as well as laborers in industries completely outside the railroad system including steel mills and coal mines. Even more remarkable, and often with significant opposition from sectors of strikers, was the impressive

working class unity which in some cases allowed action to take place across traditional racial and gender boundaries. These attributes alone make this period of class struggle worthy of consideration.

Some might object that because most of these strike movements failed in attaining the immediate demands they articulated they are not actually significant or of interest, but this ignores the impact they had on labor relations. Working class self-activity opened employers up to collective bargaining and union recognition. The moderate and cautious railroad brotherhoods came to be accepted and appreciated by managers after some of the more turbulent manifestations of working class self-activity. As Paul Michel Taillon, a historian of the railroad brotherhoods, puts it,

After the traumatic experiences of the Great Strike of 1877, the carrot of promising to discipline railwaymen and the stick of implied disruption was enough to bring a number of railroad corporations to the bargaining table. Yet, by the end of the 1880s, the brotherhoods' reliance on labor market scarcity, as well as the inter-brotherhood tensions born of craft exclusiveness, would prove their undoing.¹²⁰

Of course the “implied stick” was not going to come from the upper layer of the railroad union bureaucracies, whose “reliance on labor market scarcity” and lack of solidarity would “prove their undoing.” It came from the occasional existence and constant threat of working class self-activity of both unionized and un-unionized workers outside of the control of bosses, labor leaders, or politicians. This was the *bête noire* that labor leaders loved to invoke, a specter of violence that the brotherhoods used to threaten employers when they contemplated consolidating their power and abolishing the brotherhoods; “suppose,” one writer for the B.L.E.'s *Monthly Journal* speculated darkly during the disastrous 1888 engineers' strike, “the effort could succeed and the Brotherhood be destroyed, what then? Out of its ashes will arise a federation of labor, less conservative and forbearing, and in time there will come a conflict the result of which we shudder to even contemplate.”¹²¹ Whatever their bluster,

¹²⁰ Taillon, *Good Reliable White Men*, 70.

¹²¹ Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers*, 48.

management was not unappreciative of these facts or of the influence of the railroad brotherhoods—an influence that made strikes and other forms of defiance much less frequent.

After the great strikes, the B.L.E. at least “appeared a relatively reasonable partner to many eastern railroad managers, particularly after it purged from its ranks the element which had openly participated in the conflagration,” and there was a “growing disposition” to work with them.¹²² Stuyvesant Fish, the president of the Illinois Central Railroad, contrasted “organized labor as exemplified by the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Order of Railroad Conductors, and like useful and honorable organizations of intelligent railroad men” favorably with “the lawless and disorganized bodies of outsiders who know nothing of, and care nothing for either the railroads or the high class of men whom they employ.”¹²³ There was, in fact,

A small number of railroad executives [who] began to view the railroad brotherhoods as viable partners in labor relations. Together with their antistrike rhetoric and declarations of respectability, the brotherhoods’ promises to deliver workers of high manly character met a real need and must have seemed an antidote to labor radicalism in the aftermath of the Great Strike of 1877. In the 1880s, managers corresponded with brotherhood leaders and spoke of their organizations, as Debs put it, “in the kindest terms.”¹²⁴

It was only after the riots and strikes of 1877 that the railroads really began to bargain with the brotherhoods.¹²⁵ Similarly, after the Pullman strike of 1894, a Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen leader strongly opposed to the strikes nonetheless admitted that they had benefited his union. Workers acting under the organizational umbrella of the A.R.U. had

taught railway corporations a useful lesson. It taught them that if corporations during times of distress could succeed in enforcing defeat upon the organized old brotherhoods they would also create a mob of unorganized workers who ignored law and order and entered into what came near being an insurrection.¹²⁶

¹²² Ibid., 55.

¹²³ Taillon, *Good Reliable White Men*, 119.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 86

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 120.

Taillon states that, “the Pullman Boycott, like the Great Strike of 1877, stood as a dramatic example of what angry workers could do—just the sort of thing that the brotherhoods had promised to prevent. The brotherhoods’ survival arguably had less to do with their own strategy than with the more radical alternatives.”¹²⁷ This conclusion is coming from a scholar trying to maximize, not minimize, the importance of the railroad brotherhoods; Taillon’s entire study is based on the premise that unions mattered.¹²⁸

In light of the evidence above, dismissing the strike movements discussed in this essay because they were not immediately successful is untenable, and the gains in wages and conditions the brotherhoods were able to effect must be credited at least partially to the upheavals of 1873, 1877, 1886, and 1894. Proletarian self-activity was the bogeyman that induced the ruling classes to accept collective bargaining with the brotherhoods as a palliative. Despite the failure of the movements under discussion to achieve their immediate goals in most places, they did have an impact and clearly enabled many workers to improve their living conditions.

Even more importantly, the strike movements carried forward through proletarian self-activity demonstrated conclusively that rank and file workers themselves could direct their own movements. This runs counter to the dynamics of most railroad labor unions in which leaders thought of themselves as superior to the rank and file and directed them from above. They were engaged in making “men out of crude material.” While

Rhetorically, brotherhood leaders proclaimed the equality of railroad men and corporate managers. . . in practice they believed the rank and file needed guidance and leadership. As leaders, Brotherhood officers like Wilson, Arthur, and Debs regarded themselves both as the equals of corporation executives as well as stewards of railwaymen.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 80.

This tendency surfaced during times of hardship and stress, such as strikes. The Chicago Tribune remarked on the high salaries and swank accommodations of the brotherhood officers, who made five thousand dollars a year compared to the hundred and twenty five dollars a month the rank and file engineers could expect to make.¹³⁰ During the 1888 strike, Hoge, a B.L.E. leader, had the nerve to deny a sick engineer seven dollars to help support himself and buy medicine while he lived the high life, sleeping with prostitutes and visiting his mistress who he maintained on his income from the Brotherhood. At the same time, Hoge tried to keep the rank and file engineers in the dark about the sum in their treasury to keep requests for money at a minimum.¹³¹ Brotherhood officials clearly felt they were more competent and intelligent than rank and file workers. But in fact, as the words of both union officials and railroad managers attest to, the brotherhoods were riding the coattails of proletarian self-activity to achieve their gains.

Only self-activity was bold enough and creative enough to resist seemingly unstoppable deterioration of wages and conditions. Furthermore, self-activity succeeded in uniting a far broader working class coalition than bureaucratic maneuvering ever could. Despite the strike movements of 1873, 1877, 1886, and 1894 being largely spontaneous and unplanned, they were incredibly well organized once they did begin, relying on self-organization rather than direction from above to combat wage cuts. Workers discovered that taking matters into their own hands was often the only way to do anything, and that the established union hierarchies were as likely to hinder their struggle as assist in it. These movements did not fail because they were not organized enough or because of a lack of “leadership”; indeed, while they did exist they were incredibly successful at bringing capital

¹³⁰ “How They Must Suffer!” *Chicago Tribune*, March 20th, 1888, Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company Archive, (33 1880 9.24), Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill. Reproduced in a broadside published by C.B.&Q. R.R. Passenger Dpt., “Comments on the Late Strikes,” published March 20th, 1888.

¹³¹ Pinkerton Detective Agency Operatives “D.D.C.”, “E.S.G.”, “C.P.”, Report to H.B. Stone, C.B.&Q. General Manager, June 6th 1888, Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad Company Archive, 33 1880 9.3, Modern Manuscripts Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago, Ill. See also Pinkerton Detective Agency Operative “D.D.”, Reports to H.B. Stone sent July 28th, August 21st, and August 29th, 1888.

accumulation to a grinding halt, often paralyzing entire sectors of the transportation system and shutting down huge cities. The only thing that could stop these movements from ending in victories was repressive violence, which was used to crush every one of them.

Proletarian self-activity is important not only because it had an undeniable impact on labor relations, but also because an understanding of it challenges some of the assumptions that labor scholars often make. Taillon, for instance, the most recent historian to analyze the railroad brotherhoods, argues that the “narrow union strategies” of the brotherhoods do not “signal an essential conservatism” because skilled workers “formed the core” of the labor movement and were “on the forefront of strike activity.”¹³² I would agree that skilled workers were not essentially conservative, in the sense that they did not simply accept the status quo, but this was not *because* of craft unions like the brotherhoods but *despite* them. In fact, as this paper has shown, in almost every case of skilled running trades workers uniting with other workers to fight for their interests they did so against the wishes of their own union leaders. Similarly, if, as Taillon claims, skilled workers were “on the forefront of strike activity”—a claim that is difficult to accept when he provides no evidence to support it—this was in spite of the brotherhoods. Many strikes by running trades workers were necessarily wildcats which defied the highest ranks of the brotherhoods. Even when the strikes were officially sanctioned the pressure that led to them often came from below, as my analysis of the 1877 B.&M. strike shows. Taillon only introduces tension within the brotherhoods in one area, admitting that while the leadership and “a majority” of members believed in class harmony, a minority favored broader industrial solidarity. This is something, but it is far from clear that the radicals, those who pursued militant action and alliances with other workers, were always in the minority, and Taillon’s sentence seems to imply the disagreement was one which existed solely on the level of strategy and discourse. In actuality, wildcats and other rank and file rebellions amongst the railroad brotherhoods were periodic features of the nineteenth century

¹³² Taillon, *Good Reliable White Men*, 207.

labor movement, a fact which Taillon does not seem to address. Reading Taillon's conclusion, one gets a sense that he sees workers and "their unions" as being essentially the same, the latter simply an organized, institutional expression of the interests and beliefs of the former. Within his discourse, workers and their unions are essentially interchangeable.¹³³

If they are to truly understand the labor movement on the railroads in the late nineteenth century, future historians of this period will have to discard the unquestioning identification of workers with "their" unions and leaders—leaders who often, as I have shown, constituted a separate class in themselves, despite their ability to "command member loyalty." They will have to examine what too many historians ignore: the tension between the rank and file and the leadership within unions, as well as worker activity outside of unions. This examination, if nothing else, will yield a new understanding of unions. While unions are often vehicles for the working class' struggle against the bosses, as the Knights of Labor district assemblies were in 1886, they can just as easily act as impediments in this struggle, as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers did in 1877. There is an obvious corollary. Seeing unions as an arena for, rather than the source of, working class struggle necessitates one acknowledge worker self-activity. Workers actively challenged their exploitation, and when unions got in the way, they were often shoved aside. If the focus is only on labor organizations and institutions on the one hand, or cultural groups on the other, we miss what is most significant about the labor movement; the autonomous actions of workers fighting directly for their own interests.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 204-213.

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