

Strike Struggles Continue Militant Traditions

Is the wave of strikes breaking loose now in the U. S. "foreign" in spirit? Is class collaboration "American"? To the bosses who preach class collaboration and practice class exploitation; to the A. F. of L. bureaucrats who are trying to stifle the strike wave and sell it for a mess of pottage for themselves because they rightly fear to unleash the pent-up revolutionary energy of the masses, we say boldly, you have a right to fear for the hydra of revolution hides behind every strike even as the true face of the state as the executive committee of the bosses displays itself in just such a situation. Let us look back into our American history and see just how "American" is class collaboration and how "foreign" the strike wave.

As soon as the panic of 1873 broke out, the Pennsylvania Railroad reduced the wages of its employees 10%. Four long years the workers suffered from the continued depression, even as they do now, only to be confronted with another 10% wage cut that was to go into effect in June, 1877. The other railroads quickly followed suit. And again, just as at the present time, it wasn't only a question of wage reduction, of starvation, but also a fight on the part of the bosses against the right of the workers to organize, that is, unionization. President Gowen of the Philadelphia and Reading, fearing a strike of his locomotive engineers, ordered them upon the penalty of discharge to

withdraw from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers.

The workers reluctantly submitted, but secretly planned a surprise strike at the midnight of April 13th. However, due to the Pinkerton detectives who knew of this aim, the strike-breakers were held in readiness for the event. The plans were frustrated. One more organized attempt to strike on June 27th failed; then the misery-stricken workers burst forth into a series of spontaneous, militant strikes.

The first outbreak occurred on the Baltimore & Ohio in West Virginia on July 17th, the day after the 10% reduction had gone into effect. The trainmen did not

allow freight trains to leave the station. The local militia was called out to suppress the strike, but they proved what the master class called "unreliable", that is, they saw no reason why they should shoot their fellow-workmen, and refused to do so. The strikers held full sway for two days, until the arrival of 200 Federal troops, sent there by President Hayes. The President of the United States did that, of course, because he was "impartial" and believed in the "identity" of interests of the workers and bosses.

But to proceed. The strike spread like wildfire. All the pent-up revolutionary energy of the starving workers was let

loose. The movement spread over 17 states.

In Maryland, where the strike had broken out at the same time as at West Virginia, a company of militia was greeted by strikers and sympathizers with derision, that turned into active attack. The shooting of the militia into the crowd precipitated a riot in which the militia was overpowered!

In Reading, Pa., the militia ordered to combat the strikers, openly fraternized with the workers and distributed their munition among them and threatened to turn their arms (and did) against the hostile militia. It is important to note that the latter hostile militia was recruited almost exclusively from the propertied classes, whose officer opened fire on the crowd, killing 13 persons, and wounding 22. The fury of the strikers was unbounded. Freight trains were derailed, cars demolished, bridges burned, and militia men attacked. The latter managed to make their escape only by changing from their military uniform into civil attire.

In St. Louis the strike was at first most successful. The strikers took full possession of the city and ruled for an entire week. The "leading citizens"—the propertied class—with the aid of the coffee police force and several companies of militia forced the rebels out.

The strikers failed to achieve their immediate aims but the effect of this first general national strike movement was tremendous. The spirit of workingclass solidarity solidified and became national. Twenty-four different workingclass newspapers sprung up and the Socialist Labor Party membership grew to 10,000. The workers learned the identity of interests of the bosses and the state, its executive committee, since this was the first time the federal troops were called out in peace time.

Why? Here were the workers striking against their bosses for a decent living wage; and here was the President of the United States sending troops to kill them because they dared strike against starvation wages. Their strike then wasn't only economic. It was political.

Yes, indeed, the bosses and their lackeys, "our" government, rule over the masses by force, and by force the masses will rid themselves of their exploiters. The workingclass of America has proven its militancy time and again. And it is learning fast that the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workingclass itself.

—RAE SPIEGEL