
Review: The violent strike of 1877

Reviewed Work(s): The Great Labor Uprising of 1877 by Philip S. Foner

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model for estimating public employment does not use this distinction (nor did the subsequent simulation models). Second, the conference papers compare the effectiveness of job creation to monetary and fiscal policy, but for structural problems comparisons should also include assessments of policies to directly reduce structural barriers. Third, the structural hypothesis was rejected for the early 1960's, and the papers ignore the insights and analyses for this period. Last and perhaps most important, the overview paper by Garfinkel and Palmer may have contributed to confusion between structural unemployment and income maintenance problems. The conference papers themselves provide no information on the amount of overlap between structural problems (for example, low wages and unemployment) and low incomes, and these problems were confused during the 1978 CETA reauthorization debate.

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The violent strike of 1877

The Great Labor Uprising of 1877. By Philip S. Foner. New York, Monad Press, 1977. 288 pp., bibliography. \$14, cloth; \$3.95, paper, Pathfinder Press, New York.

Philip Foner has given us a well-researched, provocative account of a very traumatic event in our labor history, an event that some say bordered on social revolution. Thus, more than being especially useful to anyone interested in the history of the labor movement, the book should also appeal to people concerned with the social and political struggles of the late 19th century as well. Foner focuses on a 2-week period in 1877, the fifth straight year of economic depression, when a strike by railway workers in Martinsburg, W. Va., against still another wage cut quickly spread along the B & O line and to other lines and factory workers, soon encompassing some 100,000 workers and thus was subsequently referred to as "The Great Strike of 1877."

Once the strike broke out the strikers received little sympathy from the national press. The railroad at that time was the country's largest business, viewed by many as economically indispensable, to which political thinking clearly agreed. "Under no circumstances," the press

warned, "should the railroads give in to the demands of the strikers, for such a surrender would only encourage future outbreaks." The railway managers in nine States defined the strike as insurrection and called for Federal troops.

Drawing as he does upon established histories, Foner offers nothing new to those familiar with America's labor past. He does, however, present a very cohesive, readable account of an event that some rank along side the "Molly Maguires" and the "Haymarket Affair" in significance in putting the labor movement in the United States into historical perspective. Although there have been several monographs, dissertations, and articles on the strike—one of the most notable being Robert V. Bruce's *1877: Year of Violence*, which dealt with the strike's events chronologically—Foner feels that his book presents an all-inclusive examination of the subject. Foner's attempt is indeed comprehensive, particularly from a humanistic viewpoint. That is, he stresses the whys behind people's reactions—those of the strikers, railroad management, policymakers, and so forth. Foner believes that his work increases our understanding of the significance of the Great Strike, for, as late as 1973, it was still referred to as the "little understood 1877 railroad strikes and riots."

Foner meticulously sifted through the contemporary newspaper accounts, union papers and records, government documents, court proceedings, and works of other researchers and weaves them together into a vivid and at times exciting portrayal of an upheaval rooted in worker oppression and exploitation and a system of industrialization which viewed the workers as little more than part of the industrial machine. The story is not a pretty one, dealing as it does with violence and bloodshed resulting from clashes between strikers and strikebreakers, local police and militia and/or Federal troops, sometimes pitting neighbor against neighbor. Most often, the responsibility for the spread of the strike and violence that accompanied it was placed at the doorstep of the Workingmen's Party of the United States—a Marxist party established in 1876 to improve the conditions of the working class in the United States and pave the way for a new social system. Foner appears to be preoccupied and overzealous in his attempt to discount this notion. Throughout his narrative, he emphasizes the moderating influence of the Workingmen's Party in quelling disturbances. Generally, he sides with the worker's viewpoint, and oftentimes this bias is evident in his descriptions and accounts of the events surrounding each individual strike.

Nevertheless, the book does expand our understanding of why and where the strike occurred,

who was involved, how it was resolved, and most importantly, its impact on the overall labor movement in the United States. Its place in our labor history is clearly emphasized by Foner's closing remark that the Great Strike marked "the first real evidence of working class collective power capable of imposing its own will upon future social developments."

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