

AFD Ep 354 Links and Notes - Illinois Central Shopmen's strike of 1911 [Bill//Kelley] - Feb 28

- Today's episode is about a very unsuccessful early 20th century strike, the strike of the Illinois Central and Harriman System Shopmen in 1911, seeking recognition for a consolidated industrial union across one of the bigger rail combinations of the time.
- To understand this one we might first need to back up and talk about E.H. Harriman, the railroad tycoon, who had just died in 1909 after ruling the Illinois Central since 1883. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._H._Harriman (Look at this political cartoon of him as a giant fly caught in the Interstate Commerce Commission's little web!) His rail empire included a lot of huge railroads, of which the Illinois Central was his first one, and the government was busy trying to break them apart at the time of the strike. Other railroads in the system besides the Illinois Central and its subsidiaries in the American South included Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, Central Pacific, Oregon Short Line, Oregon Railroad & Navigation Company, Houston & Texas Central, and the San Pedro Los Angeles & Salt Lake...among others. Some of the railroads were operated by some of the other railroads in this system, while others were merely equal partners providing a network connection to the others. (Also as a side note: some of our listeners might recognize the name Harriman from his son Averill Harriman who in addition to being Governor of New York was an American deep state diplomat from the 1940s onward and helped orchestrate the CIA coup in South Vietnam in 1963.)
- Additionally to understand this 1911 strike we also need to talk about railroad shopmen:
 - *Railroad shopmen were employees of railroad companies charged with the construction, repair, and maintenance of the company's rolling stock. At the turn of the 20th Century, approximately one-fifth of railroad employees worked as shopmen, a broad group which came to include machinists, carpenters, boilermakers, electricians, sheet metal workers, and other related trades.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Railroad_shopmen Previously, all these occupations within the shops would have been under different craft unions for each specialty, to say nothing of all the other unions on the railroads that we've talked about previously like the firemen shoveling coal or the engineers driving the trains, and so on. This balkanized craft unionism, split over different occupations and different railroads, stood in opposition to the industrial-unionism (or "one big union") advocated by more radical trade-unionists, as we've discussed in previous episodes.
 - Another key piece of context for this strike that tells us about the state of the railroad at the time was the 1910 Freight Car Repair Scandal (citation from *History of the Illinois Central Railroad* by John F. Stover, 1975, Macmillan Publishing -- either an official corporate history or an unofficial history supported by the railroad's PR department staff): Between 1906 and 1910, the Illinois Central's total freight car maintenance costs rose by nearly 50% and their backlog at in-house repair shops became so severe that they were forced to outsource a significant number of repair jobs to outside companies. It turned out that several of these outside repair companies were part-owned by officials and employees of the Illinois Central who were basically getting kickbacks to ignore the fact that the outside companies were grossly inflating the prices they were charging the railroad. The losses to this scheme when it was uncovered by newspapers in Illinois were in the millions. Company leadership weathered the storm from shareholders despite this, and there was a transfer in leadership to a new president (Charles H. Markham, who had been working his way up through the railroad industry since childhood) after the sitting president reached mandatory retirement age in early 1911.

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois_Central_shopmen%27s_strike_of_1911 Various craft unions representing clerks, carmen, blacksmiths, boilermakers, machinists, metalworkers, steamfitters, painters, and other shop workers on 9 different railroads of the former Harriman System (primarily Illinois Central and its subsidiaries in this strike, but also sympathy or related strikes on the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific and quite a few others in the western US) attempted to merge together into a single union for their whole profession across the entire system "the System Federation." Not all of the member unions of the new federation were willing to strike however, since their contracts were still recognized and they didn't think the unions were prepared for a strike, which the railroad played to their advantage, dividing the unions of the new federation against each other. Those workers that did walk out were fired en masse at the beginning of the disastrous strike on September 30 1911. It began after a few months of strike threats and failed talks (during which time the railroad was recruiting strikebreakers) and petered out quickly. Other unions, both shopmen on other railroads and unions representing non-shop occupations on the Illinois Central, considered joining in strikes in support, but basically never did, always reaching separate agreements to avert action. There were actions in Illinois, especially in Mississippi, and also in Louisiana, Texas, California, and many other locations, but ultimately never truly system-wide or all-encompassing. The AFL also refused aid (Chicago Examiner Nov 23 1911). In desperation, the System Federation union leaders tried to recruit rail unions all over the western United States for a "general strike" (United Press Dec 17 1911) but unsurprisingly this proposal went nowhere. The Illinois Central found itself relatively easily able to outsource shop work, either to external companies as it increasingly been in the habit of doing before the strike anyway, or to shops of its subsidiaries or even competitors (Chicago Examiner Nov 8 1911). The railroad owners had publicly declared victory by January 1912 (Day Book and Chicago Examiner both, Jan 6 1912). It was declared officially over in June 1915 after four years of complete failure. (Somehow this strike isn't even mentioned in the book on the entire history of the railroad.)
- This was an especially lethal labor dispute
 - Multiple murders and various alleged shootouts
 - Mississippi National Guard was used to protect strikebreakers (see newspaper clippings and corporate account below) - McComb MS (placed under martial law during the strike) was founded specifically to support the Illinois Central shops at the New Orleans end of their operations and became notorious for decades for anti-Black violence https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McComb,_Mississippi
 - **[Congressional testimony from Illinois Central President C.H. Markham on the Harriman Railroad System Strike](#)**: "The state of Mississippi is the second most important state served by the Illinois Central system, mileage being considered. In that state there were two principal storm centers, McComb and Water Valley, these being the points where our shops are located. We had some trouble at Durant, Miss., where the freight handlers were threatened with violence, and at Vicksburg there were occasional acts of vandalism, whereby the engines were disabled and the operation of the railroad somewhat interfered with. At Jackson, Miss., on the 26th of October, 27 cars had their air hose cut, and on November 14 at the same point, a messenger boy was struck on the head with a club, knocking him senseless. We had considerable trouble at Jackson on account of the clerks' strike, due to the destruction of waybills and records, whereby our shipments were confused and our deliveries interfered with. This was a practice which will be discussed in more detail in connection with my treatment of the situation at Memphis. Outside of these incidents, our difficulties were at McComb and Water Valley, and I will address myself with particularity to

these points. On October 3, 1911, we operated into McComb a special train carrying a number of men destined for McComb and New Orleans, these being persons whom we had employed to take the place of the strikers. Information had evidently been furnished to the strikers and their sympathizers that this train would arrive. In any event there were probably 250 armed men in and about the station at McComb when this train reached that point. A number of the men were disembarked at McComb for use at that point and the rest of the trainload were taken to New Orleans. At South McComb or while the train bound for New Orleans was passing that point the train was fired on by perhaps 250 armed men. Fortunately the men, by not exposing themselves at the windows or doors, escaped without harm. On the same day, two camp cars at the shops, where 123 employees were sleeping, were fired on and other violent demonstrations were made. So serious did this situation become, the local authorities were entirely unable to cope with it and the governor of the state of Mississippi was asked for troops to protect the property of the company to preserve order. The first of these troops reached McComb at 2:20 o'clock the morning of October 4. Just prior to the arrival, the charge of dynamite was exploded in the middle of the railroad tracks near the office building. On the morning of October 4, there being then present at McComb only a comparatively small number of troops, a mob assembled near the shops and served notice upon the local officers of the company that the men then at work for the company would not be permitted to remain. There were threats of attack upon the shops and the intimation that dynamite would be used if these men were not promptly removed. As stated, there were not at that time enough soldiers presents to control the situation and the governor of the state, the Sheriff of Pike County Mississippi, and the commander of the state guards united in a request to the railroad company asking that the men at McComb be immediately removed; otherwise these authorities felt that there would be a wholesale massacre. Yielding to this request from the authorities, the men were removed from McComb by special train being escorted out of the city by detail estate guards. Very soon thereafter the number of soldiers at McComb was increased just as fast as they could be hurried to the scene. On October 13, 425 soldiers and 37 officers were on duty at that point. Thereafter the company was enabled to recruit its force at McComb and to reopen its shops being under the protection of the state troops. It was found necessary however to build a stockade around the shops and of course to maintain a commissary. These troops remained at McComb until about March 1, although the number was diminished from time to time as the situation improved. On January 17, 1912 occurred a very unfortunate event near McComb. Five Negro laborers employed as helpers in the shops at McComb lived at Summit Mississippi, a town at three miles north of McComb. It was the custom of these employees to return to Summit each night after the days' work was over. While these laborers were returning from the shops to their homes, they were fired upon at night, two being killed, one fatally wounded, and two slightly wounded. The local authorities and the governor of the state took active steps to apprehend the persons guilty of this crime, and six persons were arrested charged with murder. All of these were strikers. Some of these men were subsequently indicted by the grand jury, but it was found impossible to convict them since the proof was largely circumstantial. The commissary at McComb was closed about February 1 and thereafter there was little or no difficulty. This railroad maintains a repair shop at Water Valley Mississippi in the northern part of the state. Shortly after the strike we employed a considerable number of men to take the place of

the strikers. The trouble there culminated in an attack upon the shop on October 6, 1911. Indeed on October 4, our shop was invaded by a mob and orders were given to all the employees to leave the town immediately under threat of being fired upon. This mob was armed with shotguns and revolvers. At 11:30 of the same night, certain camp cars which were occupied by employees were fired upon. On October 6 occurred the most serious disturbance at Water Valley. At that time the shop was assaulted by an armed mob and a great number of shots fired through the windows. The employees were absolutely without any protection at that time and fled from the shop in freight and disorder. Previous to this attack the shop had been visited by local officers, the men searched for weapons, and the fact was developed that none of the employees were armed. After this attack the governor ordered state troops to be moved to Water Valley, where they remained until about the 1st of February. After the arrival of the troops there was some disorder, consisting of attempts to spike down the switch, shooting toward the shop, assaults upon employees and so forth. Some of these assaults will be referred to later in discussing measures which were taken in the courts to protect our property in Mississippi. When the strike of the clerks occurred on 25 September as has been stated quite a number of records were destroyed at Jackson Mississippi causing the utmost confusion in the handling of freight. In order to prevent a recurrence of this form of injury on 27 September 1911 the railroad company filed suit in the federal court at Jackson asking for an injunction against the striking clerks and particularly seeking to prevent them from interfering with the records and business of the company and to enjoining them from committing acts of violence and making threats against the companies employees. An injunction was issued on 28 September which was served on a number of the striking clerks. On the second day of October 1911 the railroad company filed another bill at Jackson Mississippi against the mechanical employees. This bill while it took the form of a separate suit was in effect and amendments to the previous suit so broadened as to include the shop employees. This suit was filed in the Southern District of Mississippi and was based upon certain acts of violence in certain interference with the property of the company at Jackson, Canton, Brookhaven, McComb, and elsewhere. A restraining order was secured immediately upon the filing of the bill and this was served upon a number of strikers at points where violence had been common."

- The railroad did experience a lot of problems in the opening months as they fell behind on locomotive and car maintenance (Mattoon Gazette Dec 19 1911) and experienced track maintenance problems. They repeatedly tried to suggest that train accidents were due to radicals committing acts of sabotage or trying to bomb the trains (Day Book Dec 27 1911), but this seems like a fanciful cover for their problems as they re-trained workers. Many customers moved their business to other competing railroads temporarily to avoid problems with the strike.
- In addition to "union scabs" (see below), a major feature of this strike was the used of Black and immigrant strikebreakers by the railroad system, which worsened tensions
- Union Scabs:
 - On our Joe Hill episode we mentioned he wrote a song for this strike, reacting to the railroad's divide-and-conquer strategy of using (craft) unionized rail workers from other occupations as scab workers (aka "union scabs") against the striking shopmen's union:
<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2020/11/24/nov-22-2020-the-execution-of-the-songwriter-joe-hill-by-the-murderous-capitalist-class-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-334/>
 Here is the Peet Seeger version of the song. It is not particularly historically

accurate and references the wrong railroad (SP instead of IC):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8oCmfd85IQ>

- According to the history book cited earlier, the so-called “brotherhood” unions representing the engineers, firemen, conductors, and trainmen respectively represented less than 1/7th of the Illinois Central employees (in 1916 figures), “but their pay was high, averaging probably twice that of shopmen, office clerks, stationmen, or section hands.”
- <https://www.texasaficio.org/heritage-texas-labor>
 - “The nation's daily press strongly endorsed the railroad monopolies' cause and refused to publicize the shopmen's side of the dispute.”
 - “The episode provided an important lesson to all American workingmen willing to learn from the experience. Management federations were too tough for individual unions. Organized labor could hope to compete only by fashioning comparable organizations.”
- <https://books.google.com/books?id=mqKt6oi00QcC&pg=PA248&lpg=PA248&dq=1911+central+shopmen%27s+strike&source=bl&ots=a9Q8w8argH&sig=ACfU3U3GFb-7qWmVaO-R2y1GAXcEDXoUeQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewizyLKvu4vvAhXxct8KHcHrAu84MhDoATADegQIBxAD#v=onepage&q=1911%20central%20shopmen's%20strike&f=false>
 - “This strike differed from others in which serious violence took place in union recognition was not the cause of the conflict Single crafts had recognized by this carrier for a number of years but the carrier refused negotiate a common contract with the system federation a central body of crafts Following the establishment of the Railway Employees Department the Illinois Central Railroad was requested in June 1911 to deal instead of singly with the Machinists Steam Fitters Railway Clerks Boilermakers and Sheet Metal Workers Unions The carrier and a strike was called on the entire line of the Illinois Central The decided to replace the strikers Violence was reported all along the of way of the carrier In Mississippi one of the more important areas by the Illinois Central violence erupted at a number of points When train carrying strikebreakers arrived at McComb on October 3 1911 it was by about 250 armed men who opened fire on the new arrivals Ten men killed cars were burned and strikebreakers were afterward removed the strike zone by militia called in by the Governor.”
- We will leave the 1922 nationwide shopmen’s strike for a different episode