

**AFD Ep 449 Links and Notes - Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886 [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Nov 20, 2022**

**After we recorded this episode, the [results were released](#) for the 2022 rail worker votes on tentative agreements. The engineers narrowly approved the proposed contract, while the conductors narrowly rejected it.**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Southwest\\_Railroad\\_Strike\\_of\\_1886](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Southwest_Railroad_Strike_of_1886)  
<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/great-southwestern-strike-4911/>  
<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/great-southwest-strike>

[Various newspaper clippings from the time available as scans online today: Fort Worth Daily Gazette, The Marshall Messenger, St. Louis Globe Democrat, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Parsons Weekly Sun, etc.]

- [Intro - Bill] In March, April, and the beginning of May of 1886, there was a significant railroad strike in the old southwest – which is to say Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and Kansas – targeted against one of the wealthiest and most infamous of the era's rail (and telegraph) tycoons, Jay Gould, owner or indirect controller of the Union Pacific, Missouri Pacific, the Missouri-Kansas-&-Texas, and previously the Texas & Pacific (then in federal receivership but with his stock still being the largest), among other lines in the region, who was notorious and reviled by much of the general public within his own lifetime. The focus of the labor action ended up being largely on the Missouri Pacific and its erstwhile partner the Texas & Pacific, under federal management. Unfortunately, as was the case with many major railroad strikes we have covered, the action was undertaken somewhat haphazardly, without solidarity from other unions needed to win and with little enough planning and coordination to succeed, but far too much advance notice to prevent the effective deployment of strikebreakers and state force. Indeed, one reason Jay Gould was so notorious even to his peers was that he always seemed to play every crisis to his advantage and profit, from recessions to Wall Street panics to strikes, and he often precipitated these crises in the first place on his own timetable, to ensure he would come out on top. The Great Southwest Railroad strike of 1886 seems to have been no exception. Federally appointed receivers of Gould's former Texas and Pacific, closely inter-linked to his remaining holdings in the region, took a hard line as well against the strikers, firing them all within days and contending that they had walked out without explanation or formal grievance report. Like many rail executives of the era, these receivers were Civil War veteran officers. As with many bankruptcy situations, earlier union contracts no longer seemed to hold up, frustrating workers. And – despite its size – the strike features all the classic hallmarks of the unsuccessful strikes we have covered previously on the show: Some degree of frustrated spontaneity beyond the control of leadership, the use of government force against the strikers, heaviest participation among certain rail occupations that support and maintain operations but do not actually run the trains (in this case by the boilermakers and machinists, as well as track section maintenance workers, clerks, and telegraph operators ... as opposed to the engineers, firemen, or conductors, who didn't strike), divisions among the unions on how to respond to provocations and contract disputes, and a rapid fizzling of public interest, let alone support... As usual, the newspapers largely backed the owners and customers over the workers.
- [Bill] News hook: With the lingering threat, as we record this episode on November 20, 2022, of a nationwide rail strike by several different unions, this history is a reminder of the importance of obtaining the solidarity of all the different occupations within the industry before undertaking a strike. It is also a reminder that the size and scale of

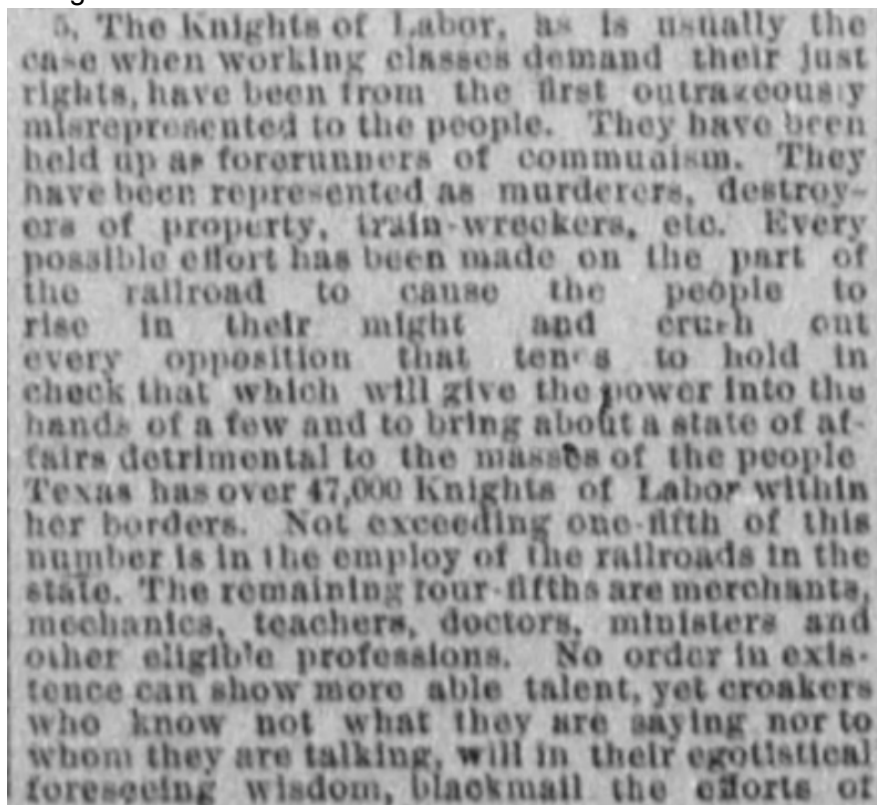
walkouts is not alone a guarantee of success. (We will know more tomorrow about what is coming down the line when the engineers and conductors release the vote tallies of their members on the proposed contracts. The Boilermakers, signalmen, and maintenance of way workers have already rejected contracts. But seven other unions have voted to accept new contracts.)

<https://www.trains.com/trn/news-reviews/news-wire/boilermakers-union-becomes-third-to-reject-tentative-contract-deal/>

- [Rachel] Background: Wabash Line strike of 1885 - The 1886 strike happened just one year after a previous clash between the Knights of Labor and Jay Gould. In 1885, the Knights of Labor shut down the entire Wabash Line after Gould fired some Knights of Labor shipmen, and the union's members on other railways refused to run any trains that carried Wabash cars. This stoppage forced Gould to the bargaining table, and he agreed to stop discriminating against Knights of Labor members, and in exchange union president Terence V. Powderly called off the strike and promised no further walkouts without labor-management discussions. Another part of the agreement was that "no man should be discharged without due notice and investigation.". This labor victory excited workers and increased union membership from about 100,000 to over 700,000 over the next year.
- [Rachel] However, Gould didn't keep his end of the bargain, and continued to discriminate against union members and routinely cut wages without notice. One Arkansas Knight said that he was forced to work 13 hours for only 10 hours' pay, and his wages decreased from \$1.50 to \$1.25 per day. This mistreatment of Knights culminated in the firing of a Marshall, Texas, union leader named Charles A. Hall, for attending a union meeting on company time. This led Martin Irons of District Assembly #101 of the Knights to call for a strike starting on March 1, 1886. Within a week, more than 200,000 workers went on strike in 5 states: Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas. On March 8th, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* headline read "Traffic Throttled: The Gould System at the Mercy of the Knights of Labor."
- [Bill] Although many Knights took part in the strike, their demands weren't clear to the public. A March 4 1886 *Fort Worth Gazette* article tried to ascertain the causes of the strike. It is heavily implied that the Knights of Labor are secretive and mysterious and non-members can only guess at the causes of their grievances and decision to walk off the job. The Knights of Labor local mentions the use of convict and Chinese labor (more notes from me on this below). I think it is really probably key here that Gould was no longer officially in control of the T&P, but the workers (and media) were treating it as if it were; this allowed the federal receivers to act like they had nothing to do with what was going on in the Gould system and had been unjustly targeted for no reason. (Divide & conquer.) This article also mentions there had very recently been significant rainfall in some parts of Texas that had weakened the condition of the tracks, which might be relevant when evaluating later allegations of track sabotage. It also might explain the timing of the walkouts by some workers, if they realized their work was urgently needed for track maintenance.
- [Bill] Further *FW Gazette* articles weren't any more sympathetic to the strikers. On March 12, 1886, they featured a range of editorial clippings from around the country, largely quite hostile to the strike. It reminded me, especially the part from the NY Post about business community's fear of an impending Socialist Revolution, that this strike occurred just before and ended the day of the Haymarket bombing in Chicago. Another item in this page is the Trades Assembly of St Louis endorsing the strike, although I'm not sure if they took further action beyond endorsement. Another item lists the demands from Martin Irons of the Knights of Labor local and although various demands are made there are several very interesting ones, including an end to the use of convict labor by the

railroads (reflecting concern over the growing practice in the post-Reconstruction era, [see episode 317 from July 2020](#)), more leave time for railroad workers to go home and see their families if they were working far away (which sounds familiar to present-day complaints), and equal pay for equal work (which presumably had a racial dimension in the context of the 1886 strike). I also noticed here that passenger trains were mostly still running without interference and US mail trains were almost always running without interference as long as the track was undamaged; I am not sure if these were strategic choices to tamp down public backlash and avoid harsher federal intervention or if there were just operational reasons why the strikers were not really involved with those trains.

- [Bill] On March 18, the *FW Gazette* listed a whole range of incidents of sabotage action (denied by the Knights), then a list of resolutions and letters from the petit bourgeoisie mostly denouncing the strike and labor's "dictation" of how businesses ought to be run... (Also in one case a guy acting as a deputy US Marshal was arrested and convicted for possession of a pistol in confronting the strikers, which apparently wasn't allowed at the time surprisingly, and supposedly some of the jury and justice of the peace were KOL members.) Interestingly most of the reports from various towns in the region simply say that everything was quiet and uneventful. They do quote the (unhinged as usual) New York Times insisting that the obstinate and tyrannical Knights of Labor is poisoning drinking water etc etc, obviously untrue. There's an interesting line from one of the railroads saying that they will only entertain wage increase requests from employees themselves to their immediate supervisors, not from the Knights of Labor to the firm.
- [Bill] On March 26, the *Gazette* reprinted an entire Knights of Labor local resolution. Two noteworthy points: 1) despite other successes with black/white organizing, they clearly reject Chinese workers [then in use in very remote parts of West Texas, per the first article from March 4]. 2) There's a long juicy section I can read from (in point 5, sorry it's a blurry image scan) about all the epithets that the media uses against the KOL including calling them communists.



5. The Knights of Labor, as is usually the case when working classes demand their just rights, have been from the first outrageously misrepresented to the people. They have been held up as forerunners of communism. They have been represented as murderers, destroyers of property, train-wreckers, etc. Every possible effort has been made on the part of the railroad to cause the people to rise in their might and crush out every opposition that tends to hold in check that which will give the power into the hands of a few and to bring about a state of affairs detrimental to the masses of the people. Texas has over 47,000 Knights of Labor within her borders. Not exceeding one-fifth of this number is in the employ of the railroads in the state. The remaining four-fifths are merchants, mechanics, teachers, doctors, ministers and other eligible professions. No order in existence can show more able talent, yet croakers who know not what they are saying nor to whom they are talking, will in their egotistical foreseeing wisdom, blackmail the efforts of

their best friends, who have made them what they are, and upon whom they are now dependent for future prosperity. They prefer to take issue with a grinding syndicate that would pauperize this country rather than aid a struggling friend, risking his all to avert the coming calamity. Such men will at some future time see their mistake and regret the past. The day of reckoning with pooled corporations is at hand. Never in the annals of history was there such an awakening to the mighty effort to stamp out, by the organized capitalists, of the laboring man's interests. Never was there such a demand for labor to organize for protection only. It must be done, and let every labor union come to the front and throw its power into the scale of justice for a common good. Make one sure victory and arbitrate, that which no man with a just cause can refuse will forever reign supreme.

- [Rachel] In contrast, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch had a much more even-handed view of the strike, even somewhat sympathetic. March 11 *St Louis Post-Dispatch* afternoon edition reports a complete standstill on the Missouri Pacific that day, despite efforts by the railroad to resume operations. This account says the Brakemen defected to the strikers and refused to touch cars. Firemen weren't officially on strike as a union, but some individuals refused to work. Engineers did not back the strike but were also working to rule and would not do more than contractually required to cover other people's usual tasks. It was emphasized that the cooperation of the engineers was going to be make or break for the strikers. The paper also observed many times that the Knights of Labor were calm and peaceful and well-organized to maintain their own discipline without need for law enforcement intervention on the scene of any strike action. Ferry companies and wagon renters did a big business moving goods across the river into St Louis when rail traffic on the bridges stopped and storage space ran out in and around railyards.
- [Rachel] March 12 *St Louis Post-Dispatch* afternoon edition extensively covers the use of police to both guard and actually operate Missouri Pacific equipment in St Louis. In some instances, they stoked the fires and rang the bell themselves. The workers were very unhappy about this. A conductor was crushed to death when he slipped while helping to switch cars in a railyard in place of the usual workers. It was also reported that many teamsters hired to carry goods by horse cart in place of rail service were overloading their wagons and their poor horses to such a degree that a Humane Society official was dispatched to stand watch by one of the road bridges to monitor for the welfare of the horses passing by. This edition of the paper also explains the Knights of Labor's favorite tactic of simply walking up to a locomotive and politely asking the crew to stop working, which sometimes worked and sometimes did not. The employees of a shoe factory also pooled together \$20 at 25 cents each to send in solidarity to the striking railroad workers and signed their names in a letter to the editor, which was very cool because it was a broad group of factory workers, including both men and women. **An anonymous Knights of Labor member also tells the newspaper reporter that it is unfair to consider the Texas & Pacific as being disconnected from the Gould**

**system because of its receivership status considering that the receiver used to be the in-house counsel for Gould and that the receivership was a maneuver to try to break contracts with the workers, which would probably not be taken seriously for other creditors owed payments for services.**

- [Rachel] March 15 *St Louis Post-Dispatch* afternoon edition reports on the railroads' strategy of seeking legal injunctions against the strikers in every county court across the system where there is a railyard or shop. There was another donation of support to the strikers from a marble mantle & grate company's workers and from a second shoe company's workers. \$50 was donated by the Father Mathew Young Men's Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society. They said in a statement that "an injury to one is an injury to all." **Many employees of the Post-Dispatch newspaper itself also donated money, adding up to \$31.50.**
- [Rachel] On March 29, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* very optimistically claimed the strike was over due to Missouri Pacific recognition of the union and agreement to arbitration and that this would be the last big railroad strike in US history. Neither of these points proved to be true. They also praised the "conservative influence" of the Knights of Labor in preventing things from getting out of hand or becoming violent and credited this far more than any law enforcement threats or presence. The article praises both the Knights and the St Louis police for maintaining order and favorably compares the situation to some ongoing unrest and violence in Belgium that was apparently making waves in the US that week. (The Belgian strike of 1886 aka Social Revolt of 1886: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgian\\_strike\\_of\\_1886](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgian_strike_of_1886))
- [Rachel] In contrast to previous disputes between the Knights of Labor and Gould, other railroad unions didn't support this strike. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen refused to honor the strike, and its members continued working. Furthermore, Gould immediately hired strikebreakers and Pinkerton detectives. The strikers quickly turned to sabotage to stop work: assaulting and disabling moving trains, threatening notes and visits to working engineers, and arson fires in yards. In one notable incident, a crowd of 600 Knights and sympathizers in DeSoto, Missouri marched on the roundhouse to drain the locomotives' boilers. Another tactic of the striking workers was to let steam locomotives go cold. It would take up to 6 hours for the railroad to reheat the engines for use.
- [Rachel] Any sympathy and goodwill that the public had towards the strikers dissipated with the escalating violence. *Law-and-order leagues organized in town after town in an effort to restore freight traffic and social stability, including in Texarkana, where a committee of "citizens" retook the shops in late March. Against the wishes of the national Knights leadership, a number of Knights, including Martin Irons, the strike's chief organizer, pushed for the strike's expansion nationally and advocated, it seems, the use of violence against strikebreakers. Bloody clashes between pro-strike crowds and company-hired deputies in Fort Worth, Texas; East St. Louis, Illinois; and elsewhere left at least nine dead and dozens wounded. Strikers exchanged heavy fire with deputies outside of Little Rock in mid-March after commandeering an engine, and again on April 8 when forty to seventy-five Knights approached deputies guarding the shops and demanded that they leave.*
- [Bill] On April 26, a sabotaged freight train was derailed near Wyandotte, Kansas, burying two non-striking crewmembers in the wreckage and mud from the Kaw River. An April 29 article in the *Parsons Weekly Sun* reported on the wreck, and also on President Cleveland's address to Congress regarding labor disputes. He was at the time in the middle of his first term. Most listeners will probably recall that he was the President, in his second and non-consecutive term, during the Pullman Strike of 1894, when he used federal troops to intervene. In this 1886 message to Congress he suggested the creation



of a federal arbitration commission to try to resolve these types of labor relations problems. Such a commission would have automatic jurisdiction in disputes involving interstate commerce but could also be requested to intervene by state governments for disputes involving only a single state under the clause in Article IV Section 4 of the US Constitution that allows states to apply for federal help in protecting them against incidents of "domestic violence," meaning localized insurrections or riots. ([The arbitration proposal was adopted 2 years later](#), although without much consequence except as precedent for future laws.) The same page reports as well that the US Census Bureau had at some point begun tracking labor disputes to make an accounting of the number, size, and causes. **Of the more than 800 recorded strikes or lockouts in 1885, and they were nearly all strikes not lockouts, more than 500 had been over disputes in wage levels.** Strikes focused on working hours tended to succeed, while strikes focused on operational rules tended to fail.

- [Rachel] *After these incidents, Gould requested military assistance from the governors of the affected states. The governor of Missouri mobilized the state militia; the governor of Texas mobilized both the state militia and the Texas Rangers. The governor of Kansas refused after local officials reported no incidents of violence, despite claims by railway executives that mobs had seized control of trains and rail yards were burning. The exercise of state police power on behalf of the railways led union members to retaliate. As the violence spread, public opinion turned against the workers. The physical attacks by the Pinkerton agents scared thousands of workers into returning to work. The strike was officially called off on May 4.*
- [Rachel] Aftermath of the strike:  
<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/great-southwestern-strike-4911/> *The Knights' defeat notwithstanding, the struggles of 1885 and 1886 produced a biracial alliance among both black and white Gould system railroaders. While fragile and limited, it drew on workers' common hostility to monopoly, labor exploitation, and the employment of Chinese and convict laborers, sentiments also shared by the mass of urban workers and farming people across the region. In Little Rock, many black Knights and a number of white Knights—particularly the Knights' state organizer, Dan Tomson—allied in July 1886 to support a strike by black cotton-pickers reputedly led by Hugh Gill, outside the city. White and black Knights went on to do significant work in such populist groups as the Agricultural Wheel and the Union-Labor Party in the mid- and late 1880s.*
- [Rachel] But for the Knights of Labor as an organization, this defeat was a heavy blow. This defeat was an important lesson for management, who learned that their stonewalling tactics and calling for government militias and federal marshals were successful in breaking strikes. This defeat, along with the unsuccessful strike by the Knights of Labor in Thibodaux, Louisiana in 1887 (which will be the topic for a future episode), was the beginning of the decline of the Knights of Labor. By 1890, membership in the Knights of Labor cratered, falling by 90 percent. This led Samuel Gompers of the cigar makers union and Peter J. McGuire of the carpenters union, along with other labor leaders, to organize and create a more effective labor organization, an alliance of trade unions. *On December 8, 1886, they and a few other delegates met in Columbus, Ohio, to create the American Federation of Labor.*
- **LINKS TO PREVIOUS EPISODES ON RAIL STRIKES:** Our past major rail strike episodes are [315](#), [354](#), & [366](#)