

## AFD Ep 366 Links and Notes - Great Railroad Strike of 1922 [Bill/Rachel/Kelley] - Recording April 18

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Railroad\\_Strike\\_of\\_1922](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Railroad_Strike_of_1922) [We will discuss in the episode some of the problems and drastic incompleteness of the Wikipedia account of this strike.]
  - [Bill] Intro: Also called the “Railway Shopmen’s Strike,” the Great Railroad Strike of 1922, represents a much more widespread sequel to the disastrous 1911 shopmen’s strike on the Illinois Central and Harriman system railroads that we covered on episode 354 in February 2021: <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/03/01/feb-28-2021-the-illinois-central-shop-mens-strike-of-1911-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-354/> It also marks the end of the big strikewave that followed World War One – and it occurred in the new legal environment of the 1916 Adamson Act on rail worker labor protections that we discussed on the most recent bonus episode #365 (<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/04/14/preview-apr-13-2021-the-adamson-act-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-365/>) – which affected train operators but not repair shop workers – as well as in the aftermath of wartime nationalization in 1917 and then postwar re-privatization in 1920 that we discussed in episode 224 from 2018 on the US Railroad Administration (<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2018/05/08/may-8-2018-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-224/>). Wages had been better under federal government control during the war, although this was somewhat offset by wartime inflation of the price of goods and services, but the cut in wages in 1921 after re-privatization stung. Additionally, a 1920 agreement to establish what amounted to sectoral bargaining rights by the AFL for all of the nation’s rail shop workers began to fall apart as soon as the new, less labor-friendly administration under Harding, Coolidge, and Attorney General Harry Daugherty took office in 1921. (See the book review linked below.)
  - [Kelley] Key strike data:
    - Seven of the 16 railway labor organizations in existence at the time participated
    - About 400,000 people participated
    - At least ten people were killed (mostly strikers or the family of strikers)
    - In 1922 wages were cut once more - this time by seven cents, or 12% of the workers wages. The “big four” unions (the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, the Order of Railway Conductors, and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen) were not affected by these cuts and thus didn’t participate in striking, preventing potential solidarity. Seven of the unions voted to begin striking as a result of the wage decrease. On July 1, 400,000 railway workers began striking, including 100,000 in the Chicago area.
    - Railroad companies quickly began to use strikebreakers to keep their operations moving.
    - “Railway workers were divided not only by craft, however, but also by race. Several of the railway brotherhoods denied African-American workers membership in their ranks on strictly racial grounds; the excluded workers had no economic or moral incentive to honor the work stoppage. Thousands of black railway workers crossed picket lines and helped to undermine strike efforts, but that was not universal; in places like North Carolina, Louisiana, and El Paso, Texas, black workers actively supported the work stoppage.”

- Strikes became violent - strikers sabotaged rail cars and railways, company guards shot strikers, the involvement of law enforcement and state guard troops also escalated tensions.
- [Bill] The strike was launched July 1, 1922 and lasted through nearly all of October despite a court injunction of September 1st (with pockets of ongoing strike action continuing in September, October, and even later than October with less conciliatory railroads). **Note that Wikipedia is incorrect to say that the strike ended in August because the strike actually got bigger with more allied strikes joining after the September 1st court injunction, eventually leading to the Baltimore Agreement in mid-September between the unions and 50 railroads, which was eventually adopted by 126 railroads by the end of October.** Some consider the strike to have been a failure, in that the workers' initial demands were largely not met ~~other than reducing shop work outsourcing~~, but contemporary accounts (see the Dec 1922 Monthly Labor Review article linked below) suggest that at the time it was viewed as more of a draw, with workers giving up most of their demands but protecting their workers' rights to get back to work without loss of seniority, and with first 50 and then eventually 126 railroads making gestures toward reconciliation in the Baltimore Agreement signed in mid-September, which they might (as in past strikes) have skipped in favor of crushing victory over workers. A Sept 1922 article in The Railway Age argued that the strike had been very costly and damaging for the railroads and would hopefully motivate moderates among both owners and unions to seek a more conciliatory labor peace strategy for the years to follow. It was also undeniably a huge show of organizational force by the unions to achieve a nationwide 400,000 person simultaneous walkout with nearly a 100% participation rate, even if it didn't win much of anything.
- [Bill] Tactical retreat: A seniority issue dragged out the strike even after it was clear it had lost its strategic objectives:
  - Some railroads tried to strip strikers of their "seniority rights" and the Railway Labor Board strikers had forfeited their arbitration rights guaranteed under the Transportation Act of 1920.
  - [Rachel] The December 1922 article by Gadsby (linked below) points out that the reluctance of the carriers to comply with the attempted mediation by the RLB is what drew out the strike longer. The strikers were willing to engage in good-faith negotiations, but the seniority issue became a sticking point.
  - [Rachel] THE BALTIMORE AGREEMENT (September 13, 1922, with 50 railroads signing initially; 126 by October 27) contents:
    - All men return to work at their current wages and conditions
    - All seniority to return to June 1922 conditions, and men to be called back to work in that order.
    - Labor disputes arbitrated by a committee composed of six representatives to be named by the chief officers of the organizations, parties hereto, and six railroad officers or representatives selected from and by the railroads agreeing to the agreement
    - Both parties pledge themselves that no intimidation nor oppression shall be practiced or permitted against any of the employees who have remained at work or have taken service, or as against those who resume work under this understanding

- The workers did claim victory in regards to subcontracting repair work to non-union subcontracted labor, but this was not in the formalized Baltimore Agreement. There were continued strike actions against the carriers that did not sign on to the agreement, and the repair issue became so urgent, so this pressure may have worked.
- [Kelley] Federal intervention against the strike:
  - On July 11, President Harding issued a proclamation that the workers and railway companies split the difference and meet in the middle. Railroad officials pledged to stop subcontracting work to non-union shops, but would not give ground on restoring seniority to striking railway workers.
  - US Attorney General Harry Daugherty was a critic of unions and sought to escalate the federal government's role in the issue. He sent US Marshals into the field to protect the property of railway companies and break up the strikes.
  - Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover and Secretary of Labor James John Davis had a different approach and wished for a negotiated end to the strike. Their approach won President Harding over.
  - On September 1, a federal judge issued an injunction against striking, assembling, picketing, etc. "One of the most extreme pronouncements in American history violating any number of constitutional guarantees of free speech and free assembly".
- [Kelley] <https://thebhc.org/sites/default/files/beh/BEHprint/v019/p0271-p0278.pdf>
  - Strike order was not actually ended by union until 1928.
  - The Penn Railroad wanted a return to pre-war railways with no union activity involved. Ironically, because they did not want to take orders from the RLB, they did not enact the wage decrease that started the strike. As a result, only about half of their workers participated. Still, they went all out to defeat the strike and spent a lot of money to replace workers and develop spy networks because of their desire to get rid of unions altogether.
  - "In a July 13 letter to W. R. Scott, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, W. W. Atterbury outlined his strategy: "Our organization plans are not different from the organization which we have set up at all times to cope with matters of this kind." Each region established its own "permanent strike organization" and "all of the supervisory officers... immediately assumed their respective strike duties"
- [?] Here's a bunch of propoganda (?) on dangerous worker sabotage of braking systems in highland West Virginia/Western Maryland: [https://www.times-news.com/news/local\\_news/nation-s-1922-railroad-strike-became-matter-of-life-and-death/article\\_9ffac5a1-d168-50e1-ab88-e267ee1aee12.html](https://www.times-news.com/news/local_news/nation-s-1922-railroad-strike-became-matter-of-life-and-death/article_9ffac5a1-d168-50e1-ab88-e267ee1aee12.html) He doesn't mention the likely possibility that the train equipment was just wearing out due to lack of repair during the strike.
- [Rachel] The IWW West Coast Weekly publication shows the rise and fall of the 1922 strike as charted in the headlines every few weeks about the rail strike and the problems it was running into (at least from the IWW's perspective) <https://depts.washington.edu/iww/yearbook1922.shtml>
  - 7/29/1922 RAIL STRIKES FEEL THE NEED OF SOLIDARITY: Surprising Vigor of Rank and File Aids Coal Miners; "Big Four" Still Scabbing
  - 8/5/1922 BIG 4 BROTHERHOOD SCABS CURBING STRIKE: No Government Inspection; Repairs Between Stations, Scabs Pay Being Reduced
  - 8/12/1922 HESITATE OVER GENERAL STRIKE: Brotherhoods Threaten to Walk Out Because of Danger; Decide to Wait

- 8/19/1922 RANK AND FILE DRIFTING INTO RAIL STRIKE: Big Four Members Quitting, Union Heads Can't Prevent, Government Hints Arrests
- 8/26/1922 New Conference in Rail Strike
- 9/2/1922 Trainmen Would Aid Strike But Union Leader Threatens
- 10/21/1922 "The I.W.W. and the Rails- How They Could Have Won" The I.W.W. and the Rails- How They Could Have Won
- [Bill] There is a whole book on this particular strike, which we did not obtain a copy of: "Power at Odds: the 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike" by Colin J. Davis, The Working Class in American History Series, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997 – but you can read a 1998 book review from the State Historical Society of Iowa here: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=10197&context=annals-of-iowa>
  - For every Pennsylvania Railroad worker on strike, there were two private guards hired by the railroad to counter them.
  - Colin J. Davis also wrote a 2007 journal article I couldn't access about this strike. He argues in a footnote on the first page that the 1922 strike had a more direct and visible impact in more communities across the US than the 1894 Pullman strike or the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00236569200890221?journalCode=clah20> This seems consistent with contemporary views on the strike after its collapse, as seen in the December 1922 article in Monthly Labor Review by Margaret Gadsby, who described it at the time as "the most extensive and complete tie-up of that branch of the railroad industry [i.e. rail shops] that this country has yet experienced. For practically three months, this strike has engrossed the attention of the country. For an even longer period, it has partially paralyzed the transportation facilities of the Nation and endangered the safety of the traveling public" due to the "deteriorating" condition of train equipment while the repair shops were on strike. Coal wasn't moving and fruit crops risked going bad. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41828540>
- [Bill & Kelley] 1911 strike compare & contrast:
  - Continued frustration with outsourcing of shop work to non-union subcontractors, something which also made striking difficult to prevail
  - Violent retaliation against striking workers and ample use of state power and state guard troops to protect strike-breakers
  - Labor racism (depending on location)
  - Much closer to a general strike (at least within the entire sector nationally) as contrasted with the desperate requests in 1911 to call a general strike, but still not much luck in activating the other railroad unions (who actually operated the trains) to support the shopmen
  - It doesn't seem like this strike ended in total disaster the way the 1911 strike did. It was probably too much to hire 400,000 new workers so people did get their jobs back.