

Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877, by David O. Stowell. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. xii, 181 pp. Illustrations, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$31.00 cloth, 15.00 paper.

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The year 1877 witnessed a spontaneous uprising of railway workers that rippled across the country. Fueled by a series of wage cuts, the strike spread from line to line, city to city, and region to region. For the first time in its history, the nation confronted an unprecedented outbreak of worker unrest. Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco experienced rioting, with some locales reporting a general uprising of workers. While railway employees in certain Iowa towns joined the walkout, the state experienced little of the intense disorder and violence that accompanied the strike in large cities. Using armed intervention by police, militia, and federal troops, the railroads broke the strikes. Although the strikers suffered defeat, the outbreak of class conflict revealed both the power of the railroad operators and the stirrings of a nationwide labor movement.

David O. Stowell's *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* moves the historical conversation about that strike from one strictly about a labor upheaval to one that also embraces the rebellious acts of urban residents. He profiles the militant actions of diverse city crowds that included a significant number of people who were not railroad workers. With strikers and citizens in the streets, railroads faced a dual insurgency. Thus Stowell casts the conflict as both labor history and urban history.

Stowell argues that crowd actions constituted a powerful but often neglected dimension of the strikes. His study focuses on three cities in upstate New York: Albany, Syracuse, and Buffalo. Stowell presents a compelling case for the animosity of many citizens toward railroad encroachment on urban spaces. City street intersections and grade crossings became the physical flash points of tension between the railroad owners and local residents. Stowell chronicles the disruptions and dangers posed by rail traffic before, during, and after the walkouts. Railroad operations caused delays in pedestrian and commercial traffic, interfered with recreational and workplace activities, and injured and killed people with horrifying regularity. Residents confronted the railroads with petitions and lawsuits that usually proved futile. When rail workers walked off their jobs in the summer of 1877, frustrated and angry citizens joined the protesters, venting their rage by blocking

train movements, throwing stones, spiking switches, and attacking railroad property.

Social, geographical, and industrial factors conspired to create varying levels of strike activity in the three New York communities. Because of its larger population, greater industrialization, and more concentrated railway facilities, Buffalo recorded the most crowd incidents. Stowell acknowledges that the vast majority of those who took to the streets remain unknown. Although several thousand people participated in protest gatherings, only the names and occupations of the small number of those arrested appeared in the press. Using newspapers and city directories, Stowell compiled occupational data on 42 people arrested in Buffalo for crowd offenses. Railroad employees accounted for 24 percent of those arrested, and another 59 percent came from other segments of the working class. Newspaper reports also noted the presence of the unemployed, boys, women, and girls. Stowell argues that people from "the surrounding streets, residences, and neighborhoods" (116) swelled and outnumbered the ranks of the railway workers.

Stowell's study shows that large crowds contributed to the extensive turmoil surrounding the Great Strike of 1877. Based on his analysis of Albany, Syracuse, and Buffalo, he underscores the community impact of transportation strikes and the influence of those not employed by the railroads. Yet Stowell's portrait of the crowds suffers in several respects. He fails to outline the national context for this extraordinary uprising of railroad workers. We also learn little about the demographic and economic character of the three cities. Finally, the book provides no substantive discussion of the local railway employees' grievances.

In 1877, citizens in three New York cities used the occasion offered by the strike to retaliate against the disorder, noise, and peril that railroads brought to their streets and neighborhoods. Unlike strikes at factories, mines, or mills, the railroad strike offered an opportunity for other working-class citizens, who constituted a majority of the crowds, to demonstrate their solidarity with the strikers. While Stowell broadens our understanding of the role urban crowds played during the strike, his account neglects the pivotal role played by the strikers themselves in the initiation and trajectory of the outburst.

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