to obtain proof of the criminal activity of the Molly Maguires at any cost. Posing as a fugitive from justice, McParlan won his way into their confidence, and under circumstances not entirely clear, finally succeeded in turning up evidence in the fall of 1875 which led the authorities to make a series of arrests. His testimony on the stand and that of other witnesses who turned state’s evidence was in many instances suspect, but the trials resulted in the wholesale conviction of twenty-four of the Molly Maguires. Ten of them were hanged for murder, and the others were sentenced to jail for terms from two to seven years.

Peace and order were restored in the coal fields. Whatever the power and influence of the secret society had actually been, it was shattered by this attack. But the operators had also succeeded in breaking the Miners’ Benevolent Association and forcing the strikers back to work on management’s terms. The long strike ended in complete failure for the workers and the virtual collapse of their union.

**The Great Railroad Strikes**

Unemployment riots and violence in the anthracite coal fields were but prelude to the railroad strikes of 1877, which led to disorders and rioting that called for the intervention of federal troops before they could be suppressed. The workers at first commanded public sympathy. Their wages had been arbitrarily cut while high dividends were still being paid on watered stock, and the railways were in any event highly unpopular in the 1870s. “It is folly to blink at the fact,” the *New York Tribune* reported, “that the manifestations of Public Opinion are almost everywhere in sympathy with the insurrection.” But as the violence continued uncontrolled, the choice appeared to become one between civil law and chaos. Although not everyone agreed with the *Nation’s* blunt statement that the strikers should have been confronted by “trained bodies of men sufficient to overawe or crush them at the first onset,” it was recognized that the government could not evade its responsibility to restore public order.

The strikes, which broke out in early July 1877 in protest against the wage cuts, were spontaneous. The first one was on the Baltimore and Ohio, and it was at once followed by similar moves on the part of railway workers on the Pennsylvania, the New York

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Central, and the Erie. Within a brief time, all lines east of the Mississippi were affected, and the movement then spread to the Missouri Pacific, the St. Louis, Kansas and Northern, and other western lines. Railroad traffic throughout the country was interrupted and in sections completely paralyzed. As rioting flared up dangerously in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco, the country was confronted with its first national industrial outbreak. “It is wrong to call this a strike,” the St. Louis Republic exclaimed, “it is labor revolution.”

The strikers on the Baltimore and Ohio were the first to clash with authority; at Martinsburg, West Virginia, order was restored only after two hundred federal troops had been sent to the scene. Rioting on a much larger scale occurred in Baltimore. There the strikers stopped all trains, refused to allow them to move, and began to seize railroad property. When the militia, called out by the Governor of Maryland, marched from their armory to the railway station, a gathering crowd of workers and their sympathizers attacked them with brickbats, stones, and clubs. The troops opened fire and broke for the station, but the rioters had had a taste of blood. They kept up the assault and set fire to the station. When police and firemen arrived, the mob for a time tried to prevent them from putting out the blaze, but finally gave way. Disturbances continued through a wild and riotous night, and only the arrival of federal troops the next morning brought any real return of order. By then the toll of victims had mounted to nine persons killed and more than a score (of whom three later died) gravely injured.

In the meantime, a still more serious outbreak took place in Pittsburgh, where the strikers also stopped trains and took possession of railway property. Here popular sympathy was wholly with the railway workers because of a deep-seated resentment against the policies of the Pennsylvania Railroad. The local militia, openly fraternizing with the strikers, refused to take any action against them. The arrival of a force of 650 soldiers, dispatched from Philadelphia to protect railway property, consequently precipitated a pitched battle in which the troops opened fire and, after killing some twenty-five persons and wounding many more, took over possession of the roundhouse and machine shops.

The infuriated strikers, their ranks swelled by miners, mill hands, and factory workers, returned to the attack with arms seized from nearby gun shops and laid siege to the troops. As night fell, freight cars were set afire and pushed into the roundhouse until it, too, was blazing. The troops, surrounded by flames and nearly suffocated with
smoke, fought their way out amid a hail of bullets and retreated across the Allegheny River.

An enraged crowd, swelled to between four and five thousand persons, now had the field to itself. Railway tracks were torn up, freight and passenger cars broken open, and what could not otherwise be destroyed, was set afire. Some two thousand cars, the machine shops, a grain elevator, and two roundhouses housing one hundred and twenty-five locomotives went up in flames. The Union Depot itself was burned down. As the rioting continued unchecked, the more unruly and desperately poor and criminal elements broke into the liquor stores and began to pillage at will. They carried off furniture, clothing, and provisions.

"Here a brawny woman could be seen hurrying away with pairs of white kid slippers under her arms," read one contemporary description; "another carrying an infant, would be rolling a barrel of flour along the sidewalk, using her feet as the propelling power; here a man pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with white lead. Boys hurried through the crowd with large-sized family Bibles as their share of the plunder, while scores of females utilized aprons and dresses to carry flours, eggs, dry goods, etc. Bundles of umbrellas, fancy parasols, hams, bacons, leaf lard, calico, blankets, laces and flour were mixed together in the arms of robust men, or carried on hastily constructed hand barrows."

It was not until after the angry poor and unemployed had spent a whole weekend seizing or despoiling an estimated five to seven million dollars of property that the police, reinforced by bands of armed citizens, began to restore some semblance of order. In the meantime, the entire state militia had been called out, and, following an emergency cabinet meeting, President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered all federal troops in the Atlantic Department made available to cope with the emergency. Only when the regulars arrived in Pittsburgh did railway property finally receive full protection.

Headlines and editorials declared that Communism was at the bottom of the strike and responsible for its violence. It was described as "an insurrection, a revolution, an attempt of communists and vagabonds to coerce society, an endeavour to undermine American institutions." The New York Tribune stated that only force could subdue this "ignorant rabble with hungry mouths"; the New York Times characterized the strikers as "hoodlums, rabble, bummers, looters, blacklegs, thieves, tramps, ruffians, incendiaries, enemies of society, brigands, rascallions, ruffians, ruffians, felons and idiots," and the New York Herald declared that the mob was "a wild beast
and needs to be shot down." Reading such headlines as "Pittsburgh Sacked—The City Completely in the Power of a Howling Mob," and "Chicago in the Possession of Communists" caused many citizens to become hysterical.

As the federal troops reached the scene in city after city, however, the rioting subsided as quickly as it had flared. The strikers not only made no further attempts to interfere with the railroads' operations, but gradually went back to work. They knew when they were beaten; they knew that they had no chance with the government upholding the railroads. By the end of July, the trains were generally running again and the strikes were over.

The outbreaks of violence brought vigorous enforcement of law and order, but in the suppression of the strikes the original grievances of the railway workers appeared to have been overlooked completely. The New York Tribune, which at first had admitted that public opinion was largely with the workers, took the position that they should have been willing to practice greater self-denial and economy until conditions had settled down. It was not impossible to sustain life on $2 or even $1 a day, it editorialized, and if the railway employees were unwilling to work for such wages, they had no right to prevent others from taking jobs they spurned; because of their attitude, "they deserve no sympathy, but only punishment."

This reflected a view widely held during these years of the need for workingmen to submit to whatever conditions prevailed in industry. "God intended the great to be great and the little to be little," the noted preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, once wrote."... I do not say that a dollar a day is enough to support a working man. But it is enough to support a man! Not enough to support a man and five children if a man insists on smoking and drinking beer. . . . But the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live."

The month of July 1877 had, in any event, been one of the most turbulent in American history, and the long-term consequences of its disorder and rioting were to be highly important. The business community was aroused as never before to the potential power of industrial workers and embarked on an aggressive program to suppress all labor activity. Businessmen revived the old conspiracy laws, sought to intimidate workers from joining unions, imposed the "iron clad" oath, and enlisted strikebreakers whenever trouble threatened. The lesson driven home for labor was the need for organization and authority that would prevent strikes from developing into uncontrolled mob action which inevitably invited suppression by state or federal troops. Capitalism had won this first round of industrial strife, but it was
fearful of the future. Labor had lost, but it had a new realization of its latent strength.

**THE HAYMARKET RIOT**

The violence that marked both unemployment demonstrations and railway revolts in the 1870s had its counterpart in another round of strikes during the next decade, but the Haymarket Square riot in 1886 more than any other outbreak of these years served to arouse and alarm the public. Anarchists were held responsible for this affair, and, while only a tiny segment among the workers in Chicago were at all influenced by their violent “propaganda by the deed,” the repercussions of the riot affected the entire labor movement. The foes of unionism made the most of this dramatic incident in trying to discredit organized labor and stigmatize it as radical, revolutionary, and un-American.

The left-wing groups within the labor movement were in this as in other periods constantly shifting their alignments and organizing new parties. The International Workingmen’s Association had been dissolved in 1876, and the socialist forces in the United States had formed a new Working Men’s party. It was not important; its small membership was largely drawn from German and other European-born immigrants; but it had been active during the railway strike in 1877 trying to foment a general strike.

Its ranks were soon split by further internal quarrels. There was embittered rivalry between the Marxian socialists, who sought to promote trade unionism as a base for the revolutionary activity that was eventually to overthrow the capitalistic state, and the Lassalleans, who urged direct political activity as a far more effective means of achieving the same end. In addition to these two groups, a third flirted with the far more radical doctrines of anarchism that were being preached in the United States by Johann Most, a big, bearded German immigrant who had formerly been a socialist, but, after arriving in the United States in 1882, had become a fiery exponent of revolutionary violence. The radicals who espoused his brand of anarchism established an International Working People’s Association, to become known as the Black International, which succeeded in winning control of the Central Labor Union in Chicago. It had some 2,000 members drawn from German and Polish metal workers, cabinetmakers, and packinghouse employees, and through the pages of its organ, the Alarm, it openly called for immediate revolution.
Anarchism itself had a long history in America and a tradition of suspicion of all government and authority, and was influenced by the moral philosophy of the Massachusetts writer Henry David Thoreau. Hence it was not odd for an American-born worker like Albert Parsons to ally with the immigrant Johann Most to propose a combination of trade unionism and anarchism as the solution to labor's plight. These radicals, not all of whom favored violent deeds, built a real following among Chicago workers, if not elsewhere in the country. Thus the Chicago newspapers constantly stressed the danger of violence in every demonstration of labor militancy. "The Nihilistic character of the procession," read one report of a labor parade in which members of the Central Labor Union apparently participated, "was shown by the red badges and red flags which were thickly displayed throughout it."

When in 1886 a movement spread across the country for general strikes in favor of the eight-hour day, the Chicago anarchists were ready to take advantage of every opportunity to preach their own doctrines of revolution. The day set for the strike itself—May 1—passed off very quietly, but two days later a clash between strikers and strikebreakers at the McCormick Harvester plant in Chicago led to police intervention and the death of four men. Here was the sort of situation for which members of the Black International had been waiting. That night leaflets were circulated through the city calling upon the workers to avenge their slaughtered comrades.

"The masters sent out their bloodhounds—the police," this appeal read; "they killed six of your brothers at McCormick's this afternoon. They killed the poor wretches because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses. . . . To arms we call you, to arms!"

A protest meeting was summoned for Haymarket Square the next evening, May 4, and some three thousand persons gathered to hear impassioned and inflammatory speeches by the anarchist leaders. But it was an entirely peaceful meeting in spite of all these alarms (the mayor himself attended it and left upon finding everything quiet). And when a cold wind began to blow gusts of rain through the square, the crowd gradually melted away. The meeting had, in fact, virtually broken up when a police detachment of two hundred men arrived and their captain peremptorily ordered such workers as remained to disperse. Suddenly there was a sharp explosion. Someone had hurled a bomb into the ranks of the police, killing one outright. They at once opened fire, and there were answering shots from the workers. During the fray, seven police in all were either killed
or fatally wounded, and some sixty-seven injured; four workers were killed and fifty or more injured.

Almost immediately the authorities and the press blamed the anarchists for the deaths and injuries. An outraged cry arose for the punishment of the perpetrators. The police combed the city for suspects, and finally eight known anarchist leaders were arrested and charged with murder. In a frenzied atmosphere compounded equally of fear and the desire for revenge, the suspects were thereupon promptly found guilty—seven of them sentenced to death and the eighth to fifteen years’ imprisonment. There was no evidence whatsoever connecting any of these people with the bombing. They were condemned out of hand for their revolutionary views and the incitements to violence that supposedly caused the bombing. “Convict these men, make examples of them, hang them,” urged the state’s attorney, “and you save our institutions.”

Two of the convicted men pleaded for executive clemency and were given life imprisonment. Six years later, Governor John Peter Altgeld pardoned them, together with the eighth man who had been sentenced to fifteen years’ imprisonment, on the ground that they had not been granted a fair trial. So violent was the feeling against the anarchists, even at this late date, that Altgeld was assailed throughout the country for what has since been universally recognized as an act of simple justice.

Organized labor was in no way associated with the Haymarket Square bombing and had at once denied any sympathy whatsoever for the accused anarchists. The Knights of Labor were as violent in condemning them as the most conservative newspapers. “Let it be understood by all the world,” their Chicago organ declared, “that the Knights of Labor have no affiliation, association, sympathy or respect for the band of cowardly murderers, cut-throats and robbers, known as anarchists.” Wholly disregarding the complete failure of the prosecution to connect the accused men with the actual crime with which they were charged, the Knights clamored for their conviction. “Better that seven times seven men hang,” it was declared, “than to have the millstone of odium around the standard of this Order in affiliating in any way with this element of destruction.”

The reason for such an outburst was obvious. The capitalistic enemies of labor were seeking to hang upon the labor movement this “millstone of odium” by charging that the Knights of Labor and the unions, generally, were permeated by the spirit of anarchism and Communism. It did not matter that few labor leaders and equally few
ordinary workers were associated with anarchism or socialism. All labor was thrown on the defensive.

This whole episode was to have an important influence on the developing trend of trade unionism, but it has taken us beyond our account of the growth of the labor movement as a whole. As already noted, the rise of the Knights of Labor during the 1880s was far more significant than occasional outbreaks of violence or the role of what were then tiny and sectarian leftist organizations.