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Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality

Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age

Edward T. O'Donnell



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“The Country Is Drifting into Danger”

“ARE WE IN DANGER OF REVOLUTION?”

In April 1886, the New York Academy of Design unveiled its spring exhibition of paintings and sculptures. Of the many pieces on display, one large painting drew particular attention from both critics and casual viewers alike. Robert Koehler's *The Strike* depicted a vivid scene of industrial discontent inspired by events the artist witnessed during the Great Uprising of 1877. Set in an unidentified industrial town, the painting captures a moment of confrontation as workers pour out of a factory to gather outside the office of their employer. The work is fraught with tension and an atmosphere suggestive of impending violence. One worker in the foreground stoops to pick up a rock. In the center foreground, a woman tries to calm another angry worker. To the left, Koehler shows what appears to be a labor leader in a red shirt pleading with the factory owner on behalf of the striking workers.

The timing and place of the debut of Koehler's painting was extraordinary, even if purely coincidental. New York City, indeed the nation as a whole, was at that very moment plunging into an unprecedented period of social turmoil. Many Americans by 1886 were coming to the conclusion



"The Strike." *Harper's Weekly*, May 1, 1886. Author's collection.

that *something* had to be done to reverse the trend toward European-style class conflict and violent upheaval. But what to do? This anxiety seemed to be the central theme of Koehler's painting. Labor and capital both deserved praise and scorn. Many capitalists, perhaps including the stern one shown in the painting, did indeed exploit their workers. Yet Koehler depicts him as willing to bend his ear to his workers' grievances. Many workers, perhaps including those gathering outside the factory, labored under oppressive conditions. Yet too many, as suggested by the man reaching for the rock, seemed all too willing to resort to violence. Koehler's scene calls out for an answer, but Americans were no closer to agreeing on how to solve the labor question in April 1886 than they had been in 1877.¹

It was in this context of tension and uncertainty that the year 1886 unfolded as one of the most tumultuous in American history, rivaled only by the years 1776, 1861, 1877, 1919, 1946, and 1968. The number of strikes that year (1,432) was nearly triple the average of the five hundred strikes that took place in the years 1881–1885. The number of boycotts imposed likewise exploded.² Writing of this upsurge in labor protest, Richard T. Ely wrote, "It is doubtful if history records any more rapid social movement

than this ominous separation of the American people into two nations. Already they scarcely speak the same language."³

In early March of that year, two hundred thousand workers, most of them affiliated with the Knights of Labor, commenced a massive railroad strike against the lines owned by Jay Gould, one of the nation's most notorious capitalists. The Knights had prevailed over Gould in another large strike the year before, an event that helped spark a massive spike in membership in the Order (to more than 700,000 members by mid-1886). But this time around, resolving to crush the Knights, Gould refused to back down. Instead, he hired strikebreakers and compelled governors in the affected states to call out their militias to protect them. Gould soon emerged as the winner in what came to be called the Great Southwest Strike.⁴

Reacting to the labor strife along Gould's railroads and elsewhere, President Grover Cleveland delivered on April 22, 1886, a "special message" that revealed the extraordinary nature of the times. It was the first official presidential statement in the nation's short history related to the plight of labor. "The present condition of the relations between labor and capital," he wrote, "is far from satisfactory." But rather than blandly call upon both sides to amicably reach an accord—the standard rhetorical procedure in the 1880s—Cleveland asserted that most of the problem stemmed from "the grasping and heedless exactions of employers and the alleged discrimination in favor of capital as an object of governmental attention." Still more remarkable, the president called for an unprecedented role for the national government in the free market economy: Congress should establish a federal board of arbitration to facilitate the settlement of future industrial disputes.⁵

Nine days after Cleveland's special message, as if to confirm its main contention, workers across the country participated in the largest protest in the nation's history for the eight-hour workday. On May 1, 1886, some 340,000 workers took part in eight-hour strikes, and large demonstrations were held in cities like New York and Chicago.⁶ Three days later, however, an explosion at a Chicago labor rally organized by anarchists in Haymarket Square unleashed a furious wave of antilabor rhetoric and action damaged the labor movement for decades to come. The bombing and subsequent panic left seven policemen dead. Hysterical headlines across the nation screamed

that revolution was at hand. "Anarchy's Red Hand: Rioting and Bloodshed in the Streets of Chicago," declared the *New York Times*. "The villainous teachings of the Anarchists bore bloody fruit in Chicago tonight," read the accompanying article's opening lines, "and before daylight at least a dozen stalwart men will have laid down their lives as a tribute to the doctrine of [anarchism]."⁷ Chicago police soon arrested eight men, all self-proclaimed anarchists, and charged them with murder. The drama of their subsequent trials and eventual convictions dominated headlines for the rest of the year.⁸

Middle- and upper-class Americans viewed these developments with alarm. Once again, they voiced from the pulpit, boardroom, and editorial page renewed fears of a Paris Commune-style social uprising in America. Such fears only mounted as the number of strikes, boycotts, and labor demonstrations increased into the summer months. For example, the *Forum*, the respectable journal of elite opinion, included nine articles devoted to the topic between March and August 1886, appearing under such titles as "An Employer's View of the Labor Question," "Shall an Eight-Hour System Be Adopted?," "What Rights Have Laborers?," "The Evolution of the Boycott," "Shall We Muzzle the Anarchists?," and "Is Labor a Commodity?" The most provocative was an article by Bishop John Lancaster Spalding asking "Are We in Danger of Revolution?"⁹

Like many Americans in the spring of 1886, Henry George wondered the same thing. But in his case, he hoped the mounting crisis possessed a silver lining; this could be just the moment when the nation, especially its political leaders, would finally be forced to admit the necessity for bold reforms to preserve republican liberty. Inevitably, George believed, they would have to pay some attention to his single tax solution. As he awaited this development, George continued to write, finishing *Protection or Free Trade* in March and lecturing throughout New York, New England, and the Midwest. Sensing that a new, larger opportunity was at hand with the "labor question" once again rising to the fore in public discourse, he turned aside the advice of friends urging him to travel abroad again. "I feel that I can be more useful here for awhile yet," he wrote to one. "We are making steady progress here, and before long I think the time for bringing the question into practical politics will come."¹⁰ Events nationwide and locally in New York City soon would prove him remarkably prescient.

"A PROTEST AND REVOLT AGAINST SYSTEMATIC INJUSTICE AND TYRANNY"

Well before workers on Jay Gould's railroad lines went on strike in March 1886, labor unrest began to rock New York City. Trouble first occurred on the streetcar lines, eventually leading to three citywide strikes that paralyzed the metropolis. Streetcar strikes were a common feature of Gilded Age urban life,¹¹ but the intensity of those in New York City and the subsequent extensive national press coverage led the commissioner of the New York State Bureau of Labor Statistics to claim they provided the "initial impulse" that sparked the labor unrest known as the Great Upheaval that swept the nation in 1886. "The car strikes of 1886," he wrote, "assume[d] the aspect of a protest and revolt against systematic injustice and tyranny."¹²

New York streetcar corporations were among the most powerful and profitable in the city, and the plight of their drivers was legendary. While labor activists in the mid-1880s led a national campaign for the eight-hour workday, the majority of streetcar drivers and conductors worked between fourteen and sixteen hours per day, often with no breaks, standing the entire time on platforms exposed to all of the elements, whether in the searing heat or biting cold. Companies routinely deducted "fines" from their drivers' meager pay for minor offenses, such as having an insufficient number of passengers on board or for running behind schedule (even if the delay resulted from unavoidable traffic tie-ups). As an editorial in the *Boycotter* put it, "the lot of the car horse—which cannot be called a happy one—has been far more enviable than that of the conductors or drivers."¹³

These conditions led drivers and conductors to form a union, the Empire Protective Association (Knights of Labor, DA 75; hereafter referred to as the EPA). The organization reported its first success in late January 1886 after it successfully negotiated an agreement with all the streetcar lines to pay their drivers and conductors \$2.00 per day for twelve hours of work, with a reasonable amount of time off for breaks. When several companies began violating the agreement in February, the EPA led two successful strikes. These actions won restoration of the twelve hours for \$2.00 rate originally agreed to.¹⁴

Despite these successes, the union soon clashed with William Richardson, the streetcar company owner with the worst reputation as an employer. Known as “Deacon” Richardson because of his work in a Brooklyn Baptist church, he owned the large Atlantic Avenue line in Brooklyn, as well as the Dry Dock line in Manhattan, one of the city’s busiest crosstown lines, which ran from the ferries on the Hudson and East Rivers down the length of Grand Street.¹⁵ His workers complained of sixteen-hour days without breaks and tyrannical managers who imposed numerous fines and often summarily discharged men without cause.¹⁶

Richardson not only rejected the EPA’s demand of \$2.00 for twelve hours, but went a step further: he took out advertisements in the local papers seeking replacement workers. In response, eight hundred drivers, conductors, and stablemen walked out on Tuesday, March 2. Unlike the earlier streetcar strikes, however, Richardson refused to give in, claiming he could not afford the new wage scale and, invoking the individualist dogma of laissez-faire capitalism, that he would not be “dictated” to by his employees.¹⁷

After a two-day standoff, Richardson ordered his managers to run a single car out of the stables. He did so to defy the strikers and to maintain his line’s state charter, which could be revoked if the company failed to run its cars. What ensued came to be known as the Grand Street Riot. As soon as Car No. 155 appeared, strikers and their supporters began piling lumber, cobblestones, barrels, bricks, overturned wagons, and any other obstructions they could find on the tracks. To the jubilation of the strikers, the car retreated back to the stables.¹⁸

Subsequent events, however, quickly proved their joy premature. At Richardson’s request, Superintendent of Police William Murray sent 750 officers (25 percent of the city’s police force) to assist in a second attempted run. Five hundred patrolmen took positions along the length of Grand Street, while the remaining 250 formed a phalanx surrounding the streetcar as it emerged from the stables a second time. They encountered a throng of strikers and their supporters, who “groaned, hissed, and jeered from the sidewalks.” In solidarity with the strikers, drivers from the other streetcar lines unhitched their teams and allowed the crowd to overturn their cars along the tracks. The police removed these and other obstacles while the crowds of men and women jeered and pelted them with rocks, eggs, and



The Grand Street Riot. “The Street Railroad Strike in New York—The Police Opening the Way for a Horsecar.” *Harper’s Weekly*, March 13, 1886. Courtesy of the Georgia State University Library Digital Collection

rotten vegetables. In response, the police frequently charged the crowd and beat onlookers with their clubs. Finally, the Dry Dock car reached the Hudson River ferries, reversed direction, and lumbered back to the East River stables. The four-mile round trip journey took two hours to complete.¹⁹

Two aspects of the incident reveal much about the attitudes and outlook of New York City’s workers during the Great Upheaval. First, it brought out not only the eight hundred men on strike, but thousands of labor supporters. Although the press called it a “riot,” it was more accurately a classic case of purposeful crowd action, unified in the objects of its anger (the police and the streetcar company) and its goal (stopping the progress of the streetcar). Notably, the crowd included large numbers of women, who played a central role in the action. “Women came out of side streets to dump ashes on the rails,” related one newspaper account. Another noted that “female heads protruded from the windows of factories along the line of march, and girls and men hissed and hooted . . . and one fiery woman threw a tea cup at the driver.”²⁰

An additional novel feature of the Grand Street Riot was the extraordinary role assumed by the police. One reporter's account captured, albeit unintentionally, the sentiment of many onlooking laborers when he described the car as being "surrounded by the strong escort of the police, who zealously fought off would-be intruders as though the Sub-Treasury, with all its millions had been put on wheels."²¹ To many working-class New Yorkers, this spectacle suggested that Deacon Richardson had the power to summon the police to serve as guardians of his personal "millions" rather than as protectors of public institutions or the public peace. While the city's laborers had grown accustomed to, though never accepting of, the frequent intervention of police in labor disputes on behalf of capital, the police actions in this streetcar strike were unprecedented. By escorting Deacon Richardson's car "like a military procession," according to *Harper's Weekly*, the force of 250 policemen in effect served as scab labor for the first time in the annals of the city's history. Furthermore, in addition to protecting the Dry Dock's car, the police removed every obstacle from its path and at one point even lifted the car onto an adjacent track to allow it to pass an overturned truck. Such unprecedented intervention on behalf of an individual's business explains the crowd's virulence toward the police. As one journalist wrote, "Everybody in the neighborhood, particularly boys and young men, seemed to harbor a grievance against the railroad company, against the police for helping it in its distress, and against the reporters who kept close to the police."²² It also reflected the profound ideological shift in Gilded Age political discourse whereby business leaders and other elites proclaimed an absolutist fidelity to laissez-faire and the negative state as they simultaneously increased the state's power and demanded that it intervene on their behalf in labor disputes.²³

What made the actions of the police in the Dry Dock strike even more extraordinary was the fact that the entire episode occurred on the *publicly-owned* streets. Workers saw the police as the lackeys not just of capital, but of capital built on the nickels of mostly working-class New Yorkers by virtue of a streetcar franchise granted by the city's Board of Aldermen, the ostensible representatives of the people. "Nobody can doubt that we have been proceeding upon an erroneous system," declared the *Boycotter*. "We have been giving away the use of our streets to capitalist speculators." This

struggle transcended the usual practical labor issues like wages and hours. It instead raised larger questions of democracy, citizenship, and equal justice—the very concerns at the heart of working-class republicanism.²⁴

In response both to the extraordinary events that transpired along Grand Street and rumors that the other streetcar lines in the city were pooling funds to prop up the besieged Dry Dock, the EPA voted to declare a city-wide work stoppage on every streetcar line until Richardson relented and met the terms of his workers.²⁵ Nothing like this had ever occurred in New York's history and no one knew quite what to expect.

As the sun rose over Manhattan on March 5, 1886, the city's entire fleet of streetcars lay dormant. Over sixteen thousand drivers, conductors, and stablemen refused to report for work. With the exception of the elevated railroads, which lacked the necessary cars to handle the increased demand, the city was utterly paralyzed. The Great Tie-Up, the largest urban mass transit strike in the nation's history to that point, lasted only ten hours. Richardson, facing immense public pressure and a warning from the New York State railroad commissioners (to whom the EPA had appealed) to restart his line or face the loss of his charter, gave in; he relented to the strikers' central demands and agreed to send the rest to the state railroad commissioners for arbitration. In celebration, the streetcar workers piled onto streetcars and rode them through the city streets while thousands cheered them on. On the Dry Dock line's Grand Street cars, jubilant men waved brooms and American flags, the former symbolizing their "clean sweep" in the struggle, the latter signifying of their conception of themselves as true republican citizens and guardians of American liberty.²⁶ It was, in the words of John Swinton, "the greatest victory yet inscribed on the records of organized labor in this city," made possible "through the solid and majestic stand made by all hands."²⁷

For the next few weeks, the city's streetcar employees enjoyed the benefits of their victory. EPA leaders spoke confidently about going further, including a demand for \$2.50 for a ten-hour workday.²⁸ But they called yet another strike on April 15, this time against the Third Avenue line for refusing to dismiss seven nonunion employees openly hostile toward the Knights of Labor. The union also demanded the rehiring of fired union employees and a wage increase.

The strategies of both sides in the struggle were clear from the outset. The EPA hoped, as in the Dry Dock strike, to gain the assistance of the state railroad commissioners in forcing the president of the Third Avenue line, Lewis Lyons, to either negotiate in good faith with the union or forfeit his charter for failure to keep his line running. President Lyons and the company's directors, on the other hand, decided to wage an all-out assault on the EPA. Lyons announced his intention to replace all the striking men with nonunion workers and to never again to deal with the EPA. "We will sacrifice the road and the franchise," declared company board member Dr. Samuel Hall, "and sell out our cars at auction rather than yield." Lyons added that "rather than submit . . . I would let them tie me up through eternity."²⁹

The terminology employed by Hall, Lyons, and the pro-business press reflected the increasingly common practice among Gilded Age employers, editors, and politicians to invert the rhetoric of working-class republicanism, painting capital as the victim of "tyrannical" labor bosses seeking to "dictate" terms that violated both employer liberty and the laws of the free market. Indeed, they were following the lead of Jay Gould in his efforts to both defeat and discredit the Knights of Labor in their strike against his railroads. Denouncing the Knights as a "secret organization" led by "agitators who had constituted themselves the rulers of the men," Gould cast the strike as "a question of the dictation of a mob against law and order."³⁰ Such a rhetorical recasting was intended to stir up middle- and upper-class resentment against union activists for acting on, in the *New York Times's* phrasing, the "outrageous" presumption that they possessed the right to give orders to their employer.³¹ "Public opinion now believes that there never was such an unrighteous strike," opined Superintendent of Police Murray. "The police share that opinion, and should they be turned loose upon the mob, the mob can expect little mercy."³²

On day three of the strike, in response to the intransigence of Lyons and the directors, the EPA called for another citywide "tie-up" of all the streetcar lines, the second such dramatic sympathy strike in six weeks.³³ Full-scale rioting broke out the next day when, to no one's surprise, the Third Avenue Line attempted a symbolic run of twenty-five cars from its stables at East 65th Street. The presence of scores of policemen on the cars and along the route

did little to stop the vast seething crowd of strikers and sympathizers, including many women, from attacking the cars (destroying four completely) and halting the attempted run. The riot ended only when two additional squads of policemen arrived to beat back the crowd and make arrests.³⁴

While the tie-up and riot seemed reminiscent of the Dry Dock strike and Grand Street riot six weeks earlier, key points of contrast stood out. Whereas the Dry Dock's Richardson gave in quickly, Lyons and the Third Avenue line stood firm. Mimicking Gould's hardnosed ultimatum recently issued to Terence Powderly in the Southwest Railroad strike, Lyons defiantly declared that he would henceforth deal only with the men he employed and not their so-called representatives from the Knights of Labor. Furthermore, whereas Richardson rehired all of his striking employees, Lyons fired his men; they could reapply for their jobs on an individual basis, but "they will not be received back in a body under any circumstances." And, in a parting slight to the Knights of Labor that likewise echoed what Gould had said a few weeks earlier, he added that the strike now allowed him to employ higher quality workers as old hands had become less reliable since they joined the Order.³⁵

Faced with such formidable employer hostility and fearing growing public anger at the inconvenience, the EPA called off the citywide tie-up. The strike against the Third Avenue line, however, continued. For the next six weeks the EPA adopted a series of strategies to prolong the strike against a vastly superior adversary. It appealed again to New York's state railroad commissioners to force the company to accept arbitration by threatening to revoke its charter.³⁶

The EPA also announced a boycott, backed by the CLU and its member unions, to drive the Third Avenue line into bankruptcy.³⁷ As part of this effort, the EPA launched a project of purely symbolic value—the establishment of a free stage coach line along Third Avenue.³⁸ By staking their claim to the public thoroughfare—the peoples' property—the strikers made a potent statement. They were upholding one of the basic tenets of working-class republicanism, one found in the writings of Henry George and the rhetoric of the Knights of Labor: the monopolization of vital resources (e.g., mines, telegraphs, or, in this case, transportation) by a few individuals denied opportunities to the people and undermined social, economic, and political equality.

As the strike and boycott staggered toward inevitable defeat, the politically and ideologically charged nature of the conflict sharply increased. One major cause was the behavior of the police on behalf of the Third Avenue line. Stephen B. French, president of the Board of Police, in a public letter to the owners of the streetcar lines on April 20, effectively handed over his police force for the duration of the troubles.

Dear Sir: That no misapprehension may exist in the minds of any portion of our community that the Police Department is unable to afford your road the necessary police protection in the running of your cars, we hereby notify you that we have been, and are, at all times ready to maintain the laws, preserve the peace, and protect the lives and property of all law-abiding citizens in this city, and are ready to give your company the necessary police protection in carrying on your business. Advise us promptly when and where you desire police protection.

Your obedient servant,
S. B. French,
President, Board Police.³⁹

In the case of the Third Avenue line's President Lyons, his "obedient servant" went beyond merely protecting Third Avenue cars and employees.⁴⁰ Plainclothes policemen showed up on strikers' doorsteps to pressure them to return to work. Others went further, actually performing labor on behalf of the company.⁴¹ As Swinton thundered:

We ourselves have seen them acting as drivers, couplers, and general assistants on the cars; we have seen them training the green hands who had taken the strikers' places, and curbing the horses which the blacklegs could not manage. They were not satisfied with arresting every driver upon the Union lines against whom they could find the least cause of complaint, but they acted otherwise as though they were mere tools of the Shylock corporation which had cheated the city treasury out of millions of dollars, and which would be suppressed but for the lobby it keeps at Albany.⁴²

The reference to cheating stemmed from revelations after the strike that the Third Avenue line not only derived hundreds of thousands of dollars in profits from the use of the public streets, but also had cheated the public out of as much as one million dollars in taxes by underreporting revenue which it split with the city.⁴³ With this revelation also came other rumors, backed with some evidence, charging that the company had been propped up financially by the other streetcar companies. Such corporate collusion, usually in the form of business or employers' associations, was becoming increasingly common in the Gilded Age. It was yet another example of the selective adherence to the dogmas of laissez-faire individualism.⁴⁴

Most significant, however, was the intervention of the state (beyond the already considerable role played by the police) on behalf of the Third Avenue line. Shortly after the second citywide tie-up and just as the EPA's position began to weaken, the courts intervened. On April 28, a grand jury indicted five members of the EPA Executive Board for conspiracy, characterizing them as "evil[ly] disposed persons" who "maliciously" contrived "by threats and intimidation" to prevent the Third Avenue line from conducting business.⁴⁵

The day after the indictments saw yet another hard blow from the state that further politicized the interpretation workers gave to the struggle. The New York State railroad commissioners issued a report on the strike; they sided with the Third Avenue line and declined to revoke its charter—despite the fact that the company had failed to run its cars due to a strike of its own making, violated a labor agreement, and refused arbitration. The rejection of the EPA appeal made it clear to the strikers that the state commission created to regulate the railroad corporations now *served* them instead.⁴⁶

The Third Avenue strike ended in defeat for the workers in early June after a third citywide tie-up and more indictments against union leaders from the grand jury. All 1,200 strikers either lost their jobs or, if the company rehired them, lost their seniority and became parttimers.⁴⁷ But not every aspect of the failed strike was entirely negative for labor. First, while entirely local in its scope, the strike possessed a powerfully symbolic link to the struggle of labor nationwide. President Lyons, as many workers pointed out, seemed cut from the same cloth as Jay Gould. Second, the incidents exposed a hardening of class lines, specifically a coalescing of upper-class

interests that did not hesitate to undermine the rights of everyday workers, the foundational citizens of the republic. Third, the response of the state, the police, and the courts vividly demonstrated to workers the extent to which capital and its political allies had twisted republican institutions to undercut their status as citizens. Fourth, the three unprecedented citywide tie-ups inescapably demonstrated the power of direct, collective action. Finally, they validated key arguments set forth by Henry George and the Knights of Labor regarding the need for public ownership of natural monopolies and the need for working-class political mobilization to preserve the republic.

"There is a remedy," wrote John Swinton alluding to labor's political power in the city. "But there is very little hope of the workingmen adopting it."⁴⁸ What Swinton did not know when he wrote those lines in April was that the streetcar strikes marked the beginning of a period of extraordinary labor conflict nationwide. Nor did he know that they constituted but one of a series of galvanizing episodes that would lead labor by midsummer to seize the remedy he so consistently proposed.⁴⁹