

Jessica Piper Outline  
The Great Railroad Strike of 1877: A Catalyst for the American Labor Movement  
THEME: Turning Points in History

THESIS STATEMENT: The 1877 Great Railroad Strike marked the first national labor event in United States history and served as a turning point for the American labor movement. Although the strike itself failed, it evoked further labor upheaval, organization of American workers, and long-term political and social change.

1. INTRODUCTION

- a. Industrialization
- b. History of labor movements before mid-1800s
- c. What changed in mid-1800s: 2<sup>nd</sup> Industrial Revolution
  - i. Growth of cities
  - ii. Growth of factories
  - iii. Influx of immigrants
- d. Expansion of railroads
  - i. Labor needs
  - ii. Power of the industry
  - iii. Weak position of workers

2. THE ECONOMY, UNIONS & STRIKES

- i. *Commonwealth vs Hunt* made unions legal
- ii. Economic depression
  1. Pay cuts
- iii. Workers organize & strike
  1. State militia's disrupt
  2. President Hayes warns against
  3. Strikes spread

3. TURNING POINT: Public sympathy

- a. Public united behind a common enemy: resenting railroad companies
  - i. Charged farmers high freight rates
  - ii. Workers from other industries blamed railroads for lowering all wages and creating chronic unemployment
  - iii. Even state militias begin to sympathize with workers and refuse to take up arms
- b. Violence spread
  - i. President Hayes deployed Federal troops and put down strikes by force

4. FAILURE

- a. The strikes did not result in higher wages.
- b. The railroad companies made no concessions

## 5. SUCCESS

- a. Because of the cost of putting down the strikes and the property damage, railroads realized that wage reduction may cost more than actually increasing conditions and benefits
- b. Strike showed the strength of a vast national working class
- c. Inspired prominent and influential labor leaders
  - i. Terence Powderly
  - ii. Eugene Debs
  - iii. Samuel Gompers
    - 1. Very influential American Federation of Labor in 1886

## 6. POLITICAL CHANGE

- a. Labor-focused political parties emerge:
  - i. Greenback-Labor Party
  - ii. Workingman's Party
  - iii. Populist Party
- b. Labor Day became national holiday in 1894
- c. Congress established Bureau of Labor in 1884
- d. 1887 Interstate Commerce Act
- e. 1916 Workingmen's Compensation Bill

## 7. CONCLUSION: "SO WHAT?"

- a. Summary of thesis