

Conrad Black: If a Rail Strike Occurs, It Should Be Rapidly Nipped in the Bud

By Conrad Black

There is ample precedent for how to deal with a railway strike, which it seems may occur in this country in the next few days. It is well settled by many previous occurrences of general strikes in that critical industry in Canada and the United States that no such action may be permitted to continue for long.



The only previous comprehensive railway strike in Canadian history was that of August 1950, when 124,000 [railway workers shut down](#) practically all operations in the country, which caused extensive layoffs in related industries within a few

days. It became clear almost at once that if the railways were not reactivated quickly, the economic life of the whole country would be substantially strangled and the food supply endangered. The government of Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent introduced strike-ending legislation with recourse to compulsory arbitration after nine days, with the agreement of the leader of the Progressive Conservative official Opposition George A. Drew. The ultimate settlement was generally deemed a reasonable compromise.

That crisis in Canada closely paralleled similar activity in the United States, which has an extensive history of labour disputes in the railway industry. The first American [railroad strike was in 1877](#), when there was a good deal of violence involving the unions and strikebreakers hired by the railway companies, scattered across parts of the American Midwest. In the laissez-faire ethos of that time, what amounted to a Darwinian struggle between the two contestants was allowed to continue for two years until the employers gained the upper hand.

The famous [Pullman Strike of 1894](#) caused President Grover Cleveland, a Democrat relatively well-disposed to organized labour, to eventually enforce an end to the strike. The railway union leader [Eugene V. Debs](#), a subsequent Socialist Party presidential candidate in five elections, was briefly imprisoned. It is generally accepted that as a belated concession to the American working class, Cleveland ordered the Labor Day holiday for the first Monday in September. (This was emulated by Canada, which is why North America takes that holiday in September while all of Europe follows socialist history by observing it on May 1.) There were approximately 70 deaths during the 10-week Pullman Strike.

There was again a strike in the U.S. railway industry in 1916 over the issue of an eight-hour workday. An end to the strike was legislated with the support of President Woodrow Wilson, but he also approved and signed the [Adamson Act](#), which granted

the eight-hour workday for railway employees and established the Railway Labor Board to deal with grievances in that industry, under the bipartisan consensus that railway strikes were too damaging to the country.

However, in 1922 the [Railway Shopmen's Strike](#) broke out and shut down practically the entire American railway industry through the collective action of 400,000 workers. It was the greatest strike in American history next to the [Great Steel Strike of 1919](#). It was a strike of the maintenance workers, as its title implies, and not the conductors, engineers, firemen, and brakemen who operated the trains, and the railway companies immediately began to replace even skilled maintenance workers with strikebreakers. There was naturally a great deal of friction between the strikers and strikebreakers, and the issues became cross-threaded with racial questions as several of the railway unions did not accept African American workers, while in some places African American employees crossed the picket lines.

The [Railroad Labor Board](#), which President Wilson had intended as a reform measure to conciliate labour and management in the railroad industry, was in the hands of his successor, President Warren G. Harding. It was chaired by Ben W. Hooper, a former Republican governor of Tennessee and no great friend of organized labour. He adopted a resolution that all strikers had forfeited their arbitration rights under the [Transportation Act of 1920](#), and railroads were encouraged to hire replacement workers whom the board would consider to be permanent. Unsurprisingly, a bitter labour dispute resulted and crowds of sympathizers on both sides frequently conflicted around the country. A number of fatalities occurred as well as a good deal of vandalism and many serious injuries.

President Harding attempted to impose a settlement midway between the claims of the two sides, but this broke down under his protection of strikebreakers as permanent employees with "the same indisputable right to work as others have to decline

work." The U.S. National Guard was called out in a number of states and the attorney general, Harry M. Daugherty, outrageously asserted that the strikers were conducting "a conspiracy worthy of Lenin and Zinoviev," and sent large numbers of U.S. marshals into the field to aid the railroads.

The Harding administration was itself divided, and commerce secretary and future president Herbert Hoover urged a negotiated end to the strike. Harding agreed, but the railway companies rejected the president's fair proposal and won from a federal judge, two months into the strike, an injunction against striking, picketing, and other obstructive activities. It was an extremely one-sided decision and violated the constitutional guaranties of freedom of speech and of assembly. There were many sympathy strikes and a great public outcry, but the strikers were unable to continue to resist the employers, buttressed as they now were by the full authority of the federal government. The strike lasted two months and approximately 10 people died while several hundred were injured.

In 1945 and 1946, immediately following World War II, there were waves of strikes across the United States in what was the closest that country has ever come to a general strike: 4 million workers were involved, including approximately 250,000 railway workers. In 1947, in response to this unrest, the Congress passed the [Taft-Hartley Act](#) over President Truman's veto, prohibiting jurisdictional strikes, wildcat strikes, strikes of solidarity or political motivation, secondary boycotts and picketing, the closed shop, and monetary contributions by unions to federal political campaigns. Right-to-work laws banning union shops were permitted, and union officers were obliged to sign non-communist affidavits in these first years of the Cold War.

Considerable labour agitation continued, however, including a threatened railway strike in 1949 and a strike in the steel industry. President Truman, well disposed to organized labour

though he was, ordered the army to take over the operation of the nation's railways, which it substantially did, though with the cooperation of many workers. The United States had just committed forces to Korea, the Red Scare was high, and public opinion was suspicious of union leaders. It was against this backdrop that the railway strike in Canada of 1950 was declared and a resolution process was legislated just nine days later.

It is clear from all this history that a railway strike cannot be permitted to go on for more than a few days, even though the economic importance of railways has declined somewhat. If such a strike occurs, the federal government must legislate an end to it at once, but with a fair resolution process. The act of St. Laurent's government and his labour minister, Milton Gregg, in 1949 could be adopted almost without alteration. The alternative is a disaster that neither Canada nor the United States has ever consented to endure. This is no time for a change of course.

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