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The Tactical Utility of VIOLENCE



by **Mike Kolhoff**

Footnotes:

1. Arendt, Hannah; *On Violence*, 1970, Harvest Book. p. 52.
2. Arendt, p.2
3. R. K. Prabhu & U. R. Rao, editors; *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1967, Ahemadabad, India
4. MK Gandhi, *Indian Opinion*, 24 September 1903
5. Sarkar, Sumit, *The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism*, The Indian Historical review, July 1976
6. Ghosh, B.N.; *Gandhian Political Economy: Principals, Practice and Policy*, Ashgate Publ., 2007 p. 46
7. Arendt, p. 53
8. Reed, Henry; *Fifth Estate*, #380, Spring 2009
9. Brecher, Jeremy; *Strike!*, South End Press, Boston, 1997 p.22
10. Foner, Phillip; *The Great Labour Uprising of 1877*; Monad Press, New York, p. 35
11. Foner, p. 42
12. Brecher, p. 19
13. Len, Sidney; *The Labour Wars*; Doubleday, New York, 1973 p.45
14. Brecher, p. 24
15. Brecher, p. 25
16. Brecher, p. 27-28
17. Brecher, 28
18. Burbank, David; *The Reign of the Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*; Kelly, New York 1966 p. 53
19. Arendt, p. 48
20. The Workingmen's Party was dominated by the followers of Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle.
21. Montgomery, *Workers Control in America*, p. 18
22. Errico Malatesta, *Violence as a Social Factor*, 1895, in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas*, Vol. 1, Robert Graham editor, Black Rose Books, 2005
23. "Our dead are many; but you have not been able to destroy anarchy. Its roots go deep: it spouts from the bosom of a rotten society that is falling apart; it is a violent backlash against the established order; it stands for the aspirations to equality and liberty which have entered the lists against the current authoritarianism. It is everywhere. That is what makes it in-dominatable, and it will end by defeating you and killing you."
24. Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 3
25. From *Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre*, SUNY Press, 2005, p. 289
26. Robert Weir, *Knights Unhorsed*, Wayne State University Press, 2000, p.81
27. Roberto Toscano, "The Face of the Other: Ethics and Intergroup Conflict," in *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, ed. Eugene Weiner, (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), p 68
28. Act utilitarianism states that the value of the consequences of a particular action determines whether it is right or not. Obviously this can be interpreted negatively, as in: the ends justify the means. Human judgment is as paramount in this as in any other ethical consideration.



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★ Acceptable Violence?

“Real individual neighbours are not necessarily loved, but they are loved or hated for concrete, not abstract reasons. And especially they are not hated en masse. On the contrary in order to apply group violence to the neighbour as belonging to a category, the concrete individual’s face has to be erased: the person must become an abstraction.”²⁷

In order for violence to mean something beyond individual expression, it must be connected to a legitimate social collectivity, some body of people which can be considered as a whole. This places it beyond the limits of the state’s monopoly of violence to the degree that it “seriously” challenges that monopoly, and by “serious” I would say: with some realistic hope of success, which means that the act has something more than a symbolic impact. Historically the collectivity could be based on ethnicity, economic class, nationality, or any of the other ways human beings decide to divide ourselves. It has to be violence coming from, and for, this collectivity. Outside agencies, however sympathetic, do not meet these criteria, whatever the make-up of the actors involved. Only the mass organisations of the collectivity, their remnants, or their accepted agents can meet these criteria for legitimate violence.

Self-appointed revolutionary vanguards do not meet the criteria, unless they can somehow successfully attach themselves to that collectivity, which would be impossible in all but the most disordered, chaotic of circumstances. Even then it would require equal parts ruthlessness, opportunism and good luck to make this (artificial) connection. It can happen, as in Russia, Italy and Germany in the first half of the 20th century, but the results were so monstrous as to be almost unbelievable.

If we consider the utility value of violence, as in the ethical principle of act utilitarianism,²⁸ where the correct action is that which produces the greatest utility (usefulness = happiness, satisfaction, pleasure, etc.) for the greatest number of people, it is even easier to evaluate. The utility value of the Haymarket bomb was zero. In fact, it had a negative value. It destroyed sympathy for the workers movement and destroyed the ability of anarchists in the workers movement to lead.

In the end, utility value might be the most objective criteria for judging this or any other act of violence. Is it useful? Does it further a greater purpose? Does it do more good than harm? If these questions can’t be answered with satisfaction, then it’s most likely a bad idea.

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The internal purging of radicals within the Knights is described in detail in *Knights Unhorsed: Internal Conflict in a Gilded Age Labour Movement* by Robert Weir. Conservative Knights Grand Master Terrance Powderly made it his personal mission to eliminate the influence of radicals, especially anarchists, in the organisation. Anarchist union leader Joe Buchanan had been instrumental in winning some of the biggest strikes the Knights had been involved with. In 1885 he was perhaps the single leader most responsible for the DEFEAT of Jay Gould in the first southwest railroad strike. This victory was the major impetus behind the phenomenal growth of the Knights, which increased from approximately 120,000 members in 1884 to over 700,000 by 1886! Despite this he was removed from the executive board of the Knights and exiled from any responsible position in the organisation: “Buchanan tried his best to don the ideologue mantle and explain the differences between his socialist anarchism and that of the Black International, but his lesson was lost on Powderly.”²⁶

This highlights the two different anarchist positions regarding the workers movement in the 1880s. Socialist anarchists like Buchanan considered themselves socialists first (Buchanan was and remained a member of the 2nd International) and saw anarchism as providing a vocabulary to describe the kind of socialist world they wanted. To them the struggle for workers self-emancipation WAS the revolution. They viewed the workers movement as the beginnings of a new self-managed socialist society, a view that became the essence of anarcho-syndicalism.

The majority of the IWPA anarchists saw the workers movement as a recruiting ground for anarchists, and as a weapon to use against the power of the capitalist state. The destruction of the state was the primary objective. The workers struggle was a conveyor belt that turned militant workers into anarchist revolutionaries. Men like Johann Most (despite being a former social democratic legislative deputy) considered themselves anarchists first and socialists second, if at all; he advocated assassination and bombing as a means of inspiring the masses to revolt and revolution. In this he and his followers were similar to the ultra-left groups of the 1970s and 1980s (Red Army Faction, Weather Underground, Symbionese Liberation Army, etc). But the masses, far from being inspired, were appalled and frightened. Instead of revolting, they were revolted. The people rejected the violence of the 19th and early 20th century anarchists in the same way they rejected the violence of the ultra-left terrorists decades later. I would guess that this had almost nothing to do with the ideologies involved, and was instead based on the perception that these acts of violence were individual acts, without social context and unconnected to any collectivity, and as such unacceptable and inexcusable.

Old Joke:

On Ellis Island, early in the 20th century, an elderly eastern European man is being processed for immigration into the United States. He stands before the desk of the immigration officer who loudly asks him, without looking up: “Do you advocate the overthrow of the United States Government by subversion or violence?”

The old man mulls it over for a few seconds, then answers: “VIOLENCE!”

no basis for the Agent Provocateur idea. And years afterward, Voltairine de Cleyre, a prominent individualist anarchist, hinted that she knew who the bomber was.

De Cleyre's initial reaction to news reports of the bombing is revealing: "Fifteen years ago today, when the echoes of the Haymarket bomb rolled through the little Michigan village where I lived, I, like the rest of the credulous and brutal, read one lying newspaper headline, "Anarchists throw a bomb in the Haymarket in Chicago," and immediately cried out, "They ought to be hung." This, though I'd never believed in capital punishment for ordinary criminals." ²⁵

Even someone already involved in the anarchist movement was immediately captured by this presentation of the events in Chicago. The response was a reflexive outcry against an inexcusable horror. I think it's safe to say that her reaction was shared with a very large number of people who had no connection with any kind of revolutionary movement or organisation; in other words the vast majority of the population.

★ The Aftermath

To say that the Haymarket bomb singlehandedly destroyed the hopes of the workers movement in the United States is certainly an exaggeration. To say that it was an important part of a series of events that mark 1886 as a turning point for the American working class is absolutely correct. To say that it discredited and destroyed the ability of anarchists to lead the workers movement at that time is accurate, and this most certainly had a negative effect on the political prospects of the working class in the U.S.

1886 marked the beginning of the decline of the Knights of Labour, and the founding of the American Federation of Labour (FOTLU under a new name). The loss of the Great Southwest Railroad Strike in 1886 probably had more to do with the decline of the Knights than anything else. The strike involved over 200,000 workers in Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kansas and Texas. It should be noted that there was far more violence involved in this strike than in anything that happened in Chicago. This is the strike where robber baron Jay Gould claimed: "I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half." The army of Pinkerton mercenaries he hired was supplemented by cops, state troops and eventually federal troops.

As violence escalated, the workers fought back. Station houses and mechanic shops were burned, train cars were uncoupled; shots were exchanged. Begun in March of 1886, it was over by June, with a disastrous loss for the workers. Public opinion had turned hard against the workers, which can be attributed directly to the Haymarket events presented in the press. The workers found themselves fighting not only the cops, gun thugs and troops, but also the leadership of the Knights, who wanted desperately to end the strike before violence spread, and to make themselves seem more respectable in the process. The loss of this strike in this way meant the end of the Knight's influence among railroad workers.

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individual violence. Collective violence has to involve at least two perpetrators and involve at least minimal co-ordination among the people involved.²⁴ Individual violence is one person acting on their own. Both are subject to determination of their social acceptability in the popular imagination. In our current social system, collective violence is usually acceptable only if authorised by the state; individual violence (if we exclude self-defence) is never socially acceptable. This was absolutely not the case in 1886.

In the late 19th century the use of collective violence by capitalists to “defend their property” was considered perfectly acceptable by most of the middle class. Private armies were hired by capitalists like Jay Gould and Henry Clay Frick to brutalise and/or kill any workers that dared endanger their right to profit from the toil of others. Likewise, among some in the middle class and a very great number of workers, it was considered the right of workers to use collective violence to defend their own right to be treated fairly and not be bullied by robber barons. Armed violence in the defence of liberty was still a tradition at that time. That’s why most of the working class was anything but appalled by the actions of 1877; many were in fact inspired by this bold assertion of class combativeness. It made them proud to be workers. Even the collective actions of the Molly Maguire’s had been seen as an acceptable assertion of workers’ rights to collective self-defence; this despite the fact that many of the acts were carried out by individuals. So why was the force of public opinion, including much worker opinion, turned so quickly against the bombing at Haymarket, and why was it not seen as an acceptable act of retaliation for the killing of the McCormick workers?

Though the range of collective violence might have been more open in 1886, the range of individual violence was almost as limited as it is today. A man was allowed to beat his children and his wife, “within reason”, as this was a family matter. He certainly couldn’t kill them, or anybody else, without justification or he would face serious consequences. Then, as today, an act of self-defence was justifiable. The difference between the assassinations carried out by the Molly Maguires and the bomb thrown at Haymarket was both the failure to meet the criteria of self-defence, and the failure to meet the criteria of acceptable collective violence. The witness reports from Haymarket are wildly conflicting, but if, as some witness testified, the police were firing into the crowd of demonstrators prior to the bombing, then the bomber was probably justified. But the majority of the testimony indicated that the demonstrators were already dispersing (the speakers had finished) and the cops were “hurrying them along” with clubs, kicks, punches, etc; the normal fare for 1886, when the bomb was thrown. If the bomber was pro-worker, it was an act of idiotic madness; if the bomber was anti-worker, it was an act of evil genius.

Asserting that the bomb was thrown by an “agent provocateur” is understandable; it would be hard to come up with an act that better served the interests of the bosses. But it was just an idea. No evidence of such a terrible conspiracy has ever surfaced, and given the quality of mercenary employed by the bosses, it probably would have. Both Johann Most and Lucy Parsons admitted that there was probably

What place does violence have in the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system? What place does it have in any struggle? Is the current definition of violence as accepted by the ruling regime and the loyal opposition relevant or realistic? These questions interest me enough to make me want to take a stab (no pun intended) at answering them, and a few more, by examining violence in the workers movement in North America. I want to try to examine violent action from a tactical standpoint, free from the moral preconditions of the religious and pacifist positions.

The etymological origin of the word violence is the Latin “violentus”, meaning vehement, forceful, and probably related to “violare”, meaning to violate. This is the earliest appearance of the word in Western European language, meaning that all future western definitions of the term should be derivative from this root. This is of course not the case, and the definition of violence in modern industrial society has taken on an abstract and contradictory character, as has peace, freedom, love, hate, joy, democracy, etc. Most of this abstraction is derived from sociological interpretations of ideas of “legitimate” and “illegitimate” violence.

Sociologist Max Weber and political theorist Hannah Arendt have added to the mystification of violence, removing it from any natural and neutral sense, and helping to make it the vehicle for both maintaining power and facilitating oppression. Weber is responsible for the definition of state (governmental) power as “the monopoly of the legitimate use of force”. Arendt defined violence inherently in the negative, as something sometimes justifiable, but never acceptable: “Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate ... Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. No one questions the use of violence in self-defence, because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate”.¹ And more to the point: “The end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted. The means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals.”² The implication is: if we defend ourselves when attacked, we are justified, but it is still socially wrong. Is this because violence is somehow unnatural? Or is it more because our definition of “violence” has drifted too far from the original, and largely neutral, definition? If violence is natural, then its rightness or wrongness is purely a human social construction. Yet we seem to instinctively know when an act of violence is right, and when an act of violence is wrong.

A mother shooting someone threatening her children is something anyone but a dogmatic pacifist would see as right; while a mugger beating an elderly man to

death for the contents of his wallet would be instinctively and universally seen as wrong. Official, “legitimate” violence is judged on a political basis as much as a moral one, expressed in the interpretation of events: the terrorist attack on the world trade centre could be interpreted as a viscous act of mass murder or justified retaliation for cultural destruction and racism; the killing of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians could be seen as mass murder or justified retaliation for a terrorist attack.

Dogmatic pacifism has defined any kind of violence, even justifiable self-defence, as unacceptable, in keeping with the essence of Arendt’s position. This pacifist tendency is derived from two primary sources, both religion-based. The first is the Christian pacifism of the protestant dissenter sects, such as the Friends, the Amish, the Mennonites, etc. These groups take their inspiration from various passages in the New Testament, mostly from the Sermon on the Mount, related to the eventual superiority of the meek and the turning of cheeks.

The other source of dogmatic pacifism is from Hinduism, as practiced by Mohandas Gandhi, who developed the practice of “Satyagraha”, or “non-violent resistance”, in the struggle for Indian rights in South Africa and during the Indian independence movement against British colonialism. In this theory, the means and ends are completely inseparable, and violence, force of any kind, is always “unjust”. “They say, ‘means are, after all, means’. I would say, ‘means are, after all, everything’. As the means, so the end.”³ Gandhi’s position is based on the “law of suffering” as it appears in many eastern religions, where suffering is seen as a good thing, in that it accrues beneficial “Karma”, which in turn can be exchanged in some way for a pleasant reincarnation. Of course if “karma” doesn’t exist, if the universe isn’t operated like a giant buyers bonus club, then suffering is just suffering, and ending suffering should be a primary goal of any human activity.

The 20th century Indian independence movement did not begin or end with Mohandas Gandhi and in fact included significant elements of the armed struggle. Leaders such as Sri Aurobindo and Subash Chandra Bose advocated immediate overthrow of the British Raj by violent means if necessary. Bose (called Netaji) worked with the Soviet Union and Germany to seek support for his Indian National Army, eventually allying with the Japanese and openly fighting the British in Burma and at the battle of Imphal in northeast India. Bose saw WWII as the perfect opportunity to overthrow the British and drive them out of India. So did Mohandas Gandhi, who launched the “Quit India Movement” in 1942, although he vacillated on the point, declaring that he did not wish to “build a free India in the Ashes of Britain.” By 1943 the Quit India movement was no longer moving, with all its leaders imprisoned.

Gandhi’s overtly racist statements regarding black South Africans are public knowledge, as is his participation in the British suppression of the Bambetta rebellion in 1906 South Africa (he served as a stretcher bearer in the colonial army). He was also a strong advocate of racial purity: “We believe as much in the purity of race as we think they do; only we believe that they would best serve these interests, which are as dear to us as to them, by advocating the purity of all races, and not one alone. We believe also that the white race of South Africa should be the predominating

What followed was the first of several “red scares” in the United States. Knights of Labour leaders who had radical political beliefs were arrested in several cities. In fact only two of the convicted anarchists had any association with the Knights (most were associated with the anarchist Central Labour Union of Chicago). The Chicago Knights had even issued an angry denunciation of the anarchists immediately in the wake of the bombing, claiming that they should receive “no more consideration than wild beasts.” Once the nature of the trial became clear, they changed their tune and joined in calling for the freeing of the Haymarket anarchists.

Any advocate of social revolution was caught in the red scare, whether they considered themselves anarchists or not. It’s questionable even if there was significant distinction between those who we today would call “Marxists” and those who we’d call “anarchists”. Certainly there was nothing like the distinction between modern Leninists and anarchists. The real distinction was between those who sought to overthrow capitalism by the ballot box and those who advocated armed revolution, and there doesn’t seem to be anything close to the animosity between those divergent positions that there is now. In any case, revolutionaries of every type were effectively purged from the labour movement after Haymarket.

The success of the capitalist press in portraying anarchists as “bomb-throwers” was at least in part because of the accuracy of the description in relation to “some anarchists”. The idea of the individual act of violence against the ruling class was gaining popularity. Johann Most, who became leader of the International Working Peoples Association, was a strong advocate of “propaganda of the deed”. Bombings and assassinations were supposed to inspire “the masses” to revolt against the oppressors. This was a particularly attractive prospect for individualists and egoists, since it removed the discomfort of working with others, and the danger of compromising their individual autonomy to the group will. Nevertheless, most anarchists denounced all forms of terrorism:

“Anarchists who rebel against every sort of oppression and struggle for the integral liberty of each and who ought thus to shrink instinctively from all acts of violence which cease to be mere resistance to oppression and become oppressive in their turn are also liable to fall into the abyss of brutal force.... The excitement caused by some recent explosions and the admiration for the courage with which the bomb-throwers faced death, suffices to cause many anarchists to forget their program, and to enter on a path which is the most absolute negation of all anarchist ideas and sentiments.”²²

Malatesta was not writing about the Haymarket bombing in particular (he wrote this nine years afterwards) but about acts of terror in the more recent past, including the 1894 bombing of the Café Terminus in Paris (which killed one patron and injured twenty others) by anarchist Emile Henry,²³ and the bombings by Ravachol who was executed in 1892 and became the hero of those who advocated terrorism.

Human society produces a number of different kinds of violence, but fundamentally they can be broken down into two distinct categories: collective violence and

of the Cigar Makers Union, had restructured that organisation in 1879 to “run like a business”. The new unionism promoted by FOTLU was pure business unionism, wherein the workers organisation would weigh the cost-benefit of each action it would take, making the continued prosperity of the Union its primary concern. They were not particularly successful. By 1883 membership in FOTLU hovered around 25,000 workers.

Conflict between the Knights and FOTLU escalated quickly. The Knights raided FOTLU locals and denounced FOTLU organising drives. This conflict reached its crisis point in 1886, in Chicago, where the Knights sponsored a break-away faction of the Cigar Makers Union, the Progressive Cigar Makers, which advocated the overthrow of the capitalist system. Gompers was enraged.

★ Haymarket and the first Red Scare

May 1st 1886 had been set as the date for a nationwide General Strike for the eight hour day. This date was set by FOTLU at their 1884 convention. Foolishly, the national leadership of the Knights refused to endorse the strike. When the date came, there was certainty among the capitalists that it would be a replay of 1877. In sheer numbers of workers involved, it certainly was. Over 300,000 workers struck nationwide, 40,000 in Chicago alone.

On May 3rd a demonstration at the McCormick Harvester Works, where moulders had been locked out since February, was fired on by police and mercenaries, killing six workers. A speaker at the demonstration was August Spies, a leader of the IWPA.

On May 4th a rally and demonstration on behalf of the murdered McCormick strikers was to be held at Haymarket Square. Early flyers announcing the rally called on workers to arm themselves and gather at Haymarket. These were quickly replaced by a less inflammatory version, but clearly there were some who saw the McCormick murders as the spark that would light the fires of a new insurrection.

What happened next varies based on who does the telling. The most popular version has Chicago cops moving in to disrupt a peaceful demonstration. At some point a bomb was tossed among the cops, exploding and killing one. The rest of the cops then began shooting wildly, killing 5 more of their own and an unknown number of demonstrators. Who tossed the bomb and why is, for many leftists, a matter of passionate dispute.

Whoever threw the bomb, whether it was a Pinkerton agent or an individual anarchist, the results are well known and undeniable. All of the key figures in the Chicago social anarchist movement were arrested. Ten men were indicted, eight went to trial, and all eight were convicted of conspiracy. Seven were sentenced to hang, one to fifteen years in prison. Their trial was conducted in the national press, which portrayed them as “fiends”, “cut-throats” and “bloody monsters”, this despite no clear evidence that they had any connection whatsoever to the bomb or bomb thrower. They were convicted for advocating the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist system. They were convicted of being anarchists.

race.”⁴ Recent protests over the erection of a statue of Gandhi in Johannesburg have reminded many people that the civil rights he was fighting for in South Africa were limited to British Indians, and specifically excluded black Africans.

It was during this period in South Africa that the construction of the Gandhi myth began, mostly by American missionaries and visiting clergy, such as Unitarian minister John H. Holmes who described Gandhi as “the greatest man since Jesus Christ.”

George Orwell, in his 1949 essay “Reflections on Gandhi” pointed out the level of support Gandhi had from the colonial authorities in India, who were terrified of a mass uprising of the Indian people: “Strictly speaking, as a Nationalist, he was an enemy, but since in every crisis he would exert himself to prevent violence – which, from the British point of view, meant preventing any effective action whatsoever – he could be regarded as “our man.” In private this was sometimes cynically admitted. The attitude of the Indian millionaires was similar. Gandhi called upon them to repent, and naturally they preferred him to the Socialists and Communists who, given the chance, would actually have taken their money away.”

Surely the most questionable actions by MK Gandhi involved his treatment of the Dalits of India, those called “untouchables”. Gandhi himself was a “high caste” Indian, of the merchant caste of Vaishyas. The Hindu religion teaches that untouchables are being punished for their sins in a past life. The entire Indian caste system is based on this idea of divine reward (for the upper castes) and divine punishment (for the lower castes). In 1933 Gandhi went on a hunger strike specifically to protest the inclusion of an article in the Indian draft constitution which granted Dalits the right to elect their own leaders. Literally tens of thousands of Dalits were murdered in the riots that followed. In the end, the rights of the Dalits were sacrificed.

The Dalit freedom movement of Bhimaro Ramji Ambedkar was a far more admirable effort than that of Gandhi and his followers. “Ambedkar was one of Gandhi’s harshest critics, a bitter opponent of the manner in which Gandhi drew a gauze of unity over what for him was India’s warring social landscape. For Ambedkar, the Gandhian movement was conservative, upper caste, and bourgeois, a movement resisting the full-scale socio-economic transformation of Indian society.”⁵ Ambedkar correctly argued that democracy without social transformation was pointless, refusing to align his Dalit movement with the Indian nationalist cause, and railing against “enlightened high caste social reformers who did not have the courage to agitate against caste.” Ambedkar championed the idea of the industrial strike, a form of protest that Gandhi refused to sanction, since he opposed all types of class-based conflict.⁶ Ambedkar rejected Gandhism, the caste system, and eventually all Hinduism, converting to Buddhism in 1956.

The person of Gandhi and whether or not he was a perfect human being is of little real significance. It is the deification of Gandhi by the pacifist cult that’s important. The presentation of Gandhi as a latter-day Jesus, a man who is More than a man, takes us directly to the Christian pacifists, and it’s no accident that much of the Gandhi myth has been the work of American evangelists. Through their work Gandhi has become a saintly figure beyond criticism or even critical analysis. The presentation of a flawless Gandhi has become as vital as the presentation of a flawless

Jesus. Criticism of Gandhi is as unthinkable as criticism of Jesus. In turn, the idea of passive, non-violent protest has become sacrosanct, immune to criticism, and accepted without question as the only truly legitimate means of opposing the actions of the State. It is presented as the Perfect Tactic, in fact the only legitimate tactic, for dealing with social change. That this accepts the State's monopoly of violence in the same way that "the free market" is accepted as the only legitimate form of economy, and so is a tacit acceptance of the inequity, injustice, and brutality that are inseparable from the Capitalist State, makes it acceptable to the dominant class for the simple reason that it does not threaten them.

Hannah Arendt has produced a significant analysis of this phenomenon in the above referenced work "On Violence." Writing in 1969, the thrust of the work is a critique of the New Left's love affair of violence, demonstrated in the emergence of numerous clandestine armed struggle organisations. Her critique draws a clear line between violence and power, arguing against such old saws as Weber and Mao. She correctly notes that the only thing that can come out of the barrel of a gun is violence, in the form of a bullet. Power is something different, and may or may not use violence (which she defines as force) to establish itself. "In a head-on clash between violence and power, the outcome is hardly in doubt. If Gandhi's enormously powerful and successful strategy of non-violent resistance had met with a different enemy - Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, even pre-war Japan, instead of England - the outcome would not have been decolonisation, but massacre and submission." ⁷ She does however cling to a belief in a humanity that is somehow beyond and above nature, which is inexplicable. True that human culture has taken us far from the Hobbesian "state of nature"; a few thousand years of civilization are insufficient to alter 100,000 years of genetic coding. We are separate from nature to the degree that we believe ourselves to be, and even so it is a baseless belief, as any natural "disaster" quickly demonstrates.

The radical environmentalist movement has recently become the focus of both police repression and a vigorous tactical debate over the use of violence. The arrest of a number of members of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), their trials and attendant harsh sentences for "eco-terrorism", has underscored one relevant fact: the Capitalist State is scared shitless of violence. They can dismiss peaceful protests by crowds in the hundreds of thousands, ignore even the most aggressive letter-writing campaigns, but one thing they cannot ignore is the willingness to blow the crap out of property.

The sentence given to Marie Mason (an IWW member and former editor of the Industrial Worker) is one of the most outrageous (21 years in prison for arson), and reflects the determination of the State to use the PermaWar on Terror as a club to beat domestic opposition into submission. For comparison, the average sentence for manslaughter in the USA is 7-15 years. Sentencing Mason to significantly more years in prison than someone who killed another person is a clear message: attacking the basis of Capitalism (private property) is worse than killing someone. Property is to be protected, people are to be imprisoned. It is not that property has the same rights as people; property has MORE rights than people. "Violence against property",

communities that allowed them to maintain the traditions of their homelands. They took low-paying jobs in construction, the factories, mills and mines, sometimes being used as strikebreakers by the capitalists.

At the same time as immigration from Europe was rising toward its peak, African Americans in the south began their exodus from Jim Crow oppression in earnest. Congressional Reconstruction of the south had officially ended in 1877 with the final withdrawal of federal troops. In May 1879, African American leaders from fourteen states gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, and proclaimed that "coloured people should emigrate to those states and territories where they can enjoy all the rights which are guaranteed by the laws and Constitution of the United States." Black leaders such as Benjamin "Pap" Singleton and Ida B. Wells supported the declaration and called upon their followers to leave the south. As a result, thousands of black people "quit the South" and headed north and west.

1877 also saw the end of the Black Hills War between the Sioux Nation and their allies against the US government, with the surrender of Crazy Horse on May 5th of that year. This opened vast tracts of land to exploitation and safe settlement, and began a massive westward migration larger than anything beforehand. By 1880 railroads could carry pilgrims into Wyoming, the Dakota Territory and Montana, plus all the western stops on the transcontinental line (Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and California). Hundreds of thousands of working people headed west, all seeking realization of their version of the American Dream. What they mostly found was wage labour in the mines and on the farms of the Great Plains. When they actually were able to homestead a patch of land (usually so remote and barren no politically connected capitalist wanted it), they found themselves scratching out a subsistence living that made the slums of Chicago look attractive. This combination of increased immigration from Europe and internal migration (from the south to the north and from the east to the west) must have created an atmosphere of a world in motion. It was like the dawn of a new era.

By the 1880s all major strikes saw the intervention of state or federal troops. Fortified gun emplacements manned by soldiers with bayonets at the ready guarded the capitalists' factories, mines and rail yards. These soldiers, unlike the citizen militias of 1877, had absolutely no problem firing into groups of striking workers. Supported by local police and mercenaries, they made every economic struggle a life-or-death fight. The workers formed their own militias, such as the Lehr und Weir Verein in Chicago. The militia groups practiced marksmanship and marching, and prepared for the coming class war. They knew it was just a matter of time before the events of 1877 were repeated on a grander, more successful scale.

In fact, the number and size of strikes increased progressively between 1881 and 1886,²¹ and half of these strikes occurred without the approval of, or against the wishes of, the national organisations of the craft unions or the Knights of Labour. They were organised and led by local workers of the Knights, the RSLP/SLP or the craft unions, sometimes all together.

1881 also saw the founding of the Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions, championing the "new unionism" of Samuel Gompers. Gompers, as leader

★ After the Great Uprising

Although the great uprising of 1877 failed to achieve working class emancipation, it did demonstrate the potential of armed workers to challenge the power of the capitalist state. The seriousness with which the capitalists took this threat can be seen today in the form of the many fortified armouries in the downtowns of older American cities. These were built by, or at the behest of, frightened capitalists who wanted no repeat of the worker victories of 1877. The local militias, which had proven unreliable or downright mutinous during the uprising, were placed under tighter control, and would eventually (at the turn of the century), be transformed into the Army National Guard.

As terrified as the capitalists and their minions were, working class advocates were energized. The most obvious beneficiary of the Great Uprising was the Knights of Labour. By the mid 1880s K of L membership had risen to 700,000 workers. The Knights openly advocated for the replacement of the capitalist system with a Co-operative Commonwealth, a socialist system based on economic and social equality. Breaking with the exclusiveness of the craft unions of the past, the Knights welcomed both women and African Americans as members of their local assemblies, sometimes in mixed organisations, sometimes in separate affiliated assemblies. This in itself was revolutionary, as segregation based on race and gender was the norm, and would remain so for many years after the passing of the Knights of Labour.

The Workingmen's Party changed its name to the Socialist Labour Party after the Great Uprising. It promptly split in 1878 over the issue of political action versus organising workers, with one half continuing to call itself the SLP, and the other forming the International Labour Union. By the end of the decade, the SLP had 2,600 members.

In 1881, the SLP split yet again, this time social anarchists formed the Revolutionary Socialist Labour Party, which made its headquarters in Chicago. In 1883 the RSLP merged with other anarchist groups to form the U.S. Section of the International Working People's Association, the anarchist international. While the SLP withered, the IWPA thrived. By 1886 the SLP had shrunk to less than 2,000 members, while the IWPA had grown to more than 6,000.

Both radical workers and capitalists seemed certain that the events of 1877 were only a prelude to what would become a general workers revolution. Unfortunately, events and circumstances would combine against this outcome.

Immigration to the US had been increasing steadily since 1825, and by the latter decades of the 19th century thousands of immigrants were entering the United States every week. Between 1880 and 1890 5.2 million immigrants arrived, almost 800,000 in 1882 alone. These new Americans came primarily from southern and eastern Europe, and unlike previous waves of immigration, a large number were Catholic, and a good many were Jewish. These immigrants faced an even harsher welcome than did the immigrants of the period prior to the Civil War. Most could neither speak English nor write in their native languages. They crammed into the cities of the Northeast and Chicago in the Midwest, where they formed small ethnic

what was once dismissed as vandalism, is now a crime against the economy and the State. The judge at the trial admitted that Mason's main crime was against "the marketplace of ideas",⁸ a bizarre and mystical place apparently, where ethics are reserved for real estate and people are served only abuse.

Author Derrick Jensen has some very interesting points on the use of violence and "property violence" in his 2 volume opus, "Endgame." From one of the twenty premises:

"Premise Five: The property of those higher on the hierarchy is more valuable than the lives of those below. It is acceptable for those above to increase the amount of property they control — in everyday language, to make money — by destroying or taking the lives of those below. This is called production. If those below damage the property of those above, those above may kill or otherwise destroy the lives of those below. This is called justice."

Another interesting premise:

"Premise Thirteen: Those in power rule by force, and the sooner we break ourselves of illusions to the contrary, the sooner we can at least begin to make reasonable decisions about whether, when, and how we are going to resist."

Jensen has no qualms about the use of violence and presents decent refutations of the claims made by dogmatic pacifists. I have problems with several aspects of his program (he demands that "civilization" has to be destroyed, yet is clearly writing about one culture, western industrialism, as the destroyer of the world; civilization didn't begin in Europe, so it doesn't make sense that it should end there); but I find more to agree with in his work than to disagree with.

Like many people who are able to recognize and articulate the need for radical social change, he has only the foggiest of ideas of how to bring it about. By ignoring the class struggle, he makes his own position impossible, a not uncommon mistake made by radical environmentalists. He is however absolutely correct in stating that we should not allow the forces of the State to maintain their monopoly of legitimate force. To do so is to surrender the one thing they fear most of all. Jensen also accurately points out that among the lower classes violence is a daily reality. To say "violence never works" is to state the opposite of what we see every day. Violence definitely works, that's why the State uses it so often and so energetically. But if we're to consider the use of violence intelligently, we need to study its history and application, which for us means how and if it has been effective in historical workers struggles. To do this I want to look at several confrontations between working class rebels and the armed representatives of the Capitalist State, determining the results of these based on a very simple criterion: did the outcome further the cause of workers struggle, or did it negatively affect that struggle?

★ The Molly Maguires

The civil war gave the same sort of boost to industrial capitalism that World War 2 gave to consumer capitalism, and as the current PermaWar on “terror” is designed to boost the next phase of capitalist transformation. The principle industrial focus in the years after the civil war was the building of the railroads. Between 1850 and 1870 the miles of track in the United States expanded from 5,000 to nearly 80,000, and the principle fuel of this expansion was coal-fired steam engines. Coal mining and railroad work were the growth areas of employment, with high hopes on the part of workers for expansion of labour unions and accompanying improvements in pay and conditions. This already vain hope was blown completely to hell when criminal activity in the banking and finance industries resulted in a financial panic and then an economic collapse (sound familiar?). Stock market flimflams and real estate scams are as old as capitalism, and the depression of 1873 was every bit as momentous as the depression of the 1930s. Certainly thousands died of starvation, mostly children. In those days the deaths of working people were not given much notice, especially if they were foreign-born and/or Catholic.

Union membership, which had grown steadily up to the war years and during the war, dropped dramatically. Union membership in the coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania had never been large, and the downturn in the economy destroyed the organisations that had existed. The group called the Molly Maguires first appeared during the civil war, as the bosses fought the nascent organising taking place when work was plentiful. The coal operators encouraged their managers to utilize any and all resources to stop workers from forming unions, including violence. The Mollys came together as a means for the unorganised workers to fight back, and they also used violence. It had been said, even by those sympathetic to the capitalists, that the coal company gangs committed 10 murders for every one the Mollys did, but even one worker daring to strike back at their masters was intolerable to the capitalists. The actions of the Molly Maguires were called terrorist even at the time, and that’s pretty much what they were! More than a few coal company mine managers ended up shot in the head with a threatening note pinned to their bloody shirts. During the long strike of 1875 other miners who were considering going back to work were likewise threatened with murder unless they changed their minds.

The coal bosses hired the Pinkerton detective agency to destroy the Molly Maguires, and that is what they did, either by killing suspected members outright or by framing known Mollys for various murders which they may or may not have been a party to. The 1876 hanging of 20 Molly Maguires in eastern Pennsylvania was good kindling for the Great Strike that came after.

It’s hard to see how the actions of the Molly Maguires advanced the workers struggle in any real way. Operating as a “secret society”, they exposed themselves to the same danger of infiltration and destruction all clandestine organisations face. Their actions were retaliatory, exacting revenge for things the bosses did, and got lost in the cycle of revenge that such actions are necessarily limited to. The mine operators were of course infuriated, not so much at the murder of their managers,

Participation in the General Strike took place in cities as far away as San Francisco, making it a truly national workers rebellion, and a moment all working class Americans should be proud of, although in the end the power of the capitalist class, with the federal army at their disposal, was too strong to be defeated. In truth the demands of the strikers had never been revolutionary or unreasonable: they just wanted enough pay to not starve. Yet for the limitless greed of the capitalists, even this was considered ridiculous and impossible. Any collective action by working people was seen as criminal conspiracy, and the ruling class would hang the ringleaders like they had the Molly Maguires. What resulted from capitalist stupidity was an outburst of working class anger and creativity that hasn’t been equalled since in the USA, but hopefully will again, sooner rather than later.

On a tactical level, the violent resistance of the strikers was successful in many places in the short term. In some places the police and government militia switched sides and joined in the cause of the workers. Turning again to Hannah Arendt: “In a contest of violence against violence, the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government remains intact - that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons. When this is no longer the case the situation changes abruptly. Not only is the rebellion not put down, but the arms themselves change hands, sometimes, as in the case of the Hungarian revolution, within a few hours.”¹⁹

Unfortunately the state seemed to have an unlimited supply of killers whose only loyalty was to the money they were paid. The participation of the labour unions was virtually non-existent. In places like Pittsburgh men who had been leaders in the unions became leaders in the general strike, but just as often it seemed that leaders appeared out of the crowds of working people spontaneously, put forward for their good sense and cool heads rather than any union affiliation. The only political party that claimed to champion the cause of the working class, the Workingmen’s Party, had nothing to do with the creation of the strike, and in fact appeared as frightened as the capitalists in some ways, actually issuing initial calls for caution and non-violence. They were active in spreading the strike after it had already begun, and played important roles in those places they were strongest (Chicago and St. Louis), but, all in all, they were pretty much irrelevant. It was the experience of the Great Strike that helped move one of the Workingmen’s Party leaders, Albert Parsons, towards Anarchism and away from the electoral strategy of the Marxists.²⁰

As amazing as the spontaneity of the Great Uprising, was the class solidarity demonstrated by the working people of places like Pittsburgh and Baltimore. It was this solidarity that would survive the cannon fire of the army and the hangman’s noose, and urge the working class into the fight for the 8 hour day in the continuing war with the robber barons of the capitalist class.

had to retreat, but they had to run a gauntlet of gunfire and projectiles as they fled. The workers of Pittsburgh had completely beaten the army.

Across the river from Pittsburgh, the town of Allegheny was completely under workers control. After taking guns from the armoury, units of strikers dug entrenchments and rifle pits at key points to defend against government troops. Strikers took over the telegraph office and used it to send messages up and down the railway. They continued to operate the passenger trains, under workers control, and formed patrols to keep peace in the streets at night.

“The strike spread almost as fast as word of it, and with it came conflict with the military. In the Pennsylvania towns of Columbia, Meadville, and Chenago, strikers seized the railroads, occupied the roundhouses, and stopped troop trains. In Buffalo, New York, the militia was stoned on Sunday but scattered the crowd by threatening to shoot. The next morning a crowd armed with knives and cudgels stormed into the railroad shops, brushed aside militia guards, and forced shopmen to stop work. They seized the Erie roundhouse and barricaded it. When a militia company marched out to recapture the property, a thousand people blocked and drove them back.”¹⁶

In Reading, Pennsylvania the militia again opened fire on strikers, killing 11. The people were enraged, and began plundering freight cars and tearing up tracks. They broke into the armoury and took enough rifles to arm their own company of fighters. When the company of militia that had killed the 11 strikers marched down the track toward the strikers they were met with stones and bricks, but a newly arrived company of militia was greeted warmly by friends among the strikers. When the troops that had massacred the 11 formed up to menace the strikers, the new militia troops went over to the strikers side, telling them “If you fire at the mob, we’ll fire at you.”¹⁷

Mutinies among militia units happened in many places. In Lebanon, Pennsylvania they mutinied but remained under arms, marching through the streets to the cheers of the crowd. Most just changed back into their civilian clothes and went home or joined the strike.

The entire city of St. Louis, Missouri was under workers control for several days. At a rally of 10,000 strikers, a barrel-maker proclaimed: “There was a time in the history of France when the poor found themselves oppressed to such an extent that forbearance ceased to be virtue, and hundreds of heads tumbled into the basket. That time may have arrived with us.”¹⁸ The British consul in St. Louis noted how the workers of the railroad had “taken the road into their own hands, running the trains and collecting fares...” Mills, a sugar refinery, and dozens of other enterprises remained in operation, under worker self-management. This experiment in workers control was eventually broken by federal troops, vigilantes, railroad mercenaries and the city police. Twenty to thirty people died and hundreds were wounded in the street fighting that took place before the tyrannical order of capitalism was finally restored.

but at the sabotage and destruction of their property. The Molly Maguires did the most good when they were destroying the bosses’ property, and not the bosses’ minions. Still, the Molly Maguires offered a glimmer of hope for the miners of Pennsylvania when any chance of fighting back seemed impossible. The resources and energy expended by the capitalists in arranging their demise indicates the level of fear they caused them. Their sacrifice exposed the ruthlessness and criminality of the coal operators more than discrediting the workers struggle in any way.

★ The Great Uprising of 1877

Called variously the Great Upheaval, the Great Strike, the Great Railroad Strike, and the Great Labour Uprising of 1877, this event was possibly the most significant action in the class war to take place in the USA before or since. It was a great victory of working people over the power of the bosses, even though it failed to establish libertarian socialism and workers control, and in fact saw self-organised workers defeated in detail across the country. Hundreds were killed outright, many more were sent to prison. The railroad barons were able to call on the power of the federal government, in the form of the Army, to crush the workers revolution as it was being born. Yet it was still a victory beyond the wildest hopes of those who fought in the streets and rail yards. The depth of the fear it instilled in the capitalist class can be measured in the thickness of the walls of the fortified armouries built in the middle of many cities afterwards.

After the defeat of the Long Strike of the coal miners and the destruction of the Molly Maguires it seemed that a kind of deadly quiet settled over the class struggle in the United States. The power of the Robber Barons, who tried to own everything and to control what they could not own, seemed unbeatable. “By the summer of 1877 it had become clear that no single group of workers - whether through peaceful demonstration, tightly-knit trade unions, armed terrorism, or surprise strikes - could stand against the power of the companies, their armed guards, the Pinkertons, and the armed forces of the government.”⁹

All of that began to change on July 16th, 1877, when the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) railroad enforced yet another wage cut for workers. That this 10 percent wage cut came only one day after the company president had proudly announced a 10 percent dividend for stock holders made the situation glaringly obvious. This was the third wage reduction since the beginning of the 1873 depression, and workers were literally at the starvation level. With company charge-backs (for housing, tools, even train fare!), workers and their families were forever hungry, ill-clothed and in growing debt to the company stores. The July 16th cut was the final blow.

The uprising began in West Virginia, when workers decided to stop all freight trains until the 10 percent wage cut was reversed. Passenger and mail trains were not affected.¹⁰ In Martinsburg, efforts by the sheriff and mayor to end the strike were dismissed and rejected. By the time regional managers of the B&O were running to the governor’s office, the strike had already begun to spread along the rail lines.

The governor was only too happy to order a militia company to go to Martinsburg and crush the strike. What he wasn't aware of was that the militiamen of the area were also railroad workers, and they, and most of the town, were fully in support of the strike. When the militia arrived in Martinsburg they were greeted by cheers and handshakes from friends and relatives, strikers all, who met them at the station. After a long search the managers finally found an engineer willing to take a train out. With armed militiamen in the engine house and on top of the cow catcher, the freight train rolled out of the round house. A striker, armed with a pistol, rushed in and tried to switch the train onto a siding. He exchanged shots with militia and was hit three times. The striker, William Vandergriff, died 9 days later, leaving behind a pregnant wife with no means of support.

After this incident the local militia refused to follow orders, many of them throwing off their uniforms and changing back into civilian clothes. The colonel in charge wired the governor that he could do nothing more, that the militia was unreliable, and then he dismissed his company.

Another militia company, this time from farther away, was called in. But they too appeared sympathetic to the strikers, and the officer in charge was reluctant to press the issue, deciding instead to wait for federal troops, which by this time the governor had requested. President Rutherford B. Hayes had come to power with the backing and connivance of the railroad barons. He had no problem using troops to break strikes (and had previously done so as governor of Ohio). On July 18 he issued a proclamation ordering that the "lawless elements in West Virginia are to disburse by noon on July 19th".¹¹ The 2nd US Artillery under General William French was dispatched to Martinsburg to insure that his orders were carried out, 300 of whom arrived by the 19th. Strikebreakers from Baltimore arrived on the 20th, and the freight trains began to move. Strikers who tried to block the tracks were arrested for inciting a riot. It appeared that the strike was broken.

This was anything but the case. The same day, July 20th, handbills began to show up on walls in all of the B&O railroad towns. They carried bold titles such as: "WE SHALL CONQUOR OR WE SHALL DIE". The strike was just getting under way.

On July 16th strikers in Baltimore had also walked out, but were almost immediately broken apart by police, militia and company mercenaries. The difference between Baltimore and Martinsburg had been in the almost 100 percent community support for the strike in Martinsburg and the surrounding area. With this support the strikers had been able to seize the trains, the rail yards and the roundhouses, and also defend themselves against the militia, whose sympathies were in any case with the strikers.¹²

The strike spread to Newark, Ohio and Hornellsville, New York. In Hornellsville the New York governor had the unpleasant experience of mobilizing 600 members of the state militia to "quell the riot," only to have them found picnicking and socialising with the strikers.¹³

The strike erupted again in Baltimore when the governor ordered the mobilisation of the 5th and 6th Maryland militia to put down disturbances in Cumberland. Thousands of workers gathered outside the armouries and the Camden train station. At

the armouries they at first cheered the militia as they left the building, but the cheers turned to shouts of derision as the troops formed up to march. The shouts were followed by a rain of stones, driving the militiamen back into the armoury. The crowd was definite: the troops were not going to be allowed to get on the trains. After keeping them under siege for several hours, the soldiers began to fire into the crowd and they began to exit the armoury by company. The best estimate of the number of workers killed in the shooting is over a dozen, probably a lot more, with many dozens wounded. The strikers dragged their dead and wounded away from the battle, so the actual numbers are unknown.

At the Camden railway station, strikers hearing of the slaughter outside the armouries set fire to the station, a lumberyard, a train of oil cars, and a foundry.

On the 19th workers at the Pennsylvania railroad in Pittsburgh joined the strike. Soon foundry workers and mill workers were with them. At a mass meeting at Phoenix Hall they loudly declared their solidarity. Attempts by Pittsburgh authorities to mobilize the local militia failed miserably. Most of the militiamen were either strike supporters or on strike themselves. One officer reported to his commander: "You can place little dependence on the troops in your division; some have thrown down their arms, others have left, and I fear the situation very much".¹⁴

The call was sent for 600 troops from Philadelphia, Pittsburgh's commercial rival. As the Philadelphia troops arrived and began to form up outside the railroad depot, a company official is quoted as saying: "The Philadelphia regiment won't fire over the heads of the mob".¹⁵

A crowd of 5-6,000 was at the station to bar the tracks and keep the trains from moving. The Philadelphia troops fixed bayonets and tore into the crowd, slashing and stabbing many. The crowd responded with stones, bricks and pistol fire. Suddenly the Philadelphia troops began firing into the crowd, shooting as fast as they could reload. At least 20 people were killed on the spot, many more were wounded, some of whom probably died later. The crowd scattered as local militia members looked on in shock as a Gatling gun was brought forward. Most of them went home in disgust or else joined the strikers.

With the tracks now cleared, several engines were fired up. But the train crews who had stayed loyal to the company and not joined the strike now refused to operate them. The strike had not only held - it had expanded. The Philadelphia troops retired to the roundhouse and began to dig in.

Enraged at the massacre, the working classes of Pittsburgh turned out in force. Several thousand armed workers surrounded the roundhouse and began shooting. More workers came as time passed, armed with guns, knives, sticks and stones, the crowd poured a withering fire into the roundhouse. Workers formed themselves into fighting formations and marched under arms through the streets to join the attack. Local militiamen who had joined the strikers even turned one of their field guns on the roundhouse and began a bombardment.

Finally the roundhouse caught fire, this after several rail cars full of coal and oil had been rammed into the building. As the flames began to engulf the Pennsylvania depot, the Philadelphia National Guardsmen decided they had had enough. They