

Class Conflict and Workers' Self Activity on the Railroads: 1874-1895

Abstract: The years 1874 through 1895 saw intense class struggle, much of it centering on the railroad industry. This struggle often took the form of working class self-activity, action organized by workers from the bottom up and carried out independently. Railroad workers did not wait for instructions or guidance from labor leaders, who often advised caution and conciliation with capitalists, but took action themselves. In doing so, boundaries between different occupational groups became less important, often leading to greater unity. This unity sometimes extended beyond the railroad industry and even the traditional working population. Women, youths, and unemployed men stood in solidarity with railroad workers. In a few cases, black and white workers worked together to further the strikes. This self-activity is significant because it led to such broad-based solidarity, but also because recognizing its full extent and importance has implications for how scholars look at unions and the labor movement in general.