The Great Uprising of 1877

The Digital History site (referred to in the Helpful Websites folder as a good resource) includes more detail about the great railroad strike of 1877: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=224

The conditions leading to the strike began in 1873 when a great depression gripped the nation. Unemployment topped 25 percent in many cities and homeless workers organized protests. Four years of misery later, railroad workers struck back. The 1877 Great Railroad Strike started in July in Martinsburg, West Virginia, as workers staggered by a 10 percent wage cut uncoupled all engines, promising to let the trains run when their wages were restored.

Below you see prints from Harper's Weekly showing first the blockading of engines at Martinsburg and below that a railroad bridge burned by the strikers.
Credit: The great strike--Blockade of engines at Martinsburg, West Virginia / from photograph by D. Bendann. The great strike--Burning of the Lebanon Valley Railroad bridge by the rioters / drawn by Fred.
Within a few days, the strike spread along the transcontinental railroad lines to New York, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Kansas City, and San Francisco. Workers in other industries and the unemployed joined the strike, defying armed militias sent by railroad owners.

Look at this headline from the *Chicago Times* about rioting in that city in July 1877.
The rioting continued for nearly a week with business leaders calling for the deportation, arrest, or execution of strike leaders, while Law and Order Leagues swept through working-class neighborhoods and broke up union meetings.

President Rutherford B. Hayes, fearing a "national insurrection," called in the US Army. In Pittsburgh, federal troops equipped with Gatling guns fired into a crowd, killing over 20 people. At strike's end, over 100 had died.

Below a series of illustrations for another newspaper of the time showing some of the violence and destruction during the strike as well as the use of National Guard troops.

Aftermath
The strike haunted business and government leaders and prompted the creation of the National Guard and the construction of armories near potentially dangerous industrial neighborhoods. Workers learned from the strike as well. As individuals they could exert little control over their wages and working conditions, but if they could organize then the power of their numbers could give them some control.

In the early 1880s, workers staged nearly 500 strikes per year and by 1886 that number reached 1500. From 1875 to 1910, state troops were called out nearly 500 times to confront labor unrest.


Coeur d'Alene Mining Wars of 1892 and 1899
The Digital History readings discussed the Coeur d'Alene strikes and their aftermath: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=232

When we think about industries and labor violence in the
late 19th century, we often look only east of the Mississippi River to the steel plants in Homestead, Pennsylvania, where you read about the 1892 strike in which workers fought Pinkerton detectives in gun battles that resulted in deaths on both sides.

But the West and in particular North Idaho was also the scene of labor violence in a predominant industry, mining. In both 1892 and 1899 mine workers in the Coeur d'Alene Valley (along I-90 and including the towns of Kellogg and Wallace).

Mining furnished the raw materials vital to the industries of the east and its workers sought the same protections as workers there. Technology threatened not only the miner's wage but also his life. In the late 1880s, pneumatic drills replaced the by-hand swinging of a pick. The drills expelled such thick clouds of dust that silicosis became a major health problem (the silica in the dust destroys the lungs' air sacs) leading miners to call the drills "widow makers." Here's a historic photos of miners
These drills drastically increased production because miners could drill more holes into which to load more dynamite to blast away more rock. At the same time the drills reduced many skilled miners to the role of "muckers," shoveling out debris and paid less than miners. By 1892 the miners' unions demanded a uniform $3.50 per day for all underground work. They also wanted control over the hospital fund created by the $1 deducted by the companies from their monthly wages.

Tensions escalated between miners and management. Unknown to the miners, the companies had hired Pinkerton detective Charlie Siringo who infiltrated the union and became recording secretary, reporting the union's every move to management. When his duplicity was discovered, Siringo crawled out of town under the board sidewalk.
In 1892 Coeur d'Alene mining companies discharged many union members in midwinter and closed the mines. When the mines reopened in April, the wage was cut and miners who refused to work for the new wage were replaced by nonunion workers (scabs) and protected them with Pinkerton detectives. In July union members struck back in a gunfight at one mine that resulted in blowing up its mill (miners of course know how to use dynamite). The miners also threatened to blow up the Bunker Hill and Sullivan Company's concentrator if the company did not get rid of the strikebreaking workers. The company relented and the strikebreakers left the Coeur d'Alenes. The violence ended with 6 dead, 3 on each side, and more than a dozen injured.

Idaho's governor declared martial law in Shoshone County (where the Coeur d'Alene mines are located) and instructed the soldiers he sent to incarcerate 300 in what became known as "bull pens." Those arrested included miners but also lawyers, merchants, local judges, and saloonkeepers who had union sympathies. Those arrested were confined for nearly two months without charges. Finally 25 union leaders were taken to Boise for trial and some were sentenced to 6 months in jail. Here are some miners in one of these outdoor bull pens.
Again in 1899 tensions erupted between miners and management at the Bunker Hill and Sullivan Company because the company was the only one in the Coeur d'Alenes to refuse to pay shovelfers and miners the same wage of $3.50/day, paying shovelfers (called "muckers") 50 cents less.

A planned union protest escalated out of control to result in union men hijacking a train and driving it to the Bunker Hill where they blew up the $250,000 concentrator. One union member and one non-union worker died.

The Bunker Hill management used political connections to convince the Idaho governor to once again declare martial law and federal soldiers took over and ran the district, ousting local elected leaders, for over a year. Those soldiers rounded up every miner, between six and seven hundred, into bull pens once again.

With union sympathizers out of local government, Bunker Hill controlled local government and used it to put into
place its supporters and instituting an employment system that effectively kept any miner with union connections from securing a job. Union efforts in the Coeur d'Alene mines were thwarted for decades.

©2009 Susan Vetter, rev. 2011