

## LIFE IN THE U.S.

# 1877 mass strike: capital & labor on brink of war



**T**his month marks the 100th anniversary of the Great Strike of 1877. One of the bitterest expressions of class warfare in American history, it was the closest this country has come to experiencing a nation-wide general strike.

The Great Strike came at the end of the most severe depression the nation had ever suffered. Between 1873 and 1877 the fledgling trade union movement had been decimated, its ranks reduced to 50,000 men and women, a mere one-tenth the number of five years earlier. Unemployment was rife in every major city while those with jobs suffered substantial cuts in wages.

The Great Strike began on Monday, July 16, 1877, when workers on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad walked off their jobs in Martinsburg, W. Va., to protest the second wage cut in less than a year. Crowds of strikers and their supporters in the community blocked trains entering or leaving the city. When the state militia was unable to clear the tracks, President Rutherford B. Hayes sent in 300 federal troops. The army succeeded in moving trains out of Martinsburg, only to be blocked by crowds of sympathizers when they reached the surrounding countryside.

What began as a local dispute spread like wildfire along the nation's railways. In the next two weeks the strike affected every region of the country except New England. In Pittsburgh, news of the walkout inspired workers on the Pennsylvania railroad to walk off their jobs, while sympathy strikes were organized by miners and workers in the great Carnegie steel mills. When crowds seized the railroad switches in the city, the Pittsburgh militia refused to act against them.

## The militia.

Militia units were brought in from Philadelphia, although at least one Irish regiment gave its arms to the strikers and went home. At one Pittsburgh railroad crossing, the militia fired on the strikers, killing 20 people. The crowd's response was one of the most dramatic acts of insurrection in American history, the burning of the Pittsburgh railroad yards. On Sunday and Monday, July 23 and 24, 104 locomotives and 2,000 railroad cars went up in flames. To one local newspaper it seemed "the beginning of a great civil war in this country, between capital and labor."

In Chicago, according to one labor his-

## *An eminent historian explains the significance of the great strike of 1877 on its 100th anniversary.*

torian, the Great Strike was "almost a revolution, but without revolutionary intent." Events there began with a meeting called by the Workingmen's party, a small socialist organization, and with a spontaneous walkout by railroad switchmen. On July 24, representatives of dozens of trades met to formulate demands for higher wages and an eight-hour day; the next day, crowds of strikers closed down virtually every business in the city. On the final day of the struggle in Chicago, troops and armed bands of middle-class citizens restored order, but only after severe fighting near railroad viaducts, attacks on railroad property and pitched battles between strikers and police. At the same time, a general strike for the eight-hour day shut down the city of St. Louis for several days and railroad property was destroyed in Buffalo.

One of the most remarkable features of the 1877 upheaval was the widespread popular sympathy for the railroad strikers. "It is folly," said the *New York Tribune*, "to blink at the fact that ... public opinion is almost everywhere in sympathy with the insurrection." Whole communities united behind the strikers, expressing the widespread hostility to the hated railroads. The largest capitalist enterprises in the country, railroads symbolized the new industrial era, which indeed they had helped to create. Cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh could hardly have existed without the railroad, but in these cities there was broad resentment against discrimination in railroad rates, the corruption of state legislatures by railroad money and the gobbling up of the public domain by the companies.

## The power of the railroads.

Railroad managers were the power brokers of post-Civil War America. The "bargain of 1877," which had ended Reconstruction some months earlier by provid-

ing troops from the South, had been engineered by railroad men. How ironic that this same year witnessed the use of federal troops against northern workers; the issue of slavery and race which had divided the nation for so long seemed to have been replaced by the issue of Americanism's response to the newly industrialized society.

The most remarkable thing about the 1877 strike was its spontaneity. The timid railroad brotherhoods—organizations of skilled engineers and firemen—were not involved in organizing the strike. The unorganized switchmen took the lead, along with thousands of factory workers who were not yet members of unions. The strike revealed a high degree of labor solidarity, but also some of the tensions that existed in the working class. In St. Louis there was unity between black and white workers; in San Francisco a mass meeting called to discuss a sympathy strike ended in rioting against the Chinese community.

Finally, federal troops succeeded in putting an end to the strike. The massive armories that still stand in the centers of American cities, often on land donated by chambers of commerce, are a legacy of the events of 1877, monuments to fears of internal upheaval rather than invasion from abroad.

## Class consciousness.

The Great Strike ushered in a period of class consciousness and militant labor/capital conflict unprecedented in their history of this—and perhaps any other—nation. The use of federal troops aroused tremendous bitterness in working-class communities and the experience of the Great Strike helps explain the rapid rise of the Knights of Labor and of local labor political parties in the following decade. Areas like the anthracite mining region of Pennsylvania, occupied for months by the troops, remained centers of radicalism for decades.

Ironically, President Hayes himself drew one of the major lessons from the events of 1877. Ten years afterwards he asked in a letter, "Shall the railroads govern the country, or shall the people govern the railroads? ... This is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people no longer. It is a government of corporations, by corporations, and for corporations. How is this?" Hayes had no answer. One hundred years later the question is still with us.

*Eric Foner is the author of Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, and Tom Paine.*



## SPORTS

# All-around Borg wins Wimbledon

by Mark Naison

**B**jorn Borg's victory at Wimbledon this year—his second in a row—is one of the most remarkable feats in tennis history. On his way to the championship Borg had to beat the Nestase and Jimmy Connors—considered by many the most talented players in the game—and Vitas Gerulaitis, a young New Yorker who was the first American in 16 years to win the Italian Open. Borg's five set matches against Connors and Gerulaitis were among the finest ever seen on Wimbledon Center Court.

But what makes Borg's achievement so unique is that he was brought up on clay and has big top spin strokes that are far better suited for slow surfaces than for grass. Other players with similar styles—Guillermo Vilas, Patric Dille, and Harold Solomon—were knocked out in the early rounds of Wimbledon. Borg completely neutralizes top-spin. Looping drives that bounce over an opponent's head on clay sit up waist high on grass, perfect targets for players who hit flat or underspin approach shots, and it's difficult to hit top-spin passing shots against the low, skidding balls hit by an experienced grass-court player.

That Borg could win Wimbledon two years in a row on a surface so inimical to his style is an extraordinary athletic achievement, equivalent to say, O.J. Simpson switching to linebacker and winning all-pro honors, or Dr. J making the NBA All-Star team as a playmaking guard.

In fact, it's Borg's all round athletic ability that distinguishes him from the other great clay court players in the game today. His serve and overhead strokes which are rarely decisive on clay, but crucial on grass—are among the best in the world, and his endurance is unsurpassed. If the match goes five sets, you almost know Borg is going to win. His superior strength and conditioning, along with an unusually slow heartbeat, give him an edge the longer the match drags on.

Borg's victory, however impressive, does not mean that he will dominate men's tennis for the foreseeable future. Although I believe that Borg will emerge as the best player of his era—decisively surpassing Jimmy Connors within the next few years—he will continue to lose his share of matches. There are so many fine young players coming up that Borg will find himself pressed hard in virtually any tournament he plays in. Although he'll psych himself up for the big ones—Wimbledon, Forest Hills, the WCT Championships—he'll be "upset" quite a bit in lesser tournaments, when boredom, fatigue or lack of concentration remove the slight edge that separates him from the rest of the players.

But all that's great for tennis fans. What Borg's victory symbolizes, above all, is the rising quality of men's tennis, sparked by an influx of talented athletes into a sport that once had an aristocratic aura. The U.S. is leading the way in this change. Three out of the four Wimbledon semi-finalists were Americans, including an 18-year-old U.S. Junior champion named John McEnroe.

With 29 million Americans now playing tennis, the base for the sport has broadened to bring a sizable portion of the population in contact with it, and the glamour and money associated with the game attracts many teenage athletes who would previously have focused their energies on baseball, basketball or football. The poorest strata of the population have not yet been drawn into the sport—but if they are, watch out! In 20 years, you may see a Dr. J. on clay.

The situation in women's tennis,

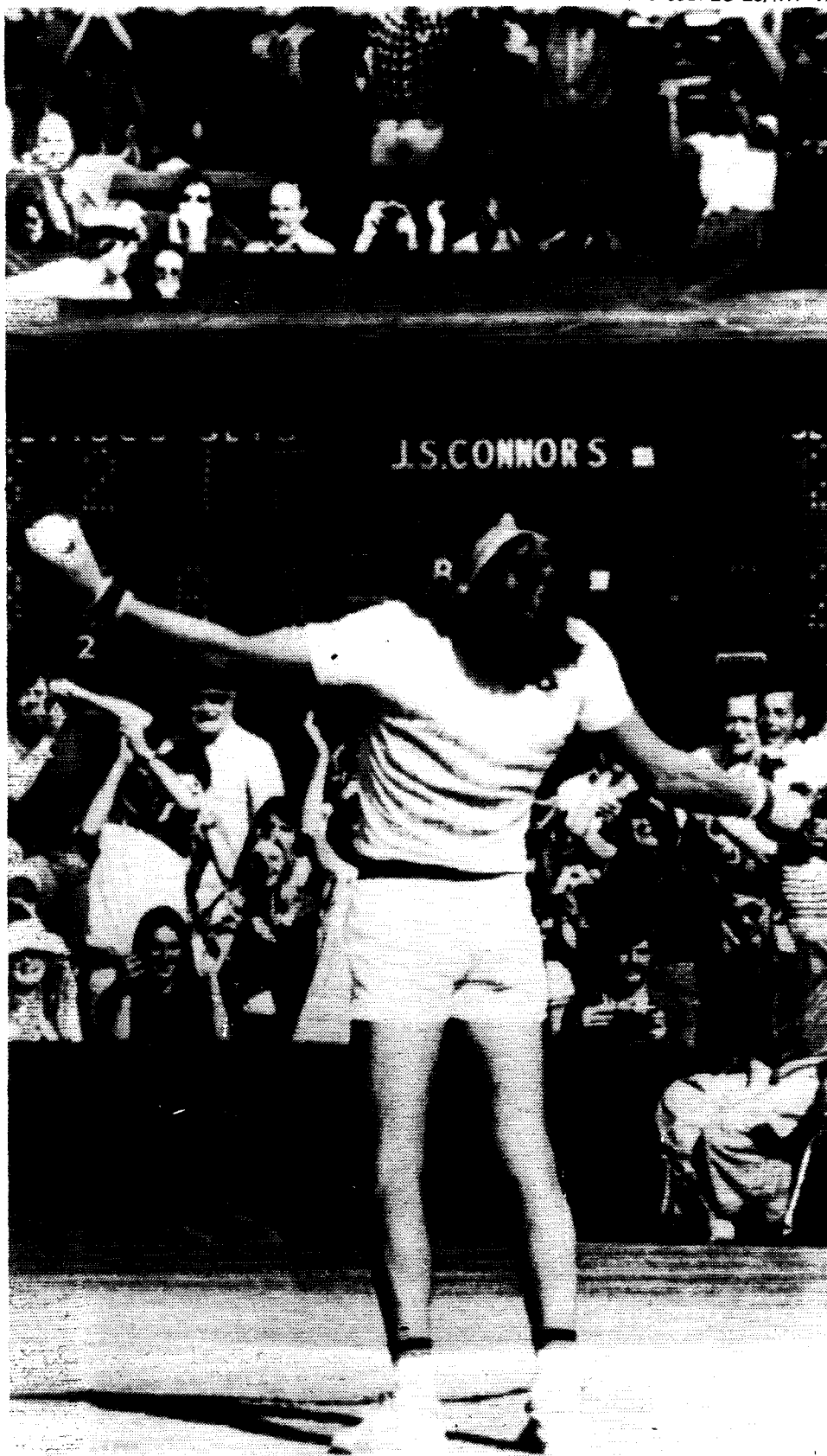
**Borg's victory at Wimbledon two years in a row and on a surface so inimical to his style is an extraordinary achievement—like Dr. J making the NBA All-Star team as a playmaking guard.**

though improving, still reflects the barrier that prevents women from devoting themselves wholeheartedly to sports. For the last ten years, a handful of women—Billie Jean King, Margaret Court, Chris Evert, Virginia Wade and Yvonne Goolagong—have dominated the women's circuit, and few other women have been even close.

The finals and semi-finals women's tournaments have often been more exciting than the men's, featuring epic contests between great athletes and competitors, but you always know who's going to get there.

Before we reach the point where the women's circuit is like the men's—where upsets are the rule, and preliminary matches are often better than the finals—there has to be a dramatic growth in the number of young women who play tennis seriously and make excellence in the sport the focal point of their lives. Until there's a big change in popular attitudes toward women in sports and a far more equitable distribution of athletic resources, that isn't going to happen.

Mark Naison, along with Jack Russell, coordinates sports coverage for *In These Times*.



Bjorn Borg thanks the gods as he closes out a five-set victory over American Jimmy Connors. Virginia Wade won the women's final over Betty Stowe.

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