Bishop Tuigg and the Railroad Strike of 1877
A paper delivered at the October 15, 1993 Duquesne University History Forum
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Introduction
Capitalizing on the problems of the 1870s, the various industrial enterprises (railroaders being no exception) promoted reasons, really excuses, to revise the worker’s position within the corporate structure. When the Panic of 1873 occurred, the nation seemed, deceptively, on the road to growth and capitalist expansion. The Panic was a byproduct of this deceptive, unbridled expansion. Railroad promoters, mining interests, industrialists, bankers and the nation’s political leaders hoped to turn over immense profits without risk. These profits did not materialize. The entire lending and borrowing scenarios of these entrepreneurs did not materialize. Result: hard times for the nation. Translation: the economy was shell-shocked and businesses modified their structure or collapsed.

Against this backdrop of economic instability, railroaders were to examine and eventually readjust the working conditions of their employees.

Causes of the Railroad Strike
The Railroad strikes occurring in July of 1877 were deeply affected by the Panic of 1873. During these economic hard times, various labor groups struck. A major strike occurring in the Pittsburgh area was with the ironworkers in the winter of 1874-1875. Naturally, opposition ensued not only by the employers but interesting enough by the general public. Yet, the ironworkers won. This successful strike led to the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers in 1876. In addition to this brotherhood being established, encouragement was given to other workers to imitate the ironworkers’ success. When in 1877 the railroaders modified worker wages and conditions, the workers felt that they too could strike and win.

However, the more immediate causes for the railroad stroke in July 1877 were the announcements in June 1877 by the Pennsylvania Railroad that all wages were to be reduced by 10% and ordered ... that beginning July 19 all freight trains between Pittsburgh and Derry were to be run as “double-headers,” meaning that two trains, with two engines would be run by one crew.

This announcement was justified by Thomas Scott, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, citing “similar economic measures taken by other [rail]roads.” Hoping to reduce the economic troubles of the Pennsylvania line, the railroad was looking for the means of reducing the outflow of capital.

When the first double-header rolled out on July 19, the trains did so without interference.

The crew of the 9:40 train, however, refused, on their own initiative, to take her out. The crews of the incoming freight trains promptly joined the strikers.

The Pennsylvania Railroad took an extremely hard line towards the strikers. The railroad promptly appealed to Pittsburgh Mayor William C. McCarrh for police protection, but to no avail. At midnight, Allegheny County wired Harrisburg for troops, and three Pittsburgh state militia regiments were ordered to the scene of the strike. These troops did not actively confront the rioters, in fact several favored the strikers’ position. Not until troops were sent in from Philadelphia did events turn bloody.

Pittsburgh’s Response
With the riot reaching bloody proportions, with the dead and wounded littering the streets, Pittsburgh responded to the problem with serious efforts. The rioters by Saturday, July 21, had developed a despicable character; the mob now was in firm control by a criminal element. This element fought back the troops from Philadelphia. The mob seized guns and munitions, destroyed stores, burned and looted, and reaped general havoc on the city.

With these events confronting Pittsburgh directly, the city finally took a concerted effort to settle the riotous behavior in the city. Pittsburgh responded with the establishment of a Citizen Committee, Committee of Twenty Nine, formed on Sunday, July 22. The meeting was held at Old City Hall for the purpose of adopting measures for the protection of life and property from the rioters, and the restoration of peace and order.

The meeting of citizens was called to order by Mr. James Park, Jr., who presided. Speed was of the utmost concern for the members of the Committee. The Committee consisted of
business, civic, and religious leaders, of which Bishop John Tuigg was a member.

The Committee set about appointing a sub-committee to quickly address the crowd and ascertain the feelings of the mob. In this sub-committee, Bishop Tuigg was to play an extremely crucial and active role. When the sub-committee reached the blazing Union Depot, Mr. Parks attempted to address the mob, but few paid him heed. Yet, the mob expressed a willingness to listen to Bishop Tuigg. 11

The Bishop, along with his secretary, gracioulsy mounted the makeshift platform and commenced to address the crowd. He did so with the soul and the determination of a man on an arduous mission, as so he was. 12

The Bishop raised his hand to settle the crowd. Moments passed. The Crowd settled. The Bishop spoke:

Fellow Citizens – A Committee appointed at a mass meeting held this afternoon selected a sub-committee and instructed them to come here and see if this dreadful destruction cannot be stopped. Whatever grievances you may have to redress, whatever wrongs you may desire to have righted, this wanton destruction of property will do you no good. It benefits no one.

A voice (from the crowd) – who commenced the riot?

The Bishop – We are not here to indulge in crimination or recrimination, or to condemn this party and uphold that. There have doubtless been faults on both sides. Certainly we all deplore that any lives have been sacrificed.

A voice (from the crowd) – What did the Philadelphia soldiers begin the shooting for, and kill innocent women and children?

Another voice – Where’s Gen. Pearson? We want to get hold of him. (General Pearson ordered the Pennsylvania National Guard into Pittsburgh.)

The Bishop – I come before you as a citizen, at the request of a … meeting, in the interest of law and order. I do not want to talk of what is past. The lives that have been sacrificed, and the property that has been destroyed cannot be restored. What I want to talk to you about concerns your welfare for the future.

A voice (from the crowd) – Go on sir we’ll listen.

The Bishop continued – I am authorized to say to you that you will obtain a redress of your grievances, if it is in the power of the citizens of Pittsburgh to bring the result about.

A voice (from the crowd) – What has Tom Scott got to say about it?

Bishop Tuigg further informed the mob that he had been for long time stationed at Altoona, on the main line of the Pennsylvania railroad, and the old employees of that company were never in favor of destroying property and were careful of the lives of their fellow citizens. Many of those men I am well acquainted with. Many of them, and I hope there is none of them, but are willing to take my assurances that a peaceable adjustment of these difficulties can be arrived at. 14

However, even with Bishop Tuigg’s words, the mob grew restless. The engine whistled and tooted drowning out any further attempts to speak to the crowd. The crowd shouted back to the Bishop that he was not in his cathedral, and that they do not care to listen to him. To further heighten the tension at the scene, a piece of iron ore was hurled at the Committee and struck the end of the car on which the Committee stood. But the Bishop and the Committee stood their ground. After further attempts by members of the Committee to address the crowd, they left the scene. On the way, the crowd milled around their carriages. Once again Bishop Tuigg addressed the crowd. The Bishop encouraged the men to make a new beginning and all good citizens will assist you. At this point, an Irishman from the crowd took issue with the Bishop as to why didn’t the railroad appoint a committee to look into matters. The Bishop’s response was honest and forthright, he stated that no one could have foreseen such total destruction. Again from the crowd further cries about why were the troops from Philadelphia called in and where was General Pearson. 15

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10 John Tuigg was born in Donoughmore (County Cork), Ireland on February 19, 1821. He was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Pittsburgh on May 14, 1850. He was appointed third bishop of Pittsburgh on January 11, 1876 and was consecrated on March 19, 1876. On August 3, 1877, he was appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Allegheny (Pennsylvania). He died on December 7, 1889 at age 68, having served as bishop of Pittsburgh for 13 years. His biography appears in "Bishop John Tuigg (1876-1889)" in William J. Pantell (ed.), Catholic Pittsburgh: One Hundred Years 1843-1943 (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1943), 48-52.
14 "Reign of the Mob," loc. cit.
Bishop Tuigg gave an eloquent speech to the mob. Basically his speech consisted of three parts:

(first) ... there was nothing to fight for, (second) the railroad company now accedes to the strikers, and (third) that if they would desist peace would readily be brought about. 16

The sub-committee returned to report to the Citizen Committee at 4 o'clock. Dr. Connelly of the sub-committee reported that Bishop Tuigg addressed the crowd; but the Bishop had little influence on the crowd since most were intoxicated. Dr. Donnelly recommended the formation of a Vigilance Committee to quell the mob. 17

For the Bishop, the riot was a severe blow in that he, as a religious leader, worked for peace and harmony, not only between the railroaders and the workers, but also he was sincere in his commitment to maintain peace in Pittsburgh.

The Bishop was unending in his call for humanitarianism. He constantly walked the streets of Pittsburgh praying for the wounded and the dying on both sides. 18

The riot finally burned itself out, but not after nearly destroying Pittsburgh as a city and as an economic center. The railroad strike was the first general strike movement in the United States, hitting railway centers from New York to California. 19

The rioters went back to work without winning their objectives. The violence of the strike set back the cause of unionism in Pittsburgh many years. Although it succeeded in unionizing every iron mill in Allegheny County during the 1880s, the Amalgamated Iron and Steel Workers remained the only union of any strength in the city. 20

Bishop Tuigg continued to administer the diocese. But the trials of not only the railroad strike but of his ministerial duties proved to be too much of a burden.

After returning from an official visit to Rome in 1881, he became ill. In 1883, he had two strokes. After which, in 1885, he returned to his home in Altoona. He died peacefully on December 7, 1889 and is buried in St. John's Cemetery in Altoona.

Bishop Tuigg was a man of great compassion and love for his church, for his fellow man and for his ministry.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

In searching for information on Bishop John Tuigg, actual accounts were discovered in the various newspapers serving Pittsburgh:

- *The Catholic*: July 28, 1877. See also August 4, 1877 for general information on the strike.
- *The Daily Post*: July 21 and July 23, 1877. See also July 18, 19, and 20 for further information on general strike activities.
- *Pittsburgh Commercial And Gazette*: July 20 and July 23, 1877. Refer also to July 21, 24, and 25 for particulars on the railroad strike. The newspaper gives a very thorough account of events.

Secondary Sources

- William J. Purcell (ed.), *Catholic Pittsburgh's One Hundred Years 1843-1943* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1943).

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