Mass Strikes, Corporate Strategies:  
The Baldwin Locomotive Works and  
the Philadelphia General Strike of 1910

The early twentieth century witnessed an epidemic of industrial unrest. Heightened worker consciousness, sometimes stirred by increasingly radical and militant unions, led to mass strikes in such places as McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania; Lawrence, Massachusetts; Paterson, New Jersey; and Little Falls, New York. These mass strikes and the union organizing drives with which they were often associated confronted employers with the difficult problem of containing agitation begun at one factory from spreading to neighboring plants and even other industries. Crowded industrial districts like those of central Philadelphia were especially susceptible to the spread of strikes and demonstrations that “surrounded and infected” downtown factory workers.¹

The papers of Baldwin Locomotive Works executive Samuel M. Vauclain (in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania) provide a revealing look at the experiences of one company whose workers were drawn into a mass strike. In addition, the papers provide the basis for identification of the strategies developed by company executives to avoid such problems in the future. Baldwin’s response was to move its operations out of its Broad and Spring Garden Street central Philadelphia location. Reacting to the same kinds of threats from the emergence of strong urban unions, other firms in other large cities also began to decentralize industrial activity. Although the availability of cheaper land on the outskirts of cities and the need for new buildings to accommodate new technologies also influenced the shift in plant

location, some historians have speculated that industrial decentralization resulted in large part from the desire to avoid increasingly aggressive trade unions.\(^2\) As yet, there have been few attempts to document that assertion, but Vauclain's papers and related supporting evidence demonstrate one example of the process of decentralization, a consequence of the Philadelphia streetcarmen's strike of 1910 in which Baldwin executives found their workers caught up.

The streetcarmen were ideally positioned to enlist mass support in their strikes. Like other big city transit systems, the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company (PRT) employed large numbers of employees, most of whom gathered before and after their shifts at centrally-located roundhouses. In addition, the streetcar provided an excellent means of informal communication through which workers could spread information about a strike and build support. The long hours, low wages, and harsh conditions of streetcar work (men frequently worked fourteen- to eighteen-hour swing shifts in open, drafty cars) generated sympathy among other workers. Moreover, Philadelphians were unsympathetic to the corruption and intrigue-riddled PRT. Indeed, streetcar strikes in 1895 and 1909 enjoyed widespread support. They were marked by numerous violent actions against company property and, in 1909, a threat by the Central Labor Union to call a general strike of its 75,000 members.

Within a year, however, the PRT fired 173 members of the streetcarmen's union and provoked a major strike. As the streetcarmen gathered at powerhouses in Kensington and Germantown, and near the Baldwin Locomotive Works in center city on February 19, 1910, workers from many nearby factories joined the agitation against the PRT and the city police called out to guard PRT property.\(^3\) Kensington textile workers left their shops to block streetcar tracks, surround PRT powerhouses, smash car windows, and throw stones at scabs or police. In Germantown, 10,000 strike sympathizers battled police for two hours when patrols attempted to disperse the crowds.


\(^3\) The only adequate history of the 1910 general strike is found in Philip S. Foner, *The AFL in the Progressive Era, 1910-1915* (New York, 1980), ch. 6.
Employers were faced with deciding how to respond when their workers were caught up in this generalized unrest. Smaller companies were especially powerless to prevent the spread of the strike. Garment shops, construction firms, and textile factories were almost completely shut down. Most had to wait for the agitation to disappear; some pressured the city and the PRT to make concessions.4

Larger companies likewise faced problems. There was violence on February 23, when mounted police arrived at the Baldwin Locomotive Works in the city’s heavily industrialized Spring Garden section. Confronting the transit strikers, the police also clashed with many Baldwin men returning from lunch. In response, workers inside the plant unleashed a barrage of nuts and bolts at the police. Chief engineer Charles Bourgeois and inspector Luke Johnson ordered their employees into the factory and directed that they close the windows. The police opened fire, narrowly missing Bourgeois.5 The first document, a report of the event from the Baldwin erecting shop foreman J. L. Kimball to general superintendent Vauclain, demonstrates how the downtown location of industry could involve workers in a strike that originated elsewhere.

Philadelphia, Penna.,
February 24, 1910

Mr. S. M. Vauclain,
General Superintendent.
Dear sir:-

I beg to submit the following report of the disturbance occuring at noon yesterday (Feb. 23rd.) as seen by me upon turning the corner of Broad and Spring Garden Streets about 12 minutes to 1 o’clock:

The crowd of people which had gathered around this point (principally people not employed here) were being hurried before the rush of a number of the city police who were lined up on the east side of Broad Street with revolvers drawn

and shooting at the buildings of these works comprising the Hamilton Street Shops. Nuts, bolts, washers, etc., were being thrown from the windows.

Mr. Hicks, Mr. Stevens and myself remonstrated with one of the sergeants of police for the purpose of giving an opportunity to remove the trouble from around the gate at Broad and Hamilton Streets and also from the windows in Hamilton Street Shop and Willow Street Shop in which the greatest amount of trouble was occurring at this time.

The police continued their march down Broad Street firing at every face appearing in the windows of the shops and the men continued throwing metallic substances making our efforts of no avail. I entered the Willow Street Shop for the purpose of breaking up the trouble in the shop, while Mr. Stevens and Mr. Hicks endeavored to quiet and remove the crowd gathered around the inside of the gate while Mr. Dearnley, who appeared on the scene about the same time as Mr. Hicks and myself, was taking care of the outside of the entrance to the works. The police, having moved as far as half the length of Willow Street Shops, retired, the whistle announcing the hour of one o'clock and hostilities ceased.

The sergeant whom we approached informed me that the police were shooting blank cartridges but the evidence of lead on the bricks and small holes in window panes proved otherwise.

Respectfully yours,

(Signed) J. L. Kimball,
General Foreman,
Erecting Shop.

The involvement of Baldwin employees did not end with this incident. As the continuing strike embittered industrial relations, the city's labor movement grew increasingly resentful of police action supporting the transit company. The appearance of violent class conflict on Philadelphia streets also spurred labor organizing drives. The Central Labor Union announced a general strike for March 4, stimulating union activity, building labor solidarity, and heightening the sense of grievance felt by many workers.

Although Baldwin workers generally enjoyed high wages, many workers joined in these efforts. The company's use of an inside contracting system became a special target of agitators, drawing heavy criticism in the ensuing weeks. Under the system, highly skilled craftsmen functioned as crew leaders or contractors, bidding on work to be done within the factory, organizing production, and distributing
earnings to the workers in their crews. This system allowed contractors substantial earnings; but it also encouraged favoritism in awarding contracts, and it encouraged contractors to exploit their crews. Ordinarily, skilled craftsmen were the backbone of trade unionism. At Baldwin’s, however, these men were actually managers, hostile to unions because, as managers, they prospered by driving their crew members. Other complaints voiced by Baldwin workers—no overtime pay, low piece-work rates—were also related to the inside contracting system.6

In the highly charged atmosphere of the transit strike, Baldwin workers moved toward unionism to seek redress for their grievances. At meetings held in early March with representatives of the Iron Workers, Machinists, and Metal Finishers unions, they were told of the better conditions in union shops. Baldwin workers organized a temporary union and slowly joined the general strike. Some employees went beyond the sympathetic strike by addressing specific demands at Baldwin, petitioning Vauclain for a shorter workday, extra pay for overtime, and a restoration of the higher wages that prevailed before the recession of 1907. By March 8, perhaps one-third of Baldwin workers had left the plant for the picket line.7

This was not the first time Baldwin’s workers were influenced by surrounding union activities. In the 1880s and 1890s some had tried to unionize during the periods of general labor unrest. Baldwin successfully avoided unionization, but the periodic resurgences of labor activism disturbed Vauclain and company president Alba Johnson. Sensitive to the anti-business climate of the early twentieth century, Baldwin executives launched no immediate attack on the strikers in 1910 and maneuvered instead to improve the public image of the company. Vauclain stated publicly that there would be no recriminations against men involved in the sympathy strike. He also granted

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7 See H. Irelan to Mr. Walker, March 9, 1910; W. J. Bender to Mr. Kenny, March 9, 1910; and First Floor Shop to Mr. Vauclain, March 10, 1910, all in Vauclain Papers.
workers a half-holiday on Saturdays. He even interceded on behalf of one of his workers who had been arrested at a strike demonstration. Finally, he announced on March 12 that Baldwin was backlogged with orders and would take back all strikers and hire an additional 4000 workers to supplement the company’s 12,000-man force. The second document (also contained in the Vauclain papers), a clipping from the Philadelphia Public Ledger, suggests that Vauclain expected to win back the loyalty of many of Baldwin’s workers and present the company in a favorable light.

**BALDWIN’S TO ADD 4000 TO FORCE**

Superintendent Vauclain Declares Conditions Remove All Fear of Prolonged Strike.

Despite the interference of the sympathetic strike with operations at the Baldwin Locomotive Works, there is so much work ahead that the management expects to have 16,000 men employed by July 1.

Samuel M. Vauclain, general superintendent of the company, said last night at his home in Rosemont, that although the strike had taken 4000 men from their tasks, he was confident that they would all come back and that they would welcome the accessions which are to be made at the rate of 1000 monthly until the 16,000 figure had been attained.

Mr. Vauclain declared that this was a time when, with work to be done and “plenty more in sight,” people should “get busy and forget it.” He continued:

“‘There is no strike. That’s the spirit that will effectually settle the difficulty. When the people determine that the work calling for workers should be done, you will find those who must toil returning to their benches. I am glad to be able to say that we have enough to do to keep between 12,000 and 13,000 busy now and that what we have in the way of orders and will obtain necessitates the employment of a force lacking only 3000 of the top notch number of men that we had on the payroll in the days before the panic.’ . . .

The Baldwin plant includes the shops at Eddystone where 2700 men are now employed. The additions to be made to the working force will affect all departments. . . .

Mr. Vauclain’s optimistic view of the strike situation reduces itself to this, he said—there is nothing to be gained by folding one’s hands and bemoaning the loss of business. Business prosperity is here, has been here for some time, he maintained;

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“and it is time we are taking advantage of it by forgetting there is such a thing as a strike.”

The locomotive shops are being operated as well as conditions permit. “Men are gradually coming back,” the general superintendent asserted, “and I believe they will not be sorry to know that much work is in store for them.”

In business circles the news that the Baldwin plant is to resume operations on a scale which it has not known for two years was received with rejoicing. It was predicted that this increase in business would produce a wholesome effect upon the Baldwin men who struck and upon the sympathetic strikers in general.

Vauclain’s approach to the turmoil of the general strike won him and the company public support. Local newspapers applauded Baldwin’s handling of the strikers. Other employers also praised Vauclain’s actions. Charles Le Fenn, a pipe stamper, wrote: “As an employer who has been forced out by the action of his ‘gang,’ allow me to thank you for the consideration and courtesy which you have exercised in dealing with your men.”9 Even the wives of Baldwin workers joined in the praise. One woman, signing her letter Mrs. R. A. C., wrote that “It is only Christian people with good characters who make the smallest bow to an umble [sic] workman and I believe you must be this kind of a man.”10

Public image, however, hid a more draconian corporate strategy. From the first, Vauclain used spies to inform him about Baldwin workers who attended union meetings. One, a Mr. Browne, complained that speeches made in foreign languages and that general confusion made it hard for him to make a lengthy report. But he assured Vauclain that he was right at the front of the hall and that he would attend the next “secret meeting.” H. Irelan and W. J. Bender also attended meetings “filled with Baldwin men.”11 Although Vauclain publicly claimed that the sympathy strikers had no complaints against his company, he knew this not to be the case. As the

9 Charles W. Le Fenn to Vauclain, March 10, 1910, Vauclain Papers.
10 Mrs. R. A. C. to Vauclain, March 10, 1910, in Ibid.
11 Browne report, March 14, 1910; H. Irelan to Mr. Walker, March 9, 10, 1910; W. J. Bender to Mr. Kenny, March 9, 1910, all in Vauclain Papers.
third document—a handwritten report made by an unidentified company spy—attest, he was very much aware that his employees were organizing to pursue their grievances. At the same time, Vauclain was gathering names of dissatisfied workers.

Union Meeting held in Labour Lyceum 6th and Brown sts Mar 9, 1910

I arrived to [sic] late to hear a short talk by C O Pratt the car union leader but heard a few short talks by different speaks [sic] of whom were men from our shop. I do not know them or could I ascertain there [sic] names but there faces were familiar.

Speaker Daly was very enthusiastic on having Baldwins unionized and made an assertion that the men employed here were not properly paid. Capatol was abused you might know and in fact it was as near an Anarchist meeting as could be.

The men were induced to go to 921 Girard Ave to the union head-quarters where they would be welcome and bled for 1.00 admission fee.

After this, several of our men tried to speak at once and which ended in a dispute more than a talk. Every one was made a “picket” and urged to get all other men out.

Names of all Baldwin men were taken.

I might state that I think this is more of a strike of our own than a sympathetic strike.

A meeting at 9 am Mar 10 will be held only for Baldwin men.

Fearful of adding to strike tensions, Baldwin executives did not take immediate reprisals. Even after workers’ demonstrations of strike sympathy had dwindled in mid-March, Vauclain continued to tolerate unions in the plant. Machinists Local 466, for example, organized some 2700 Baldwin workers, while the Molders, Patternmakers, Boilermakers, Blacksmiths, and Metal Polishers also established themselves within the plant. On Labor Day, 1910, unionized Baldwin workers closed the plant to join the city-wide labor parade for the first time. Machinists Union leader George Jones wrote that “In passing the Baldwin plant we did no hooting or ‘hollering’ at the men in the windows, as in former years. The very few men at the windows were clerks, not machinists; the machinists were with us.” As the parade passed the Baldwin plant the band played “Hail! Hail! the gang’s all here.”

12 Machinists’ Monthly Journal, October 1910, 951, 977-78.
Vauclain, however was preparing to implement his response to unionism. In spring, 1911, Baldwin began to move even more of its work to its Eddystone shops, in nearby Chester County. During the year 1911, Vauclain transferred carloads of workers—especially younger men who held fewer attachments to unions—to the suburban plant, where they would be far removed from the influence wielded by organized labor in the downtown districts. At the same time, the company completed the orders that had led it to expand its workforce from 12,000 to 16,000 in 1910. A period of contraction followed. In one dramatic action, Vauclain announced 8,000 layoffs. Most were at the downtown plant, and workers also accused the company of firing from the lists compiled by company spies during the sympathy strike in 1910. When the radical journalist John Reed interviewed Baldwin workers in 1915, he was told that the company had given solemn pledges to bargain collectively with its workers. But when the 1911 business recession hit, “the first [men] to be discharged were the members of [union] committees, who were cynically told that this was the chance their employers had been waiting for.”

The firings precipitated a large strike at Baldwin. Prominent labor agitators came to demonstrate—among them Elizabeth Gurley Flynn of the Industrial Workers of the World, who later recalled that thousands of workers had been fired without any notice or reason and that all of the militants in the plant had been victimized. Although Socialists, Wobblies, and the union leaders kept the strike going in downtown Philadelphia for several months, they could not generate any resistance at the suburban Eddystone works. Vauclain’s actions thus enabled the company to continue production outside the city and broke union effectiveness at the plant. With a new recession generating intense competition for the remaining jobs, Baldwin workers quickly gave up their unions. Foremen at Eddystone demanded that all workers entering the plant tear up their union books and deliver them to the plant superintendent. Three years later, union

officials agreed with company officials that there were virtually no organized workers at Baldwin.  

When Baldwin executives and union officials testified before the U. S. Commission on Industrial Relations in June 1914, both groups frequently confused the 1910 sympathy strike with the 1911 strike. Although the strikes were separated by more than a year and took place under very different circumstances, the witnesses who testified in 1914 referred to the dates interchangeably. In fact, most of the testimony suggests that there had been only one strike.

The Vauclain documents reveal that the two strikes were linked by a single corporate strategy. Baldwin executives had begun planning as early as 1907, when they built their Eddystone works, to move important segments of production from the downtown plant. They hoped thereby to avoid recurrences of the labor agitation that often "infected" congested industrial districts. They made the best of a bad situation in the 1910 general strike, identifying potential labor activists while at the same time maintaining an enlightened corporate image. Even as company executives seemed to respond generously to workers in 1910, they were preparing a strategy to destroy union activity. They expanded production, training thousands of new workers; they built up the production capacity of the suburban Eddystone works; and they segregated at Eddystone the younger and more loyal employees from the influence of organized labor. By the spring of 1911, the plan was in place, ready for implementation. Vauclain disciplined his workers through a drastic cutback of the workforce. At the same time, he developed an alternative to the too easily disrupted downtown plant for the future.

Industrial decentralization was, of course, more than a response to unions. Cheaper land, better transportation, and new factory building layouts all influenced plant relocation in more spacious suburban districts. Yet, the recent flood of "runaway shops" has alerted analysts


\[\text{16} \] See the testimony of Alba Johnson, John Tobin, Edward Keenan, John Sykes, and Charles Torpy, in USCIR, Final Report, 3:2817-2927.

\[\text{17} \] Tobin testified that Baldwin's ran "carload after carload" of men from Philadelphia to Eddystone, in Ibid., 3:2842.
to the importance of the transfer of capital as a tool to discipline labor. This phenomenon is not a recent development.\textsuperscript{18} The Baldwin Locomotive Works did not have to relocate in South Carolina or Texas; a mere twelve miles from the city was far enough to escape unionization. Few executives had Vauclain's flair for teaching labor a lesson in such dramatic fashion, but the decentralization of manufacturing as demonstrated by Baldwin became an increasingly important corporate strategy.

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\textsuperscript{18} For example, see Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, \textit{The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry} (New York, 1982), 164-65.