



Eugene Debs, socialist labor leader, addresses workers at Pullman.

The Story of the Great Pullman Strike

A Break with Craft Unionism and Class Collaborationism

In difficult times of economic crisis such as these, when the working class in its millions is locked in a life-or-death battle with the giant capitalists, it is important to look carefully at the history of the working people and learn the lessons of previous struggles.

Few working class struggles in all history were of more significance than the great Pullman strike of 1894. Led by the socialist labor leader, Eugene V. Debs, who organized the American Railway Union (ARU), the Pullman strike marked the very beginnings of industrial unionism in this country. During the course of this strike, which lasted from spring until late summer, all of the basic contradictions of capitalist society came to the forefront and the working class began the process of development into "a class for itself," as Marx said.

The strike took place at a time which was similar in many ways to the present period. The depression of 1893 hit the country like a sledge hammer. Business came to a standstill and thousands of workers were put out of work. This was at a period marked by the early rise of imperialism (capitalism at its highest stage). The giant robber barons were climbing to the top of the imperialist system using every cut-throat method imaginable to smash their competition as well as the murderous exploitation and oppression of the working class. George Pullman was just such a man.

Pullman invented and developed the famous Pullman Palace Car, which revolutionized cross-country transportation and represented a great advance in the productive forces at a time when the capitalist system was still reaching new heights and still had something to offer in the way of scientific and industrial development. But these advances in science and industry under capitalism came only with the fierce exploitation of working people, millions of whom flocked to this country to escape the feudal backwardness of Europe.

When the panic of 1893 hit, the Pullman Company possessed assets of \$62 million of which \$26 million represented undivided profits. From Aug. 1892 to Aug. 1893, there was a period of unprecedented prosperity for the Pullman Company. Despite this, Pullman proceeded to cut the wages of his 6,000 workers by 25 to 40 per cent. Like all capitalists in time of economic crisis, George Pullman was going to place the burden of the crisis on the backs of the already impoverished workers, rather than cut into his giant profits.

The panic of '93 was so severe that 8,000 bank failures were recorded. Railroads followed each other into receivership with 56 companies, including the Erie, Union Pacific and the Northern Pacific going totally bankrupt. The depression lasted four years, during which time millions of unemployed workers roamed the country looking for work. Demonstrations of the unemployed became a common sight in the big cities including the famous march on Washington led by General Jacob S. Coxey, a populist. Eugene Debs wrote in 1893 that "the capitalist class like a devilfish, has grasped workingmen with its tenacles and is dragging them down to fathomless depths of degradation."

ENSLAVEMENT OF WORKERS

In the meantime, the business tycoons like J.P. Morgan, Carnegie, Rockefeller and Harriman were consolidating their power with the failure of their competitors and using their unchallenged strength to tighten the grip of exploitation and enslavement of the working class.

The Pullman workers lived in the company town of Pullman, which is located near Chicago. George Pullman had built this town as a model industrial city. In a work entitled, *The Story of Pullman* written for the company, here is how the town is pictured: "The Pullman car solved the problem of long, continuous railway journeys, and the town of Pullman, along new lines, gives a hope of bettering the relations of capital and labor . . . In brief, the Pullman enterprise is a vast object-lesson. It has demonstrated man's capacity to improve and to appreciate improvements. It has shown that success may result from corporate action which is alike free from default, foreclosure or wreckage of any sort. It has illustrated the helpful combination of capital and labor, without strife or stultification, upon lines of mutual recognition."

That was the company side of the story. The realities for the families of the working people were quite different and their heroic strike exposed clearly the lie of the "helpful combination of capital and labor" and showed that laboring people have nothing in common with the capitalists. Actually, the town, which appeared beautiful and idyllic to the casual visitor, was a hell-hole for the workers. They lived in overcrowded buildings with exorbitant rents. Even in prosperous times, they received less than the prevailing wages of the day and their rents were 25 per cent higher than those in neighboring Chicago. The cost to the Pullman Company for illuminating gas was only 33

cents a thousand cubic feet. Yet every worker living in Pullman had to pay a rate of \$2.25 a thousand.

If a worker wanted to keep his job, he kept quiet and paid. The city of Chicago supplied the Pullman Co. with water for four cents a thousand gallons. For this same water, the company charged the workers 10 cents a thousand. Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld spent a day inspecting conditions in the town before he wrote a letter to George Pullman, which said in part:

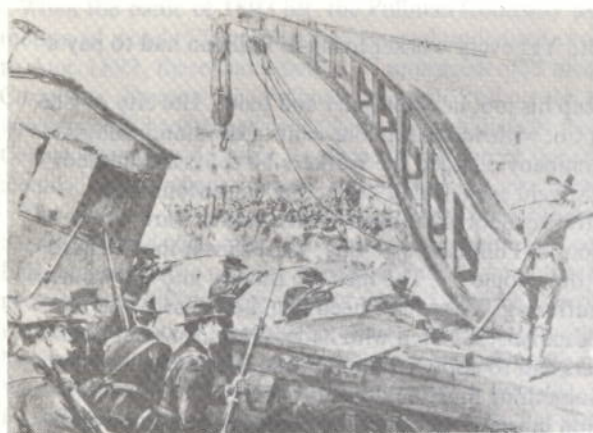
"I examined the conditions at Pullman yesterday, visited even the kitchens and bedrooms of many of the people . . . The men are hungry and the women and children are actually suffering. They have been living on charity for a number of months and it is exhausted. Men who had worked for your company for more than 10 years had to apply to the relief society in two weeks after the work stopped. Something must be done at once. . . ."

So much for the "common interest" between the company and the workers in this "model" town. When wages were cut during the crisis, the rents and living costs remained high. By late summer of 1893, all but 900 workers were laid-off. In the fall workers were brought back to work, but wages were cut drastically and foremen began to abuse the workers viciously to get more work out of them. When the discontent became widespread, the workers began to get organized.

ORGANIZE ALONG INDUSTRIAL LINES

Hearing of the success of the American Railway Union, the Pullman workers came to Debs and asked for support. The ARU was organized by Debs in opposition to the craft-minded railroad "Brotherhoods" of the A. F. of L. which refused to organize along industrial lines and excluded the unskilled and especially the minority workers. Born in Chicago on June 20, 1893, the ARU was an industrial union supposedly open to all workers (even miners and longshoremen) who drew their pay from the railroad companies. But as Boyer and Morais write in their book, *Labor's Untold Story*: "the great and tragic weakness of the new union was its constitutional exclusion of Negroes, its denial at birth of its own fundamental principle of the absolute unity of all railroad employees."

While Debs led a bitter and unsuccessful fight for the admission of Black workers into the ARU, he too was weak on the question, refusing to support special demands for Black people on the grounds that they would "split the working class." He later said that the exclusion of Black workers was an important factor leading to the later failures of the ARU and that the fight to exclude them had been led by those who were proved to be spies in the pay of the railroads. "They proved subsequently," said Debs, "to have been traitors to the union, sent to the convention at the instigation of the corporations to defeat the unity of the working class."



The national guard attacks the Pullman workers.



The ARU, however, with its militant struggle against the railroad tycoons, won the support of thousands of workers who flocked to it from the A.F. of L. unions. An unprecedented victory in the Great Northern strike earlier in the year captured the attention of the Pullman workers. At the ARU convention that year, full backing was voted to the Pullman workers, after hearing this appeal from them: "We struck because we were without hope. We joined the American Railway Union because it gave us a glimmer of hope . . . We will make you proud of us, brothers, if you will give us the hand we need."

Before the strike began, Debs advised caution and warned them against striking until the ARU could acquire more strength and fully prepare themselves for the upcoming battle. But with the taste of militancy in their mouths and the rudiments of organization, there was no holding back the workers at Pullman.

Grievance committees were set up and they met with representatives of the company who said they would "investigate" the grievances but would offer nothing in the way of meeting their demands. Mr. Pullman himself gave a speech to the workers claiming that the company was taking a loss and therefore he couldn't reduce rents or raise wages. This was followed by the "laying off" of three men who were members of the negotiating committee.

The embittered workers held a secret meeting to plan a strike. The meeting was infiltrated by a company spy who ran to Pullman with word of the plans. Pullman decided to lock-out the workers but Debs led a walk-out before Pullman could carry out his scheme and the great Pullman strike began.

For seven weeks, the strike was very well organized. Support came from the ARU which organized a successful nation-wide boycott of Pullman trains. As a result, transportation throughout the whole country was shut down. This gave evidence to workers everywhere of the great power they had. "The American Railway Union immediately became the center of attention of railroad workers all over America," wrote Peter Lyon in his study of American railroads. "Section hands, switchmen, brakemen, roundhouse workers, firemen, engineers, even conductors signed membership cards to ARU lodges. They came in by the thousands."

TROOPS CANNOT MOVE TRAINS

All over the country, workers and capitalists alike watched Pullman to see who would win this early test of strength. When Gov. Altgeld refused to call out troops to run the trains, U.S. Attorney General Richard B. Olney, a former railroad lawyer and stooge for Pullman, did so. Troops were summoned to Chicago, the nerve center of the strike. Debs cautioned ARU members to stay cool. "Have every man stand pat," he said, "Troops cannot move trains." Olney dispatched 3,600 deputy marshals to Chicago to "preserve order and protect property." Up to that point the strike had been non-violent, but now the violence broke out. Railroad cars were over-turned and burned following the police murder of an innocent worker. Here is how a local preacher, William H. Carwardine, who later authored one of the best books on the strike described the incident (*The Pullman Strike*, Charles H. Kerr & Co., Chicago):

"A United States deputy by the name of Stark fired wildly into the crowd. William Anslyn, an innocent spectator about 250 feet from the scene was shot. Falling upon his face, he endeavored to rise, when Stark, according to the deposition of eye witnesses, advanced and deliberately fired a shot into the back of the prostrate man. Two days thereafter Anslyn died as the result of the brutal deed. The deputy is still at large."

The strikers were infuriated. They tried to get their hands on the deputy but he was saved by the police. That afternoon more cars were burned and by

evening, Pullman was occupied by a permanent garrison of militia. By the end of the strike, more than 30 men and women were to die at the hands of the hired police thugs.

Debs commented later: "Peace and order were fatal to the railroad corporations. Violence was as necessary to them as peace was to the employees. . ." However, the violence was used by the courts as an excuse for issuing injunctions forbidding Debs and his associates "from in any way or manner interfering with. . ." any business activity of the 22 railroads involved in the strike. It charged the ARU leaders with conspiracy and "hindering the delivery of United States mail." From that point all hell broke loose. Armed scabs began moving the trains. Trying to turn back the attack, Debs ignored the injunction and issued an appeal to the workers of Chicago for a general strike.

Even under the martial law imposed by the government, Debs led a mass democratic movement of the strikers in Pullman. Daily mass meetings were held where workers could speak their mind. According to Carwardine, ". . . night after night, immense audiences have gathered to listen to addresses from speakers good, bad and indifferent. It was an open platform, free for all, and many splendid addresses have been delivered to the assembled strikers." A Central Strike Committee, composed of members of each of the local unions was set up to coordinate strike activities. Food and relief came in from workers all around the country who recognized that the Pullman strikers were fighting for the rights of all workers.

PRESS SLANDERS STRIKE

The press began its outcry in full force against Debs and the strikers in their customary manner exposing their role as guardians of the interests of the rich. The strike was referred to as "Debs' Rebellion," and its leader called "Director Debs." On June 30 the Chicago Tribune declared "MOB IS IN CONTROL" while a later headline read "STRIKE IS NOW WAR." Its editorial began:

"SIX DAYS SHALT THOU LABOR—BIBLE"
"NOT UNLESS I SAY SO—DEBS"

Rather than respond to Debs' call for a general strike, the labor aristocrats who ran the AFL sabotaged the strike and refused to act. Led by Samuel Gompers, they opposed what Debs was trying to do, which was to break the back of the craft unionism of the AFL leadership and organize the basic industrial sections of the working class. The AFL wanted to keep the unions restricted to the small percentage of skilled craftsmen and especially to keep the unions free from the foreign-born workers and radicals. To them the unions were to be pro-capitalist and this line fit right into Pullman's dream of "labor-capital alliance."

Debs' previous stand towards the AFL didn't help the workers any. It had been often characterized by a dual-unionist approach which abandoned all work

in the reactionary AFL unions. Without any base of support in the "Brotherhoods," Gompers had his way and played the role of scab and traitor towards the Pullman strike.

Towards the end of the strike, Debs and his comrades were jailed and scores of workers were shot and beaten. With the sabotage of the AFL, the strike was broken. The ARU suffered a defeat from which it never recovered. Nevertheless, Debs told the membership: "No strike has ever been lost, and there can be no defeat for the labor movement." From that point on, Debs was to become more and more outspoken in the cause of socialism, although he never fully grasped the science of Marxism.

In prison he began studying Marx's works such as "Capital" which began the mental process which led him to say a few years later: "The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society—we are on the eve of a universal change."

THOUSANDS CHEER DEBS

Ten thousand Chicagoans journeyed to Woodstock, Ill. to greet Debs as he was released from prison. Back in Chicago, 100,000 people were present when he stepped off the train. They held a parade and wept and cheered for him.

The blow struck by the Pullman strikers shattered the myth of labor-capital "cooperation" and showed it to be a cover for the continued exploitation and degradation of the working class under capitalism at the point of a gun. The Pullman strike also exposed the labor-fakers who claim to this day to represent the interests of the workers. Like the Meanys and Fitzsimmons of today, the labor aristocrats of 1893 showed their real colors when the workers rose up in struggle. They were and are the agents of the capitalists and must be driven from the unions. At the same time, it was the revolutionary-minded workers, like Debs and today's communists who provided the real leadership and punch against the onslaught of big business during the economic crisis. The Pullman strike showed workers everywhere that the strike and class struggle were the only way out of the crisis and that ultimately this struggle must result in the final destruction of the capitalist system itself.

But it also showed them that the struggle would be a long one and that the firmest unity between all workers had to be forged within the unions. To be fighting organizations, the unions could not turn their backs on any worker and had to fight for the rights of all, especially the Black workers and other minority workers who bore the greatest brunt of capitalist exploitation.

While the Pullman strikers dared to take on capitalism at its peak strength, they showed clearly, even in defeat, that the days of this rotten system were numbered.