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Published by: Organization of American Historians
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163289
Accessed: 17/04/2010 14:46
"To the Ragged Edge of Anarchy": The 1894 Pullman Boycott

The 1894 Pullman strike and boycott, which pitted one of the nation’s first large industrial unions against the combined forces of the Pullman Sleeping Car Company, the nation’s railroads, and the federal government, remains the best known of all the great strikes American workers have undertaken. From 26 June to mid-July the boycott closed the rail arteries of half the United States, from Chicago to the West Coast. The Pullman boycott culminated two decades of intensifying labor conflict in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially on the railroads. Coming amidst the nation’s worst depression, marches on Washington, DC by unemployed workers, a series of large and bitterly contested strikes in the bituminous coal industry, and the spreading Populist political insurgency, the boycott and the turbulence that attended it helped define “the crisis of the 1890s,” which marked the boundary between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Before that crisis was surmounted, the Pullman boycott sent convulsions of fright and foreboding through the ranks of the respectable elements of the nation. In the memorable phrase of U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, the strike seemed to have brought the nation “to the ragged edge of anarchy” (1).

Background

Railroads were at the center of the rising industrial machine that made America the world’s greatest economic power by 1900. In their frenzied expansion beginning in mid-century, the railroads called forth a world-class capital goods industry, consisting of iron and steel mills, foundries and machine shops for constructing locomotives, and the iron and coal mines that supplied them. In the 1880s three-quarters of the nation’s steel went into railroad construction. The building of the railroads also stimulated the economy by creating a unified national market in a country once divided between North and South by the Mason-Dixon line and between East and West by the unsettled plains and Rocky Mountains.

Though federal land grants helped build the railroads, most of the financing derived from the sale of stock on the newly formed New York Stock Exchange. As the first large corporate enterprises of national scope, the railroads separated ownership, now in the form of stock, from control, exercised by salaried managers. Though so-called robber barons like Jay Gould and Cornelius Vanderbilt pioneered these corporate empires, it was the new managerial elite that planned, coordinated, and administered traffic flows, accounting, sales, purchasing, construction, and the terms and conditions of employment for workers.

But as the size of the nation’s rail network doubled between 1877 and 1893, the railroad business fell into crisis. Overbuilding, heavy indebtedness, and “watered” (inflated) stock prices led railroad managers to compete recklessly with each other for business to cover their high fixed costs. To stop ruinous rate wars, managers forged “pools” whereby competing railroads agreed to divide markets and charge uniform rates. But pools were unenforceable and short lasting.

As economic crisis deepened during this period, railroad managers responded to falling rates by cutting the wages of their workers. In the early phases of railroad building they had been compelled to pay premium wages and accept collective bargaining to attract unionized locomotive engineers, brakemen, firemen, and other skilled workers to the sparsely settled West. By the mid-1880s railroad managers began to neutralize labor scarcity by intensifying recruitment efforts, reclassifying occupations, and adopting individualized pay schemes. When the craft brotherhoods resisted by striking, the managers created the Chicago-based General Manager’s Association (GMA) in 1886 to set standard job classifications and wages, recruit strikebreakers, and equalize differential revenue losses due to strikes.
Railroad workers countered managerial cooperation with their own efforts to broaden solidarity. The first great attempt to unite the different trades and organize the lesser skilled workers occurred with the spread of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s. But mutual scabbing by knights and brotherhood members in the Reading Railroad strike of 1887; the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy strike of 1888; and the New York Central strike of 1890—all union defeats—virtually halted progress in organizing railroad workers. Although the brotherhoods subsequently experimented with various craft federations, the first successful effort to overcome craft divisiveness and draw in other railroad workers was the product of the intense labors of Eugene Victor Debs, a thirty-eight-year-old, charismatic former official of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

In 1893 Debs founded the American Railway Union (ARU). Rather than a federation of existing craft organizations, the ARU was a new industrial union, an association of all workers employed by the railroads irrespective of their skill level or whether they worked in the machine repair shops, running trades, or freight depots. In April 1893 the ARU won an electrifying victory on the Great Northern Railroad, leading tens of thousands of dissatisfied Western workers to flock to the new organization. By June 1894, when the ARU held its first convention, it boasted 150,000 members, making it the largest labor organization in the United States at that time.

**Pullman**

As the ARU continued its meteoric growth, a crisis was brewing in the town of Pullman, fourteen miles south of Chicago. Pullman was a planned community constructed in 1880 around the factories of George M. Pullman, a manufacturer of the sleeping cars leased by many passenger railroads. To the many visitors who toured the model town, Pullman appeared to be a successful utopian experiment uniting industrial efficiency and the profit motive with the most laudable impulses of benevolence and moral uplift. In contrast to the unpaved streets strewn with garbage, the rows of dingy shacks and bungalows interspersed with saloons, and the questionable water and dirty air endured by Chicago's working class, Pullman's residents enjoyed neat and tidy brick homes with indoor plumbing, paved streets, clean air and water, beautiful parks, and an arcade containing stores, a theater, and a bank.

Generally, only the labor agitators who tried persistently to organize Pullman's workers pointed out the coercive paternalism at the core of his much applauded experiment. Pullman expected his employees to live in town rather than commute, but he didn't allow them to own their own homes or exercise democratic self-government. Residents were also denied in-town access to saloons, then deemed an essential lubricant of working-class daily life. One of the few who recognized the underside of Pullman was the pro-labor reformer Richard T. Ely who in 1884 called it "a benevolent well wishing feudalism" (2).

The five-year depression starting in 1893, precipitated by the failure of railroad financing, glaringly exposed the contradictions inherent in Pullman's experiment. Faced with overproduction, Pullman slashed wages on the average of 33 percent. Yet he declined to reduce rents on the homes his employees lived in or the prices his company stores charged. By the end of April 1894,
about 35 percent of Pullman’s workers had joined a local affiliated with the newly formed ARU.

On 7 May a union committee requested a restoration of wages or a reduction in rents. After the company not only refused the demands but fired three members of the committee, Pullman workers walked out on 11 May. Local leader Thomas Heathcote explained the desperation that underlay their action: “We do not know what the outcome will be, and in fact we do not care much. We do know that we are working for less wages than will maintain ourselves and families in the necessities of life, and on that one proposition we absolutely refuse to work any longer” (3).

In addition to the economic question, two other issues united Pullman workers. First, they were frustrated and angry at the arbitrary actions of Pullman’s foremen, who had the authority to hire and fire, set wages, and administer discipline. Pullman insisted that wage rates be set anew after each new contract for sleeping cars, and this exacerbated the lack of predictability in workers’ lives. A second element that united Pullman’s male workers was the assertion of their “manhood.” To many male breadwinners, Pullman’s paternalism had been endurable only as long as they were able to sustain their own paternalism over their wives and children by bringing home a family wage. But with wage cuts that reduced families to destitution, Pullman seemed to have undercut both kinds of paternalism. Not only his employees but many civic leaders in Chicago held him responsible for that violation of the Victorian moral code (4).

The unity of Pullman workers did have its limits. Much in the manner of other white-led institutions of that era, they refused union membership to two thousand African-American porters. If these porters had struck along with other Pullman employees, the union might have been able to shut down the Pullman works without relying on the ARU to declare a sympathetic boycott of all railroads using Pullman sleeping cars (5).

At the June convention the cautious Debs hoped to substitute arbitration for confrontation. But Pullman’s refusal to bargain or accept third party mediation, such as that offered by Civic Federation of Chicago, left the ARU no choice but to declare a sympathy boycott of all trains carrying Pullman cars. The boycott nationalized what had been a local conflict. The strike was now a battle to the finish that set the ARU, the nation’s largest labor organization and first great industrial union, against the GMA, the earliest managerial elite in the nation’s largest industry.

Despite the refusal of the brotherhoods to support the strike, which kept the boycott from spreading to the East, the ARU was able to shut down the nation’s rail traffic in twenty-seven states from Chicago to the Pacific coast. From the start the GMA was determined to use the strike to crush the ARU before it was strong enough to meet the railroads on more equal terms. To accomplish this, the GMA worked to bring in the federal government on its side. That much is clear from the surviving secret notes of its meetings (6).

Fearful that troops would be used to break the strike, Debs cautioned strikers to avoid riotous actions that might precipitate violence. With the benevolent neutrality of Chicago’s police, who refused to protect strikebreakers or provoke confrontations, and the unwillingness of Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld to intervene with state militia against workers whose votes had elected him, the strike appeared to be a peaceful success after its first week.

The GMA, however, had allies in Washington. In the context of the political crisis of the mid-1890s, U.S. Attorney General Olney, himself a former railroad attorney, perceived the unfolding contest as a fundamental test of constitutional order and property rights seemingly threatened on all sides by anarchy and insurrection. He appointed Edwin Walker, a GMA legal advisor, as a special U.S. attorney for Chicago. On 1 July Walker asked for and received from the federal district court in Chicago an injunction preventing ARU leaders from using any method, even peaceful persuasion, to convince railroad workers to continue their boycott.

The injunction was justified under a major premise of nineteenth-century jurisprudence that a public interest existed in the individual right of free competition in the market, whether that market be for the products of business or the labor of workers. Under the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act, the federal government had the power to prevent trusts or any unreasonable restraint on competition in interstate commerce, and the courts deemed the ARU boycott such a restraint. The following day, Olney convinced President Grover Cleveland to dispatch federal troops to Chicago to enforce the injunction despite the absence of violence and the protests of Governor Altgeld.

The presence of federal troops turned the tide of the strike in favor of the railroads. Large crowds of outraged partisans of the strikers clashed with troops—and state militia finally dispatched by Governor Altgeld—in the industrial areas of the city, leaving many casualties. Public opinion quickly swung to the side of the government and the railroads; their efforts were seen as a bulwark against a perceived breakdown in civil order. By 9 July the trains, operated by strikebreakers under the protection of massive armed force, began to move. Meanwhile, Debs and other ARU leaders were arrested on 11 July for contempt of court, further demoralizing strikers.

In Chicago, sentiment grew among local organized workers for a general strike to support the ARU and protest the blatant partiality of the federal government in crushing a peaceful boycott. In stark contrast to conservative opinion, which dubbed Debs a dictator for obstructing commerce, the prevailing opinion among workers was that the federal judicial and executive branches had colluded with moneyed interests in abrogating labor’s right to strike. But Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and other national union leaders were cautious. Meeting in Chicago on 12 July in response to Debs’s plea for support, they counseled against any sympathy action that might embroil other unions in a conflict now doomed to defeat. The walkout remained strong in many smaller Western railroad centers through the end of the month, but with the defeat of the strike at its center and without support from the rest of organized labor, its fate was sealed. On 2 August the ARU called off the boycott. In Pullman, the strike lingered until September when two thousand Pullman strikers surrendered unconditionally.
Legacy

The Pullman strike was a devastating setback for early industrial unionism. Coming on the heels of the crushing defeat of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in 1892 at Homestead, Pennsylvania, it portended a long period of labor exclusion from the bastions of large-scale, corporate-run industry that ended only with the coming of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935. The use of the court injunction to stymie sympathy boycotts like that of Pullman and strikes to require employers to exclude nonunion workers from employment (the closed shop) broadened into a tidal wave after the turn of the century, leading labor critics to speak of “government by injunction.” The difficulties of economic action in a corporate-dominated society convinced Eugene Debs, after serving his six-month jail sentence, to turn to political action on behalf of the Socialist Party of America. Drawing on the immense reservoir of working-class sympathy for his defiance of the state and massed capital, as well as his own considerable rhetorical talents, Debs would run five times as the Socialist presidential candidate, eventually receiving 6 percent of the vote in 1912.

Though labor was clearly the loser in the Pullman strike, the “winners and losers” metaphor conceals its significance in a broader political and legal transition taking place in American history, one that would ultimately undermine the Victorian liberal ideal of individual freedom in an untrammeled market (7). In a merger wave from 1896 to 1904 the corporate form of organization extended beyond the railroads into the large segments of the economy still under proprietary ownership. The corporation’s ability to manage and regulate investment, production, pricing, and the demand for its products so as to mitigate industrial instability increasingly challenged economists, social scientists, judges, and political thinkers to make their peace with the growing reality of group organization in the market.

In November 1894 the president’s commission established to study the Pullman strike issued a report that lambasted “the theory that competition would amply protect shippers as to rates, etc., and employees as to wages and other conditions” and endorsed collective bargaining. Once the boycott had been defeated and his vision of order secured, Richard Olney, too, accepted elements of a revised liberalism. “Whatever else may remain for the future to determine,” he wrote, “it must now be regarded as substantially settled that the mass of wage-earners can no longer be dealt with by capital as so many isolated units” (8). Olney sponsored the Erdman Act passed by Congress in 1898 that outlawed yellow-dog contracts requiring workers to forswear unions as a condition of employment, recognized the railroad brotherhoods and collective bargaining, and inaugurated an era of government intervention on behalf of labor peace on the railroads. Eager to mollify and offer public recognition to labor, the same Congress inaugurated the Industrial Commission to investigate the relations of labor and capital. Its final report, issued in 1902, offered a ringing endorsement of collective bargaining as a way of redressing the power imbalance between the buyers and sellers of labor in the market.

To implement the emerging new agenda, the Chicago Civic Federation organized the National Civic Federation (NCF) in 1900. Basing its actions on a fragile accord between national business and labor leaders, the NCF sought legislative alternatives to the application of Sherman Act jurisprudence to the organized bodies of labor and capital and the conciliation of strikes and lockouts. In a longer perspective, therefore, segments of both labor and capital recoiled from the prospect of bloody confrontation after the defeat of the Pullman boycott. That recoil helped propel the labor-capital question to the forefront of the national political agenda during the Progressive Era. ☐

Endnotes
1. Gerald G. Eggert, Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Fed-


Bibliography


Richard Schneirov is an associate professor of history at Indiana State University. He is author of Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97 (1998) and is co-editor with Shelton Stromquist and Nick Salvatore of The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics (forthcoming).