

The Pullman Strike

The Pullman Strike occurred when 3,000 Pullman Palace Car Company workers went on a wildcat strike in Illinois on May 11, 1894.

Owner George Pullman was a "welfare capitalist" who hoped to prevent labor discontent, but was not willing to grant high wages. Pullman housed his workers in a company town by Lake Calumet (Pullman, Chicago) in what is today Chicago's far South Side. Instead of living in utilitarian tenements like other industrial workers of the day, Pullman workers lived in attractive company-owned houses, with indoor plumbing, gas, and sewers.



The Town of Pullman

However the luxuries of this supposed utopia came at a cost — workers for Pullman lived in a "company town" where everything was owned by the corporation, including their housing and local store. The Pullman Company controlled every aspect of their lives, and practiced "debt slavery," which kept workers under de facto contract by maintenance of large debts to the company store and to their "landlord," the Pullman Company itself. Money owed was automatically deducted from workers' paychecks and frequently workers would never see their earnings at all.

During the major economic downturn of the early 1890s, George Pullman cut wages between 25% and 40%, without an equivalent decrease in rent and other expenses. Discontented workers joined the American Railway Union (ARU), led by Eugene Debs, and decided to stage a strike.

The strike effectively shut down production in the Pullman factories and led to a lockout. Many supply routes were cut off when railroad workers blocked Pullman cars (and subsequently Wagner Palace cars) from moving in the ensuing nationwide sympathy strike.



On July 5th, the buildings of the World's Columbian Exposition around the Court of Honor were torched. Buildings caught in the blaze included the administration's hall, the manufacturer's hall, the electricity hall, the machinery hall, the mining hall, the agricultural hall, and the fair's train station.

With a historic use of an injunction, the strike was eventually broken up by United States Marshals and some 2,000

United States Army troops, commanded by Nelson Miles, sent in by President Grover Cleveland on the basis that the strike interfered with the delivery of U.S. Mail. By the end of the strike 13 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded. An estimated \$80 million worth of property was damaged, and Eugene Debs was found guilty of interfering with the mail and sent to prison.



At the time of his arrest, Debs was not a Socialist. However, when he was jailed for obstructing the mail, he read the works of Karl Marx and after his release in 1895 became the leading Socialist figure in America, running for President for the first of five times in 1900.



Eugene Debs
President of the American
Railway Union