

Turning the Tide: How The American Railway Union Changed the Federal Strike Policy

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Paper

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Process Paper

I chose the Pullman Strike as my topic because of its connection to Chicago and because I could visit the neighborhood of Pullman, which helped me find sources and connect better to the project. My project is related to the theme of turning points in history because the Pullman strike was massive and significantly consequential in many fields, such as federal intervention in strikes, effective strike methods for laborers, the organization of unions, strike tactics, the history of the labor movement, and labor relations.

I conducted my research by reading books and articles from the period, first focusing on primary sources. I then read secondary source books and journal articles to get a sense of the impacts that the strike had. I also visited the national park at the Pullman factory to learn more about the company and see the factory town.

I created my project by producing a plan for my paper, researching, and then writing. Then as I wrote, I included sources that I had read that explained or evidenced the point I was making. I made sure to explain my evidence and focus on my argument as well as explaining what happened. After drafting my paper, I wrote annotations for my bibliography and then wrote my process paper. I drafted this paper step by step and took an organized approach.

My historical argument is that the American Railway Union's participation in the Pullman Strike marks a significant turning point in that history because conflicts between capital and labor are among the most significant issues in modern history. This strike reorganized the balance of power between capital and labor and introduced a new role for the federal government in those conflicts. The Pullman Strike and the ARU's participation set the terms for conflicts between capital and labor for labor, capital, and the federal government for much of the next

century. The ARU's participation significantly affected both the course of the Pullman Strike and the federal strike policy.

My topic is significant to history in many ways. It was one of the most effective labor strikes in United States history, it set the example for unions and strikers to follow in future strikes, and it also set the example for the federal government to intervene in future important strikes. The American Railway Union was also one of the first unions in United States history to include all classes and skill levels of railway workers under one banner.

Introduction

From the strikes of textile mill workers in New Hampshire and Lowell, Massachusetts, in the early nineteenth century to the strikes of the Chicago Teacher's Union in the twenty-first century and most recently the United Auto Workers Union, collectively withholding labor has been the most powerful tool that workers have had in asserting their rights and will. Withholding that labor—striking—has consequences for both the striking workers and the business, but the consequences can extend much further than the localized conflict, affecting the society and political economy more generally. With strikes that have broad implications, representatives of the federal government can choose to intervene. The policies of the United States Government have shifted significantly across that two-hundred-year period. The American Railway Union's participation in the Pullman Strike marks a significant turning point in that history. Conflicts between capital and labor are among the most significant issues in modern history. This strike reorganized the balance of power between capital and labor and introduced a new role for the federal government in those conflicts. The Pullman Strike and the ARU's participation set the terms for such conflicts for labor, capital, and the federal government for much of the next century. The ARU's participation significantly affected both the course of the Pullman Strike and the federal strike policy. This essay will do two things. First, it will explain how in assisting the Pullman Palace Car Company, the ARU transformed a local dispute between workers and bosses into a national battle between labor and capital. Second, it will highlight how the Pullman Strike permanently influenced how the federal government addresses large-scale strikes.

Background

In 1893, a financial panic spurred by falling global wheat prices, an oversupply of silver, a bursting of a bubble in railroad stocks, and a run on U.S. banks overtook the United States economy and caused employers to be stringent.¹ Among those who tightened budgets was wealthy railroad executive, George M. Pullman. Pullman was born in upstate New York and continued his father's business of raising buildings along the Erie Canal and brought that technology to Chicago.² He transitioned from moving buildings to building luxury sleeper cars for railroad lines. In 1880, he designed the town of Pullman at that time 14 miles outside of Chicago which included his factory and housing for his workers.³ In a statement, he said: "We decided to build, in close proximity to the shops, homes for workingmen, of such character and surroundings as would prove so attractive as to cause the best class of mechanics to seek that place for employment in preference to others."⁴ He created a trap for workers in the town of Pullman because a sizable portion of their wages from Pullman returned to Pullman in the form of rent and if they decided not to live in the factory town, they would likely lose their jobs. This dynamic made workers unhappy. After 1893, while they were getting paid less, their rent stayed the same, putting workers in a tough position.⁵ Some workers at Pullman joined the ARU to protest their unfair treatment. At this time, the ARU was a new organization, led by Eugene

¹ Albert Clark Stevens, "Analysis of the Phenomena of the Panic in the United States in 1893 " *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 8, no. 2 (1894): 119-25.

² David Ray Papke, *The Pullman Case: The Clash of Labor and Capital in Industrial America*, ed. Peter Charles Hoffer and N. E. H. Hull, Landmark Law Cases and American Society, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 3.

³ Joseph Jr. Nimmo, *The Insurrection of June and July 1894: Growing out of the Pullman Strike at Chicago, Illinois*. (Washington, DC: Age Printing Company, 1894), 1.

⁴ William James Ashley, "The Railroad Strike of 1894: The Statements of the Pullman Company and the Report of the Commission, together with an Analysis of the Issues," *Publications of the Church Social Union*, April 15, 1895, 1.

⁵ Susan Eleanor Hirsch, *After the Strike: A Century of Labor Struggle at Pullman*, ed. David Brody et al., *The Working Class in American History*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 31.

Debs.⁶ The ARU was a labor organization that united railway workers regardless of skill or specialty, unlike other unions of its time.⁷ The workers then went to Pullman asking for higher wages or lower rent. These workers were fired and thus the strike began.⁸

Eugene Victor Debs was born on November 5, 1855, in Terre Haute, Indiana.⁹ In 1870, Debs started his first job cleaning grease for a freight train company. He became a locomotive fireman in 1871 and used his wages to go to business college.¹⁰ These years gave him insight into the life of railroad laborers, on which he relied in his later labor organizing work.

The ARU Joins the Fight

The Pullman Strike was at first only a conflict between Pullman and his employees, but because said employees had joined the ARU, the ARU was advising the strikers. The ARU had a national convention in Chicago in June of 1894.¹¹ They had already been discussing a Pullman boycott, but Debs was skeptical of the idea as he was against a strike. This changed at the convention when the ARU committee heard the complaint of the daughter of a Pullman worker: “He [her father] died owing the company \$65 rent after having worked for it eleven years. ... she received written notice that she could not remain with the company unless she agreed to pay the debt in installments out of her pay—money she needed to support herself and her family members.”¹² Hearing how the Pullman employees were suffering and oppressed convinced the

⁶ Gerald G. Eggert, *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), 154.

⁷ Richard Schneirov, "Consolidating the New Unionism," in *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 308.

⁸ Eggert, *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy*, 154.

⁹ Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene V. Debs* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007), 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹² Bernard J. Brommel, *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* (Chicago: Charles Kerr Publishing Company, 1978), 35.

committee that they should strike.¹³ The ARU committee voted unanimously to boycott Pullman cars.¹⁴

This unanimous vote demonstrated the ARU's commitment to collective power. The ARU believed firmly that their strength lay in their power as a collective and their willingness to act as one. The ARU constitution stated: "Organization is union. It is a self-evident truth that 'in union there is strength,' and conversely, without union weakness prevails."¹⁵ Debs believed that this unity would help them succeed in their boycott. He sent telegrams to local ARU officials, stating that they were not to move or work on any trains containing Pullman cars.¹⁶ Believing that Americans supported this decision, Debs wrote, "I have perfect confidence in the American people and believe that they will uphold us in this fight."¹⁷

Effects on the Strike

Without the help of the ARU, the striking Pullman workers would have crumbled against the Pullman Company because of their small numbers and isolation. When the ARU, with its numbers and organization, joined the strike, the workers' chances of success increased drastically. The presence of the ARU changed the dispute from one between the local Pullman Company and its workers to a battle between labor and railroad companies nationally. Eugene

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Eggert, *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy*, 155.

¹⁵ The American Railway Union, "Constitution of the American Railway Union," (1893), 1.

¹⁶ Eugene V. Debs, "Telegram to Labor Leaders Announcing the Launch of the Pullman Boycott," in *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. Tim Davenport and David Walters (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 269.

¹⁷ Eugene V. Debs, "Speech on the Forthcoming Pullman Boycott to a Mass Meeting of Railroad Workers in Chicago [excerpt]," in *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. Tim Davenport and David Walters (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 268.

Debs hoped that the boycott would pressure the Pullman company by stopping their cars and their profits.

While the ARU appeared to be successful, they still faced many challenges. The General Managers Association, a group of leaders from railway companies across the nation, represented one of those challenges. Before the boycott started, the GMA was taking measures to stop the ARU. The GMA released a statement to halt the boycott of Pullman cars, saying that “to break existing contracts with the Pullman Company would be unjustified and unwarranted.”¹⁸ They implied that they could not remove Pullman cars from their trains. They believed that this policy would undermine the ARU boycott of Pullman cars, but when the chairman of the GMA, Everett St. John, testified before the United States Strike Commission after the strike, he stated that “the companies [the railroad companies part of the GMA] had complete discretion in the use of Pullmans.”¹⁹ The GMA relied on false reasons to justify their pushback during the boycott, and they got away with it. Had the ARU not joined the strike, the sparsely numbered Pullman workers would not have stood a chance against the wealth and power of the GMA.

The boycott of Pullman cars quickly grew to an all-out railroad strike, as the GMA had met and decided that all workers who did their jobs but refused to move Pullman cars would be fired. As this played out, every railroad in the Chicago area was struck, and the GMA and ARU were locked in a “life-and-death struggle.”²⁰ If the Pullman workers had not joined the ARU before striking, they would not have had the support of the 150,000 railway workers under the ARU, and the strike would not have had the attention and therefore the support to have a chance

¹⁸ Eggert, *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy*, 156.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

at succeeding.²¹ However, because they did join the union, it brought national attention to the struggles of laborers and national pressure on the Pullman Company to make concessions that would end this strike and boycott.

The Federal Strike Policy

The ARU joining the Pullman strike was a massive turning point in government management of strikes. Then-president Grover Cleveland's attorney general Richard Olney managed the federal government's response to the strike. This response was biased against the ARU from the start because Olney was a former railroad lawyer and had ties to the GMA. Olney planned to stop the strike by charging that the ARU and the Pullman car boycott were interrupting the postal service. This claim was dubious because the Pullman company made sleeper cars, which were generally not on mail trains. Olney authorized the swearing-in of as many deputy marshals as necessary to protect the mail. In Chicago, the GMA convinced the United States marshal in Chicago, John W. Arnold, to swear in 2,887 railway employees as deputies.²² Consequently, the mail trains and railroad property were now protected by "men wearing the badges of federal law officers, but who, in fact, were elected, armed, directed, and paid by the railroad companies themselves."²³ Railroad companies announced that passenger trains with Pullman cars would now be carrying mail, which meant they were protected and the strikers could be punished. Postmaster-General W. S. Bissell recognized how railroad companies

²¹ Wright, *Report on the Chicago strike of June-July, 1894*, XXIII.

²² Eggert, *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy*, 159.

²³ Ibid.

were exploiting this charge, and “recommended to Congress before and after the strike the need for a law clearly defining the character of a mail train.”²⁴

The GMA lawyers then decided to appeal to the federal government for it to take legal action against the ARU. They did not go to the Illinois state government because the governor, John Altgeld, sympathized with labor.²⁵ They sought an injunction against the ARU, which would limit what the striking workers and the union could do. They succeeded on July 2nd when an injunction was released against the strikers. This meant that the U.S. Army could be dispatched to Chicago to enforce the injunction.

These biased activities by the federal government shaped the United States strike policy in years to come, as the U.S. would continue to favor businesses and not the common people who labored for said businesses. Even Grover Cleveland showed the U.S.’s bias towards corporations and against laborers. He wrote:

“In the last days of June, 1894, a very determined and ugly labor disturbance broke out in the city of Chicago. Almost in a night it grew to full proportions of malevolence and danger. Rioting and violence were its early accompaniments; and it spread so swiftly that within a few days it had reached nearly the entire Western and Southwestern sections of our country. Railroad transportation was especially involved in its attacks. The carriage of United States mails was interrupted, interstate commerce was obstructed, and railroad property was riotously destroyed.”²⁶

²⁴ Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike: The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), 151.

²⁵ Eggert, *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy*, 161.

²⁶ Grover Cleveland, *The Government in the Chicago Strike of 1894*, The Stafford Little Lectures, (Princeton, London, Humphrey, and Milford: Princeton University Press and Oxford University Press, 1913), 2.

Cleveland states that the strikers were rioting and destroying property, although this was not the case. From the very beginning of the boycott, Eugene Debs urged that all men striking were peaceful and did not participate in the rioting. In one of many letters and telegrams sent to the striking employees, Debs said “I deem it my duty to caution you against being a party to any violation of law, municipal, state, or national, during the existing difficulties.”²⁷ Although the strike was legal, because it was disadvantageous to the U.S. government, Cleveland had to use false evidence to justify his shutdown of the strike. These measures foreshadow a similar policy in the trial of Eugene Debs.

Debs’ lawyers during his trial were Clarence Darrow and S. S. Gregory. As soon as the trial began, Gregory objected to the presence of Edwin Walker, a prosecution lawyer who was connected to the GMA. This was overruled. Gregory highlighted that the men who disrupted the mail trains, who were not striking workers, were not being indicted, and that the government was using that charge to bring down the leaders of the ARU.²⁸ Darrow added that there was no evidence of any member of the ARU disrupting the mail.²⁹ When the members of the GMA testified, they claimed to forget what went on at their meetings, and when Debs charged them with perjury, they were not indicted.³⁰ Debs’ colleagues were given three-month sentences and Debs a six-month sentence for violating the July 2nd injunction. This trial and the overall handling of the strike were biased in favor of corporations and the railway industry from the start, and the government had no concern for the laborers, even in light of the duplicitous

²⁷ Eugene V. Debs, “Warning to All Striking Employees: July 6, 1894,” in *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs, Volume 2: The Rise and Fall of the American Railway Union, 1892-1896*, ed. Tim Davenport and David Walters (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 282.

²⁸ Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene V. Debs*, 165.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 166.

activities of the GMA. A policy of favoring the interests of the businesses over those of the workers continues to this day.

Modern-day Effects

In December of 2022, railway unions in the U.S. planned to strike, but President Joe Biden and the U.S. government passed legislation to impose a deal between the freight companies and the unions. The New York Times wrote, “Congress acted on Thursday to avert a nationwide rail strike, clearing legislation personally requested by President Biden that would impose a labor agreement between rail companies and their workers.”³¹ This decision is based on the government’s favoring of corporations. Joe Biden urged lawmakers to move before the deadline railway unions set because the strike would cause “a disruption that could cost the economy an estimated \$2 billion a day and hurt consumers.”³² This idea of the economy refers to losses in stock value and company profits and privileges “consumers” over workers, and this bias is one of the problems with the federal strike policy. Another problem with federal intervention in strikes is the idea that the company and the workers are on equal footing. In an essay titled *Arbitration*, Debs wrote “It is impractical to parallel a money corporation and a labor organization. They are dissimilar. They cannot be ‘placed and kept upon a similar footing’.”³³ This applies to both the Pullman strike and this potential strike in 2022. Debs was against arbitration in the Pullman Strike because the GMA had much more power than the ARU, and arbitration suggests that they are equal. The federal government still believes that capital and labor are on equal ground, so they passed legislation to intervene in this possible railway strike,

³¹ Stephanie Lai, "Congress Moved to Avert a Rail Strike. Here's How and Why.," (December 2 2022).

³² Ibid.

³³ Debs, "Arbitration," 194.

which is evidence of how the Pullman Strike changed the government's approach to intervening in strikes.

Conclusion

The ARU's boycott of the Pullman Company represents a turning point in the Pullman strike and its power and effectiveness as well as its popularity. The ARU's boycott also caused a turning point in the way the federal government intervenes in strikes of a large scale. The ARU boycotting Pullman cars caused the Pullman Strike to gain national attention and created a more widespread railway strike in its wake. The boycott transformed the Pullman strike into a battle between railroad corporations and their workers. The ARU boycott also changed how the federal government intervenes and breaks up strikes and reinforced the bias of the government towards capital and over laborers.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Ashley, William James "The Railroad Strike of 1894: The Statements of the Pullman Company and the Report of the Commission, Together with an Analysis of the Issues." *Publications of the Church Social Union*, April 15, 1895.

I used this source to learn what George Pullman and the Pullman company said to the United States Strike Commission, and it helped me learn what George Pullman thought about the strike and how he responded to it.

Cleveland, Grover. *The Government in the Chicago Strike of 1894*. The Stafford Little Lectures. Princeton, London, Humphrey, and Milford: Princeton University Press and Oxford University Press, 1913.

This helped me learn Grover Cleveland's opinions on the strike and what the government did to intervene. This source is biased, because the president wrote it, so it is written to make it seem like the government made the right choice.

Debs, Eugene V. "Arbitration." In *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, edited by Tim Davenport and David Walters, 193-200. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.

This essay by Debs helped me understand Debs' opinions on arbitration and why he was against it. It showed what he thought about the government and its intervention system, which helped me write about the policies of the government and their methods of intervention.

———. "Speech on the Forthcoming Pullman Boycott to a Mass Meeting of Railroad Workers in Chicago [Excerpt]." In *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, edited by Tim Davenport and David Walters, 268-69. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.

This speech showed me how Debs believed that the American people supported the laborers in this strike, and how he was confident that they would support the ARU over the Pullman Company.

———. "Telegram to Labor Leaders Announcing the Launch of the Pullman Boycott." In *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs*, edited by Tim Davenport and David Walters. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.

This telegram showed me what Debs told local labor leaders to do when he announced the boycott of the Pullman Company, and it also showed me how Debs needed their help in order to conduct the boycott.

———. "Warning to All Striking Employees: July 6, 1894." In *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs, Volume 2: The Rise and Fall of the American Railway Union, 1892-1896*, edited by Tim Davenport and David Walters. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020.

This source showed me how Debs was against the rioting and violence and warned the strikers to stay out of it and not do anything illegal. He believed that they would destroy the strike if they participated in illegal activity.

Nimmo, Joseph Jr. *The Insurrection of June and July 1894: Growing out of the Pullman Strike at Chicago, Illinois*. Washington, DC: Age Printing Company, 1894.

This was an address from the time period that helped me gain background knowledge on the Pullman Strike and the boycott.

Stevens, Albert Clark. "Analysis of the Phenomena of the Panic in the United States in 1893 ". *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 8, no. 2 (1894): 117-48.

This source helped me define the economic panic of 1893.

The American Railway Union. "Constitution of the American Railway Union." 1893.

This was the constitution of the ARU, and it helped me learn the ideals of the organization. I used it to gain insight into why the ARU did what they did.

Wright, Carroll Davidson. *Report on the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894*. Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1895.

This is the official government report on the strike, and it was a very helpful source, because it had all of the information the government gathered and their opinions and beliefs on the strike. I used it to learn what the Pullman strikers did before the ARU boycott.

Secondary Sources

Brommel, Bernard J. *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism*. Chicago: Charles Kerr Publishing Company, 1978.

This book about Debs helped me learn more about the strike in general. I used it to learn about why the ARU chose to boycott the Pullman Company and what they did to try and succeed in their boycott.

Eggert, Gerald G. *Railroad Labor Disputes: The Beginnings of Federal Strike Policy*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967.

I used this source to learn about the methods that the GMA and the federal government used to combat the Pullman Strike and boycott. It gave me a good understanding of the processes used by the GMA and Richard Olney to unjustly stop the strike.

Ginger, Ray. *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene V. Debs*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007.

This book helped me learn a lot about Eugene Debs from his early life to his participation in the ARU and labor strikes to what he did later in life. It was a helpful source because it told me a lot about Debs, and I used it a lot throughout my paper.

Hirsch, Susan Eleanor. *After the Strike: A Century of Labor Struggle at Pullman*. The Working Class in American History. Edited by David Brody, Alice Kessler-Harris, David Montgomery, and Sean Wilentz. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

This source helped me learn about the impact of the strike on the labor movement and more about the broader picture of the strike.

Lai, Stephanie. "Congress Moved to Avert a Rail Strike. Here's How and Why." (December 2 2022). Accessed February 3, 2024.

From this article, I learned how Joe Biden intervened in a possible railway strike in 2022. I used it to show how the Pullman Strike impacted government strike policy today.

Lindsey, Almont. *The Pullman Strike: The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942.

I used this source to gain background knowledge about the Pullman Strike.

Papke, David Ray. *The Pullman Case: The Clash of Labor and Capital in Industrial America*.

Landmark Law Cases and American Society. Edited by Peter Charles Hoffer and N. E. H. Hull. Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999.

This source gave me information about how labor and capital interact, and how the Pullman strike applies to that interaction. It also gave me more background information about the strike and boycott.

Schneirov, Richard. "Consolidating the New Unionism." In *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97*, 298-328. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

This gave me information about the ARU, and how it was quite different from other labor unions of its time. I learned how the ARU combined all classes of laborers, which was something that few unions did during the time of the strike.