

Pullmans strike and its effect on society history essay



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The American history is dotted with countless labor struggles, and some are more valuable to the labor movement than others. According to Fossum (1999), the Pullman strike of 1894 is a classic labor struggle that played a crucial role in splitting the movement, in addition to raising doubts, about the ability of unskilled employees to win their demands. Simply put, the Pullman strike started as an uprising against unjust labor practices before quickly escalating into the national occurrence that it is famous for today. Because of this very reason, it is necessary for individuals who seek to understand the intimate details of the American Labor movement to spend a considerable amount of their time looking into this strike. In fact, the Pullman strike is one of the greatest known in history and hence contributes an outstanding deal to the history of the Labor movement in America. This paper goes into the details of the strike, seeking to understand it from both the worker's point of view, as well as the employers.

Key words: Pullman, strike, Labor, employers, workers

The Pullman's Strike and its Effect on Society

The Pullman's Strike Of 1894 and Its Effects on The Labor Market and Economy

George Pullman is infamous for being the mastermind behind building lavish sleeping cars for the railroad industry, but most people are unaware that Pullman was also a developer of a model working community. As a matter of fact, in 1881, he founded a town in his own name that was situated in the city's outskirts of Chicago, Illinois. According to Altman (1994), he was the greatest loved sponsor of the 12000 belated individuals. These very same '
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happy individuals', only three years, later declared Pullman, both the town and the man a wound on the body politic. The insult to Pullman was made by the then President of American Railway Union Local 269, Jennie Curtis.

It is necessary to note this dramatic change of view and what could have possibly transpired in order to spark it. What could have made his own community hate him in such an extensive manner? The answer lying in understanding the strike although it can be summed up to be the simple fact the George Pullman in light of the great depression of 1893, knew what was best for his employees whether they agreed to his ideologies or not.

Like all other companies in America, the depression of 1893 had an overwhelming effect on the Pullman Palace Car Company. In addition to the labor force being cut from 5500 to a mere 3300, the remainder of employees was subject to an average pay cut of 25%. Moreover, those that remained had to tolerate a reduction in the number of hours they could work. Brisben (1994) states that considering the great changes, no effort on Pullman's behalf was made to decrease living expenses. Truthfully, the situation was so pathetic that one man had to work for 120 hours so as to get a check of a meager 7 cents after the company had subtracted rent and other expenses. This caused Pullman, Illinois, in May 1894 to become the stage for battle between a bitter labor force and the government because of unjust labor practices.

Like almost all other employers during his time, George Pullman was not empathetic to his workers and their apparent lack of ability to support their families financially. However, he still met with worker representatives to

discuss their plight regarding their problems (Filippelli, 1990). As expected, he refused to meet their demands, hence he never restored their pay checks to their original size and neither did he reduce the rents they paid. Almost immediately after this meeting, the representatives were sacked; a move that only worsened the situation. The workers took this blatant undermining of their rights to mean that action was necessary to correct the terrible situation.

Finally, on May 11 1894, the workers down their tools, which in turn, shut down all operations of the Pullman Company. The local media was rather taken back by this path that the workers chose to take and made headlines out of the story. This was partly because George Pullman was widely known for being a model employer and also because there was an exceedingly high rate of unemployment at the time (Brisben, 1994). However, these two factors did little to deter the employees from their cause as they were determined to end what they considered oppression.

Eventually, the workers realized they needed external help if they were to meet their goals and objectives. It was only natural for them to turn to Eugene Debs, creator of the American Railway Union (ARU) and a renowned labor leader of his time. According to Altman, (1994), Debs called the first ever ARU's national convection with the people of Pullman being in attendance. Although the union was in favor of the use of a boycott to have them heard, Debs felt an immense need for arbitration as a better option. It was then agreed that a boycott would only be enforced if all other attempts to restore normalcy came to a dead end. Nevertheless, by June 15, 1894, it was obvious that officials of Pullman were not willing to meet with union
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representatives under any circumstances. As a consequence, the ARU carried through with their promise and put into operation the boycott on June 26, 1894 at 12pm. The simple order was that all members were to keep the mail moving, but Pullman cars were to sit on the sidetrack.

The national boycott only served as fuel to the fire; Pullman employee's desire to win. This worried Pullman officials immensely and especially so when the numbers of the employees on strike increased dramatically within three days. According to Fossum (1999), this was because a certain stipulation noted that if an employee was fired for honoring the national boycott, all union men that worked in the yard were to walk off. In June 29, 1894, the number had reached a staggering total of 50, 000 workers. It was at this point that Pullman's officials realized that the strike was not going to end anytime soon if they never took part in it. Like many employers caught in this predicament, Pullman officials hired strike breakers in order to break the strike although they knew this would not solve the problem.

What had begun as a peaceful strike took a turn for the worse. The momentum that had initially been directed in the correct direction; it became obvious that the peace and tranquility would not last for long. When Eugene Debs travelled to Blue Island on June 29, 1894, the union members decided to take matters into their own hands. Following a peaceful rally that was held to gain more support for the boycott, strikers started acts of hooliganism.

Altman (1994) describes that they derailed a locomotive, destroyed the yards as well as setting fire to all things that moved. These actions were like

an answer to Attorney General Onley's prayers. These actions would give him the power to use an injunction against the strike. According to Fossum (1999), an injunction is when a court orders certain actions to be stopped. Eventually, Onley was given the injunction he was passionately seeking since he was very much against the strike as he viewed it as dangerous to the welfare of the nation.

The injunction served its purpose. It frustrated the efforts of the striking workers. It allowed government troops to be sent to remedy the situation if mail delivery was indeed being tampered with. Furthermore, it stripped striking workers of their leadership (Filippelli, 1990). This made the striking workers to be quite infuriated. An angry mob put baggage cars cross tracks hence acting as an obstruction to the passing of mail on June 3, 1894. The next day, President Grover Cleveland, sent out an order for several federal troops to be sent to Chicago, in order, to restore harmony in the area and ensure no further interruption of mail.

The public then shifted to the side of the government; the strike ended soon after without their objectives being met. Debs and other leaders of the union were arrested on July 10, 1994, for interference of delivery of US mail, but were released days later. The strike formally came to an end on July 11, 1984 with the conditions that all employees be hired back to their previous job positions. However, only two thirds were rehired with the rest being blacklisted, or had already sought employment elsewhere. Employees of the Pullman Palace car company were rehired on condition that they signed yellow-dog contracts. Yellow dog contracts are a situation whereby the employee shows that they are not a member of any labor union, and in the <https://assignbuster.com/pullmans-strike-and-its-effect-on-society-history-essay/>

event that they join one in the future they shall be dismissed (Fossum, 1999).

Lindsey (1971) states that the loss caused by the strike cannot be quantified in dollars, class bitterness or human misery. Even so, the strike is attributed to the annihilation of the American railway Union, defeat of the then governor of Cleveland, nomination for the presidency, and the financial damages caused to the railroads. In addition, the strike emphasized the fact that there was a serious labor problem in the US. Therefore, although the Pullman strike may not have achieved what it was set out to achieve, but it serves as a reminder of the desire by the labor movement to triumph over its numerous hurdles.

In conclusion, the Verizon strike of August 2011 comes closest to the details of the Pullman's strike. It is a strike that around 45000 Verizon workers put down their tools. The workers, together with their workers union were demanding that their contracts for their jobs to be renewed. However, the management and the union could not get to an amicable agreement (Fossum, 1999). Like all other strikes, its effects were mostly negative.