

many of the disgruntled factory workers.^[2] When the Pullman Company refused recognition of the ARU or any negotiations, ARU called a strike against the factory, but it showed no sign of success. To win the strike, Debs decided to stop the movement of Pullman cars on railroads. The over-the-rail Pullman employees (such as conductors and porters) did not go on strike.^[2]

Debs and the ARU called a massive boycott against all trains that carried a Pullman car. It affected most rail lines west of Detroit and at its peak involved some 250,000 workers in 27 states.^[4] The American Federation of Labor (AFL) opposed the boycott because the ARU was trying to take its membership. The high prestige railroad brotherhoods of Conductors and Engineers were opposed to the boycott. The Fireman brotherhood—of which Debs had been a prominent leader—was split.^[5] The General Managers' Association of the railroads coordinated the opposition.

Thirty people were killed in riots in Chicago alone.^[6] Historian David Ray Papke, building on the work of Almont Lindsey published in 1942, estimated another 40 were killed in other states.^[7] Property damage exceeded \$80 million.^[8]

The federal government obtained an injunction against the union, Debs, and other boycott leaders, ordering them to stop interfering with trains that carried mail cars. After the strikers refused, President Grover Cleveland ordered in the Army to stop the strikers from obstructing the trains. Violence broke out in many cities, and the strike collapsed. Defended by a team including Clarence Darrow, Debs was convicted of violating a court order and sentenced to prison; the ARU then dissolved.

<u>American Railway Union</u> ; <u>Railroad workers</u>	<u>Pullman Company</u> ; <u>General Managers' Assoc</u> ; <u>US National Guard</u>
Lead figures	
<u>Eugene V. Debs</u>	<u>George Pullman</u> ; <u>Grover Cleveland</u>
Number	
~250,000	~12,000
Casualties and losses	
Deaths: 70 est. Injuries: 57 Arrests: 4+	

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Background

During a severe recession (the Panic of 1893), the Pullman Palace Car Company cut wages as demand for new passenger cars plummeted and the company's revenue dropped. A delegation of workers complained that wages had been cut but not rents at their company housing or other costs in the company town. The company owner, George Pullman, refused to lower rents or go to arbitration.^[9]

Boycott



The American Railway Union escalated the Pullman strike beginning with the blockade of the Grand Crossing in Chicago during the night of June 26, 1894.

Many of the Pullman factory workers joined the American Railway Union (ARU), led by Eugene V. Debs, which supported their strike by launching a boycott in which ARU members refused to run trains containing Pullman cars. At the time of the strike approximately 35% of Pullman workers were members of the ARU.^[4] The plan was to force the railroads to bring Pullman to compromise. Debs began the boycott on June 26, 1894. Within four days, 125,000 workers on twenty-nine railroads had "walked off" the job rather than handle Pullman cars.^[10] The railroads coordinated their response through the General Managers' Association, which had been formed in 1886 and included 24 lines

linked to Chicago.^{[11][12]} The railroads began hiring replacement workers (strikebreakers), which increased hostilities. Many blacks were recruited as strikebreakers and crossed picket lines, as they feared that the racism expressed by the American Railway Union would lock them out of another labor market. This added racial tension to the union's predicament.^[13]

On June 29, 1894, Debs hosted a peaceful meeting to rally support for the strike from railroad workers at Blue Island, Illinois. Afterward, groups within the crowd became enraged and set fire to nearby buildings and derailed a locomotive.^[11] Elsewhere in the western states, sympathy strikers prevented transportation of goods by walking off the job, obstructing railroad tracks, or threatening and attacking strikebreakers. This increased national attention and the demand for federal action.

Federal intervention

Under direction from President Grover Cleveland, the US Attorney General Richard Olney dealt with the strike. Olney had been a railroad attorney, and still received a \$10,000 retainer from the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, in comparison to his \$8,000 salary as Attorney General.^[14] Olney obtained an injunction in federal court barring union leaders from supporting the strike and demanding that the strikers cease their activities or face being fired. Debs and other leaders of the ARU ignored the injunction, and federal troops were called up to enforce it.^[15] While Debs had been reluctant to start the strike, he threw his energies into organizing it. He called on ARU members to ignore the federal court injunctions and the U.S. Army:



The condition of laboring man at Pullman. The employee is being squeezed by Pullman between high rent and low wages, July 7, 1894.

Strong men and broad minds only can resist the plutocracy and arrogant monopoly. Do not be frightened at troops, injunctions, or a subsidized press. Quit and remain firm. Commit no violence. American Railway Union will protect all, whether member or not when strike is off.^[16]



Violence erupted on July 7, 1894, with hundreds of boxcars and coal cars looted and burned. State and federal troops violently attacked striking workers, as this study by Frederic Remington illustrates.

Debs wanted a general strike of all union members in Chicago, but this was opposed by Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, and other established unions, and it failed.^[17]

City by city the federal forces broke the ARU efforts to shut down the national transportation system. Thousands of United States Marshals and some 12,000 United States Army troops, commanded by Brigadier General Nelson Miles, took action. President Cleveland claimed that he wanted the trains moving again based on his legal, constitutional responsibility for the mail; however getting the trains moving again would also aid his broader fiscally conservative economic interests and would protect capital, an issue arguably more motivating to justify the violent military intervention than just mail disruption. His lawyers argued that the boycott violated the Sherman Antitrust Act, and represented a threat to public safety. The arrival of the military and the subsequent deaths of workers in violence led to further outbreaks of violence. During the course of the strike, 30 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded. Property damage exceeded \$80 million.^{[6][7][18]}

Local responses



Depiction of Illinois National Guardsmen firing at striking workers on July 7, 1894, the day of greatest violence.

The strike affected hundreds of towns and cities across the country. Railroad workers were divided, for the old established Brotherhoods, which included the skilled workers such as engineers, firemen and conductors, did not support the labor action. ARU members did support the action, and often comprised unskilled ground crews.^[19] In many areas townspeople and businessmen generally supported the railroads while farmers—many affiliated with the Populists—supported the ARU.

In Billings, Montana, an important rail center, a local Methodist minister, J. W. Jennings, supported the ARU. In a sermon he compared the Pullman boycott to the Boston Tea Party, and attacked Montana state officials and President Cleveland for abandoning "the faith of the Jacksonian fathers."^[20] Rather than defending "the rights of the people against aggression and oppressive corporations," he said party leaders were "the pliant tools of the codfish monied aristocracy who seek to dominate this country."^[20] Billings remained quiet but on July 10, soldiers reached Lockwood, Montana, a small rail center, where the troop train was surrounded by hundreds of angry strikers. Narrowly averting violence, the army opened the lines through Montana. When the strike ended, the railroads fired and blacklisted all the employees who had supported it.^[20]

In California the boycott was effective in Sacramento, a labor stronghold, but weak in the Bay Area and minimal in Los Angeles. The strike lingered as strikers expressed longstanding grievances over wage reductions, and indicate how unpopular the Southern Pacific Railroad was. Strikers engaged in violence

and sabotage; the companies saw it as civil war while the ARU proclaimed it was a crusade for the rights of unskilled workers.^[21]

Public opinion

Public opinion was mostly opposed to the strike and supported Cleveland's actions.^[22] Republicans and eastern Democrats supported Cleveland (the leader of the northeastern pro-business wing of the party), but southern and western Democrats as well as Populists generally denounced him. Chicago Mayor John Hopkins supported the strikers and stopped the Chicago Police from interfering before the strike turned violent.^[23] Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, a Democrat, denounced Cleveland and said he could handle all disturbances in his state without federal intervention.^[24]

Media coverage was extensive and generally negative. A common trope in news reports and editorials depicted the boycotters as foreigners who contested the patriotism expressed by the militias and troops involved, as numerous recent immigrants worked in the factories and on the railroads. The editors warned of mobs, aliens, anarchy, and defiance of the law.^[25] The *New York Times* called it "a struggle between the greatest and most important labor organization and the entire railroad capital."^[26] In Chicago the established church leaders denounced the boycott, but some younger Protestant ministers defended it.^[27]



American Railway Union President Eugene V. Debs was pilloried in the press for the disruption of food distribution and passenger traffic associated with the 1894 Pullman Strike.

Aftermath

Debs was arrested on federal charges, including conspiracy to obstruct the mail as well as disobeying an order directed to him by the Supreme Court to stop the obstruction of railways and to dissolve the boycott. He was defended by Clarence Darrow, a prominent attorney, as well as Lyman Trumbull. At the conspiracy trial Darrow argued that it was the railways, not Debs and his union, that met in secret and conspired against their opponents. Sensing that Debs would be acquitted, the prosecution dropped the charge when a juror took ill. Although Darrow also represented Debs at the United States Supreme Court for violating the federal injunction, Debs was sentenced to six months in prison.^[28]

Early in 1895, General Graham erected a memorial obelisk in the San Francisco National Cemetery at the Presidio in honor of four soldiers of the 5th Artillery killed in a Sacramento train crash of July 11, 1894, during the strike. The train wrecked crossing a trestle bridge purportedly dynamited by union members.^[29] Graham's monument included the inscription, "Murdered by Strikers", a description he hotly defended.^[30] The obelisk remains in place.

In the aftermath of the Pullman Strike, the state ordered the company to sell off its residential holdings. In the decades after Pullman died (1897), Pullman became just another South Side neighborhood. It remained the area's largest employer before closing in the 1950s. The area is both a National Historic Landmark as well as a Chicago Landmark District. Because of the significance of the strike, many state agencies and non-profit groups are hoping for many revivals of the Pullman neighborhoods starting with Pullman Park, one of the largest projects. It was to be a \$350 million mixed used development on the site of an old steel plant. The plan was for 670,000 square feet of new retail space, 125,000 square foot neighborhood recreation center and 1,100 housing units.^[31]

Politics

Following his release from prison in 1895, ARU President Debs became a committed advocate of socialism, helping in 1897 to launch the Social Democracy of America, a forerunner of the Socialist Party of America. He ran for president in 1900 for the first of five times as head of the Socialist Party ticket.^[32]

Civil as well as criminal charges were brought against the organizers of the strike and Debs in particular, and the Supreme Court issued a unanimous decision, *In re Debs*, that rejected Debs' actions. The Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld was incensed at Cleveland for putting the federal government at the service of the employers, and for rejecting Altgeld's plan to use his state militia rather than federal troops to keep order.^[33]

Cleveland's administration appointed a national commission to study the causes of the 1894 strike; it found George Pullman's paternalism partly to blame and described the operations of his company town to be "un-American". In 1898, the Illinois Supreme Court forced the Pullman Company to divest ownership in the town, as its company charter did not authorize such operations, and the land was annexed to Chicago.^[34] Much of it is now designated as an historic district, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Harper's Weekly labeled Eugene Debs and the strike organizers as "The Vanguard of Anarchy", July 21, 1894.

Labor Day

In 1894, in an effort to conciliate organized labor after the strike, President Grover Cleveland and Congress designated Labor Day as a federal holiday. Legislation for the holiday was pushed through Congress six days after the strike ended. Samuel Gompers, who had sided with the federal government in its effort to end the strike by the American Railway Union, spoke out in favor of the holiday.^{[35][36]}

See also

- United States labor law
- History of rail transport in the United States
- Murder of workers in labor disputes in the United States

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