
The Pullman Strike After One Year

by Eugene V. Debs

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It is intimated in an introduction that this is a transcription of an account provided verbally by Debs at an interview conducted at Woodstock jail.

The American Railway Union did not receive much public notice till the big strike occurred on the Great Northern system, April 13, 1894. The wages of all the employees on the system had been reduced from 10 to 40 percent, aggregating, according to the statements of the officials of the road, \$16,000 a month. The old brotherhoods acquiesced in the reduction, because, as is assumed, they felt themselves unable to cope with the powerful corporation. At this juncture our policy of united action, which distinguishes the American Railway Union from the [craft] brotherhoods, came into boldest prominence. Under the auspices of the new order all the employees, from conductors and engineers to wipers and call-boys, in every department, quit the service of the company. This was an innovation which attracted attention in all parts of the country. The employees were jubilant and the railroad companies were alarmed. The strike lasted 18 days, and on May 1 it was settled by arbitration and practically everything contended for by the men was conceded.

To show the fairness of the order it need but be stated that the board of arbitration was composed of 21 millionaire merchants and manufacturers of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Every man on the board was an employer of labor and yet we did not hesitate to commit all our interest to their hands.

Start of the Pullman Strike.

A few days later, on my return to Terre Haute, I was informed by the Vice President [G.W Howard] that the Pullman employees who

were members of our order had serious grievances and threatened to strike. I immediately advised him to do all in his power to avert a strike, and this he did, as the employees themselves testified to the United States Strike Commission. Their wages had been repeatedly reduced, but their rents and other fixed charges remained the same, and notwithstanding they were putting in full time they were getting deeper and deeper into the debt of the Pullman Company every day. At the time the strike occurred on May 11 [1894], they were indebted to the Pullman Company for the one item of rent alone \$70,000.

We felt that the victory on the Great Northern would have a tendency to stir to action men on other roads, and that in some places there might be undue eagerness to strike. We were especially anxious, for the good of the order, to prevent any further strike, feeling that we could secure justice by arbitration, as had been done on the Great Northern, with the difference that the difficulties would be arbitrated before instead of after the strike, and in pursuance of this policy everything possible was done to restrain the Pullman employees from striking. They acted on the advice of Vice President Howard, until an incident occurred which precipitated the strike without his knowledge or the knowledge of any other officer of the order.

Breach of Faith Charged.

The committee which had charge of the employees' grievances had secured an interview with Mr. Pullman. He promised that these grievances should be investigated. The following morning three members of the committee were laid off. This resulted in the spontaneous stoppage of work and the great Pullman strike was on. There was a deliberate breach of faith on the part of the Pullman Company, and it was resented by the employees laying down their tools and leaving the shops.

It will thus be seen that the charge so often made, that the strike was instituted by labor agitators, is utterly false and absurd. Shortly after the strike occurred I was called to St. Paul and I stopped over at Pullman to make a personal investigation. I visited the houses of the employees and talked with them in person, as also with their families, and found a condition of affairs there which no language can describe. It was perfectly clear that the employees had been methodically plundered. They had been ground to atoms between the upper

millstone of reduction and the nether millstone of extortionate living expenses. Some of the employees apologized to me for not being able to introduce me to their families, as their wives had not clothing enough to make themselves presentable. The money I had in my pocket I gave away in charity and I had to borrow money in Chicago to take me to St. Paul. I am entitled to no credit for this, for I would have a heart of stone had I left with a dollar in my pocket. That awful spectacle of squalid wretchedness, hungry children, and poverty indescribable was well calculated to sow in any human breast the seeds of the greatest strike the country has ever known. And all of this, be it remembered, at a time when, according to the sworn statements of Pullman officials, there was a surplus of \$25 million in the vaults of the Pullman Company.

Power of the Company.

The fact was established before the strike commission that rents at Pullman were fully 25 percent higher than elsewhere. An enormous profit was derived from the water supply received from Chicago. While no order compelling employees to deal in Pullman stores was issued, it was well understood that failure to do so was not in the interest of the employee. Pay day came every two weeks, and the rent money was deducted whether a dollar remained for the family or not. There are checks still in existence ranging from 2 cents upward representing two weeks' work. The debt of the employees to the company represented an unbreakable bond of slavery.

Many people have asked why the employees did not leave the place if these conditions prevailed. The answer is they could not leave because they were virtually mortgaged to the Pullman Company. Living expenses exceeded wages, and the indebtedness grew larger day by day. Many employees were thus working for the Pullman Company for less than a bare living. Instead of having a little over at pay day there was a deficit, and the employee found himself in a condition of slavish dependence from which there was no escape.

Purpose to Crush Competition.

It has been contended that the Pullman Company accepted contracts at losing rates for the sake of keeping its employees at work. This contention is not supported by the facts. It is admitted that los-

ing contracts were accepted, but the purpose was to crush out competition, and this could be effectually done because the Pullman Company was getting a large part of its work done practically for nothing. The loss on the contracts was more than balanced by the excessive rents and other forms of extortion.

The Pullman Company was chartered in 1867 with a capital of \$1 million. It increased in six years, from 1883 to 1889, from \$13 million to \$25 million, or an average of \$2 million a year. In 1894, when the strike occurred, it had increased its capital stock to \$36 million, and on this enormous capital it paid a quarterly dividend of 2 percent, amounting to \$3.88 million per year. With this showing, aside from financial considerations, the employees were smarting under numerous petty grievances, which combined amounted to insufferable despotism. The indignities put upon them by petty bosses were outrageous. It is but just to Mr. Pullman to say that he was probably in utter ignorance of many of the wrongs his employees suffered. In what I have to say here I do not discuss Mr. Pullman personally. I deal with the general policy of the Pullman Company in relation to its employees.

Nothing to Arbitrate.

On June 12, 31 days after the employees struck, the regular convention of the American Railway Union met in Chicago. That convention would have been held if the Pullman strike was never heard of. It had been ordered for that date and was not by any means called especially to consider the Pullman strike. It was composed of about 425 delegates, representing in round numbers 125,000 railroad men. One of the matters which came up early in the convention was the grievances of the Pullman employees. A committee was appointed to investigate and called on the officials to see if an amicable adjustment could not be effected. Mr. Wickes of the Pullman Company objected to the committee because it was partly composed of others than Pullman employees. Another committee was at once appointed, consisting solely of Pullman employees, and they were told by Mr. Wickes that the company would run its business to suit itself; that it had nothing to arbitrate. In the meantime Mr. Pullman went east to spend a period at the seashore.

A great many delegates visited Pullman to make a personal investigation. All came back impressed with the magnitude of the wrongs

done the employees and resolved that something must be done at once to rescue the unfortunates from such a tyrannical and pauperizing condition. The convention was not disposed to act hastily. Every effort which could be conceived was put forth to end the trouble. There was no desire to extend it. When it was seen that the Pullman Company would entertain no proposition looking to a settlement, it was proposed by some delegates that it was then their duty to their suffering brothers and their families at Pullman to refuse to handle Pullman cars. This sentiment found immediate favor. In my speech before the convention I appealed to the delegates, in view of the unfortunate industrial condition of the country to pursue a conservative course. I said:

There is a danger in extremes and defeat lurks in discord. Nor is this all. However paradoxical it may seem there is, nevertheless, an element of danger in prosperity and against this we will find it the part of wisdom to guard with sedulous care. Present conditions are fruitful of manifold defects and deficiencies, which are annoying and constitute grievances, which, while productive of injury and vexation, are far below the plane of gravity which demands any resort to extreme measures for redress or adjustment. Industrial conditions are at present of a character which demands a constant exercise of the virtue of patience and forbearance when difficulties are encountered, which under other and more favorable circumstances would demand the interposition of the order.

It will be noted that decisive action was not taken until the eve of adjournment, and this action was confined exclusively to Pullman cars. There was no intention to stop trains, to quit work in shops, or to do any other thing, except not to handle Pullman cars. I can cite scores of instances where men proffered their services to haul the mails and other trains, but in each case the offer was declined in accordance with the policy agreed upon, that unless Pullman cars ran all traffic should stop.

One word from the General Managers' Association would be sufficient to compel Pullman to settle with his employees. This word was not uttered. Why? Because the General Managers' Association courted the opportunity to clash with the ARU. When the delegates decided not to handle Pullman cars the General Managers' Association held an emergency meeting. Mr. Wickes, Pullman's chief in command, was present. It is a little singular that when these general

managers were put upon the stand in the conspiracy trials last January not one could remember the object of that emergency meeting or why Wickes was here.

The resolutions adopted by the general managers about this time clearly defined their policy. They resolved, among other things, that Pullman cars should run. In other words, they would back the Pullman Company in starving its employees to death, while at the same time they would wipe out the American Railway Union. The triumph of the union on the Great Northern when it was but ten months old had alarmed them. They viewed its marvelous growth with grave apprehension. They probably thought it would be comparatively easy, since they were solidly united, to crush out the American Railway Union at so early a stage of its existence. They greatly underestimated the power and extent of the order. I have it upon good authority that they felt perfectly able to snuff out the order without much more difficulty than if it were a candle.

Sufficient Notice Given.

The delegates, it should be observed, gave five days' notice in regard to the handling of Pullman cars, and the action was unanimous. This remarkable feature of the proceeding should not escape notice. In that entire body of 425 delegates, on the whole the most intelligent body of railroad men I have ever seen, there was not a single one who dissented. They were so strongly imbued with the wrongs and sufferings that had been borne by the people of Pullman that their sense of humanity prompted them to the action they took. Upon this point the most conservative, who are found in all bodies, were radical. They could do nothing less without forfeiting all claim to human sympathy.

In the annals of the world there is no sublimer exhibition of self-sacrifice. They esteemed 14,000 starving men, women, and children of more consequence than the running of a few palace cars. Their action requires no apology from me or from anyone else. As Professor [George D.] Herron, the eminent theologian, said: "The time will come when they will stand monumental in history for their love and devotion to their fellow-beings."

It may be well at this point to introduce the report of the United States Strike Commission. It is still fresh in the minds of the people. It declared, after exhaustive investigation, that the employees had

been grossly mistreated; that the officers of the ARU were opposed to the strike; and that the General Managers' Association was not only an unlawful but a dangerous body. A question of grave import is, what was the policy of the order in reference to the railroads and to the public.

Obedience to Law Counseled.

No scintilla of evidence has ever been introduced to show that any violence or infraction of the law was at any time contemplated. In all the addresses issued I counseled obedience to the law, and my associates did the same. We believed, as we still believe, that men had a lawful right to quit work. More than this we never claimed. If the companies could operate their trains, their right to do so was never questioned. That there was violent interference to some extent is not denied, but it has never been traced to the ARU. There was abundant opportunity to do so during the conspiracy trials, but the prosecution utterly failed to make a single point.

For the first few days after June 26, when the railroad strike began, everything was peaceable and orderly, and not until the railroad companies began to swear in deputy United States marshals by the thousand was there serious trouble. Four thousand of these were sworn into service at the request of and paid by the railroad companies. Just let me quote from the official report of Chief of Police [Michael] Brennan:

“Another source of annoyance to the department was the conduct of the deputy United States marshals. These men were hastily gathered, largely from the scum and refuse of the lowest class of the city's population. While there were honest men among them, a large number of them were toughs, thieves, and ex-convicts. There were also some strikers sworn in. Several of these officials were arrested during the strike for stealing property from railroad cars. In one instance two were found under suspicious circumstances near a freight car which had just been set on fire. They were dangerous to the lives of citizens on account of their careless handling of pistols. They fired into crowds of bystanders when there was no disturbance and no reason for shooting. Innocent men, women, and children were killed by these shots.”

I aver that nearly all the rioting, car burning, and lawlessness generally is traceable to this source. The facts overwhelmingly support the averment. The railroad companies had everything to gain, the employees everything to lose. If the employees, because of hostility to Pullman, had been bent on the destruction of property, why did they not destroy palace cars instead of stock cars? The query is exceedingly pertinent. When the rioting began and cars were fired public sympathy, which is all powerful, turned against the strikers and that instant their cause was lost.

From the riot to the injunction is but a step. From the injunction to jail is but another step. In this way it is quite easy to defeat a strike. Until violence began the strikers were triumphant and this would have been the ending but for the deputy marshals who incited the trouble, which was deemed sufficient to justify the interference of the courts, the jailing of the leaders at every point, the calling out of the army, and the breaking up of the strike. As a matter of course the ARU never started out to antagonize the government. It is singular, however, that in no single instance in the history of the republic have the authorities ever interfered on the side of workingmen. When their great powers have been invoked it has always been in support of the corporations and on the side of property against human life.

Clamor for Prosecution.

There was a general clamor for the prosecution of the leaders of the strike. The corporations insisted that the conspiracy should be punished to the full extent of the law. In due course of time the officers of the ARU were indicted for conspiracy. It was deemed a very easy matter to convict them and send them to the penitentiary.

The trial began Jan. 24 [1895]. All of the evidence of the prosecution was presented to the jury. The defense then began to tell its story, and as the tale was unfolded a perceptible change was visible on the faces of the juror. The tide was rapidly turning against the prosecution. An unconditional acquittal became painfully apparent. There were scores of witnesses yet to testify, and the truth, the whole truth, was about to be disclosed. At this supreme juncture the only real misfortune befell us. A juror was taken ill. The defense sought by all the means at their command to have the trial continued. They agreed to wait till the juror got well or to continue with 11 jurors or to subpoena another, or to do anything else to reach a verdict. The prosecu-

tion strenuously refused to proceed. They were ignominiously defeated and knew it. It would not do to have such a verdict to go on record. It would be in ghastly conflict with the sentence of Judge Woods which committed us to jail upon practically the same issues.

Since the trial I have received authoritative proof that the jury was practically unanimous in the opinion that there was no case. It is most unfortunate for us that this verdict was not put on record, but this does not lessen the moral effect of the vindication.

Exonerated by the Commission.

The United State Strike Commission had exonerated us and had put the corporations in the pillory. A jury of our peers, after hearing all the evidence, would have found us not guilty, and yet we languish in jail. not for having committed crime, but for alleged contempt of court. By two duly constituted bodies we were tried and our cause investigated, and in each case the verdict was equivalent to acquittal, and yet we occupy felons' cells.

In the face of this I do not see how any fair-minded man can avoid the conclusion that constitutional rights in this country are nothing more than a hallucination.

Reverting again to the strike, it should be borne in mind that the Pullman Company set at defiance the whole city of Chicago. An appeal was made to the city council and that body appointed a committee to call on the Pullman Company to ask them to consent to arbitration. This committee, of which Alderman [John] McGillen was chairman, was authorized to make this proposition: That the Pullman Company should select two representative, the judges of Cook County two more, and these four a fifth, to inquire into the matters as to whether there was anything to arbitrate, and if this board found there was nothing to arbitrate, the employees agreed to return to work in a body. The employees did not even ask to have a representative on the board. The Pullman Company rejected the proposition with scorn.

Suppose the Pullman Company had made the same proposition and the employees had spurned it. What would have been the public verdict? Would not the whole country have condemned the strikers? Then what must be the enlightened public verdict in relation to this company? The Pullman Company were afraid to have that investigation made. They new that if it were made there would be disclosed a

state of affairs that would have horrified the country. I wish to state that all through the conspiracy trials Judge Grosscup acted with eminent fairness. He seemed desirous to get at the real facts and to have even-handed justice meted out.

What the Decision Means.

As to the effect of the adverse ruling of the Supreme Court resulting in our imprisonment, it will in its ultimate result have the same effect upon the money power that the Dred Scott decision had upon the slave. Stripped of all extraneous matter the decision means that workingmen, while ostensibly having the right to organize, have not the right to exercise the legal functions of organization. In other words, they are compelled to submit to any conditions their employers may impose, because if they quit in concert, and such cessation of work results in the interruption of the mails or interferes with interstate traffic, the fact of the workingmen having united is construed as conspiracy and they are held accountable by the court for all acts of omission or commission that may result. The effect of this will be to destroy the usefulness of organization in so far as the fundamental, pivotal object, which is united resistance, is concerned.

Judge Trumbull says: "The doctrine announced by the Supreme Court in the Debs case, carried to its logical conclusion, places every citizen at the mercy of any prejudiced or malicious federal judge who may see fit to imprison him."

Knowing this, railroad employees will certainly not quit work if any judge can by the injunction process declare them guilty of contempt and put them in jail for three to six months. The workingmen of the country realize the gravity of the situation. The dangerous encroachments of the federal judiciary are now more clearly comprehended since Judge Woods committed us to jail and the Supreme Court declined to review the decision, claiming that the lower court had complete and final jurisdiction.

Trial by Jury Denied.

So far as my colleagues and myself are concerned, the imprisonment is of little or no consequence; so far as the principle involved in our incarceration is concerned, it amounts to everything, for the reason that if the right of trial by jury can be abrogated in the case of

one citizen and he can be arbitrarily thrust into jail, so can all others. And hence every safeguard of our much-vaunted civil rights is destroyed and no citizen is secure. Some of the most eminent jurists of the country declare that the constitution has been violated and that a federal judge, district or circuit, can now enjoin any man from doing anything, lawful or unlawful, and lock him in jail, guilty or not guilty. He issues the injunction, hears the evidence, pronounces the sentence, thus constituting himself judge, jury, plaintiff, and executioner. Between this man, who in respect to the liberty of the citizen has supreme power, and the tsar of Russia, there is not the slightest difference. In each case the citizen is the helpless victim of autocratic whim or caprice.

When all the people fully comprehend the situation, they will act. There is a higher [judge than] the Supreme Court and someday the court will find itself at the bar of the tribunal of We, the People.

Example of the Corporations.

On this proposition all labor harmonizes. Every trade union in the land has declared itself, has cried out against the monstrous assumption of power by one man. When I am again allowed my rights as a citizen I intend to take up the great work where I laid it down. We hope to bring about a unification of labor, a harmony between unions, for all are working to the same end. In seeking thus to combine all classes of labor we simply follow the example set by the corporations. We feel that if they had the lawful right to combine their tremendous power to reduce wages, to blacklist employees, the latter had the same power to unify their forces for mutual protection. If such a combination is unlawful, if the courts construe it to be a conspiracy and against public policy, then let the corporations who initiated the proceeding abolish it. The one necessitates the other. On our part we acted purely in self-defense. What possible hope would the employees of any road or system have against such a colossal alliance as is represented in the General Managers' Association? They would be ground to atoms.

And therefore the work must go on. But to avoid the spies and sneaks who fatten on the misfortunes of the toilers and who are quick to report the name of every man who joins an association to better his condition, the work will hereafter be carried on in secret. No engineer need know whether his fireman is a member of the ARU. And it will

be spread until it becomes the strongest union in the world, for there are 800,000 railroad men eligible. Every man who served his term in this county jail is now a worker in the field, stronger and better equipped for the fight than if he had not been here. WE will carry on the work, even unto the end.

I have had ample time for retrospective reflection, but had I to do it again I would not change my course in the slightest degree. I did what my head prompted and my heart approved and I have no regrets. I would do all I did and as much more as I could on the same lines if a hangman's noose instead of a felon's cell confronted me. The losses, the sacrifices, and the sufferings incident to the strike will dwarf into insignificance in comparison with the monumental blessings which will flow from it when the last chapters shall have been written.

Eugene V. Debs.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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