

A View of the Pullman Strike

George Pullman



OVERVIEW

Following a violent strike by workers against the Pullman Company, a railway car manufacturer, a presidential commission investigated the causes of the conflict. George Pullman, president of the company, testified before the commission in 1894. Part of his testimony follows.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why did the Pullman Company lower wages?
- How were company executives and employees affected by the wage reductions?

Question: Did the Pullman Company, during its years of prosperity, ever voluntarily increase the wages of any ... of its employees?

Answer: Not specially on account of prosperous business. It has always paid its employees liberal wages. . . . I think that it has never had a strike.

. . .

Question: But it has never increased the wages of its employees voluntarily?

Answer: Certainly it has not increased them any other way.

Question: It has never divided any of its profits with them in any shape or form?

Answer: The Pullman Company divides its profits with the people who own the property. It would not have a right to take the profits belonging to the people who own that property. . . .

Question: Well, we will not discuss that question. . . . Now, when the first year of losses comes, it makes a reduction of 20 or 25 percent on [the wages of] its employees.

Answer: In that particular branch [factory]. It was a question whether we could get cars to build or whether we should shut up our shops.

Question: Was this reduction upon one class of your employees [in that factory] or upon all classes? . . .

Answer: When we reduced the wages in one part of the manufacturing plant, we would reduce the wages in all parts of it. You cannot be paying one set of men higher wages than you are paying others. . . .

Question: Suppose a board of arbitration had examined . . . the matter and had said: "Yes, we accept your statement that you are losing money on these jobs and that the times are hard. . . . But with a body of workmen who had been with you some time . . . you ought to divide with them a little, give them at least enough to make a good living." Wouldn't that have been a fair matter to be considered?

Answer: I think not. How long a time should a man be with a company before he would be entitled to a gift of money? For that is what this would mean. The wage question is settled by the law of supply and demand. We were obliged to reduce wages in order to get these cars. [We were forced] to compete with other people in the same business [who] were doing the same thing. . . .

Question: Who has the power to reduce rents at Pullman?

Answer: Any question of that kind would come to me. . . .

Question: Was the question of reducing rents [on company houses] when wages were reduced one that came under discussion at all?

Answer: No, . . . the question of reducing rents did not come under discussion between the officers of the company. The income from the rent was so low that there was no room for reducing the rent. . . . And, as I explained to the men, there was no necessary connection between the employment of men and the renting of homes. . . . They had the privilege of living where they chose. . . .

Question: When this reduction of wages was made, was your salary reduced? And what [about] the other officers?

Answer: No, sir.