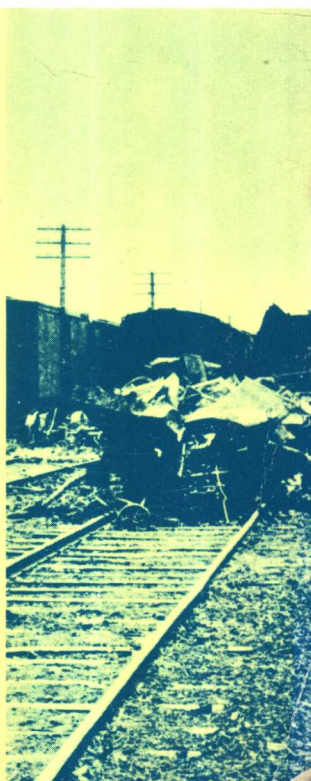


THE PULLMAN STRIKE

ALMONT
LINDSEY

THE STORY OF A UNIQUE EXPERIMENT AND OF A GREAT LABOR UPHEAVAL



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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS / CHICAGO & LONDON

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Published 1942. First Phoenix edition 1964

Printed in the United States of America

87 86 85

987

International Standard Book Number: 0-226-48383-5

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 64-23413

TO THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER, ALBERT LINDSEY
WHO EXEMPLIFIED THE FINEST QUALITIES
OF HIS GENERATION

PREFACE

MORE than ten years ago Marcus L. Hansen, professor of history at the University of Illinois, suggested that I investigate the town of Pullman as a social experiment. Out of this study came my doctoral thesis. So fascinating was the subject and so unexplored was the field that I later decided to broaden my research to include the entire scope of the Pullman Strike. My project met with the enthusiastic encouragement of my friend and mentor, Professor Hansen, who felt that there was need for a full treatment of this great upheaval. His unexpected demise in 1938 deprived me of an able counselor, whose scholarly judgment and sympathetic advice I greatly missed in the preparation of this book.

The material of many libraries contributed to the substance of this volume, and to all these institutions I owe a debt of gratitude. In particular I would like to acknowledge the extremely valuable assistance of the Illinois State Historical Library, the Pullman Branch Library, the John Crerar Library, the Metropolitan Library of Chicago, the Illinois State Archives, and the newspaper, legal, and manuscript divisions of the Library of Congress. For permission to use certain quotations I wish to express my appreciation to Charles Scribner's Sons and to Alfred A. Knopf and Company. To George W. Arms, one of my colleagues at Mary Washington College, I am greatly indebted for his painstaking perusal of my manuscript and his many helpful suggestions.

A. L.

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CHAPTER I

EMBATTLED LABOR

EIGHTEEN HUNDRED AND NINETY-FOUR was a year of fast-moving drama. Never had the nation witnessed a spectacle of greater despair or more serious labor disturbances. The panic of 1893 paralyzed the industrial structure, demoralized wages, and reduced to idleness three million workers.¹ Added to the growing chorus of national discontent was the voice of the agrarian forces, protesting against forty-nine-cent wheat, seven-cent cotton and twenty-six-cent corn.² From hamlet and city the armies of the Commonweal were recruited. Their weapon was the petition; but, to exploited labor, industrial warfare seemed more effective in forcing redress of grievances. Strikes shook the nation to its foundation. All the pent-up bitterness of years found expression in the tragic struggle between the classes and the masses.

John Swinton, journalist and author, wrote of events in that feverish year:

Do we hear cries of distress from a million idle people? The wail of hunger from men, women and children? The groans of anguish from the multitudes who suffer in many a great city? Do we see hordes of men, mingled with women, looking for work by which they may earn their daily bread? Does strife rage between the workers and the capitalists? Do we hear the tramp of a hundred thousand soldiers, bearing guns, with which they are ready to shoot their own countrymen? Do we hear Grover Cleveland ordering his generals to whet their swords for blood? Do we see dread spectacles of human degradation all over the coal area of our country? Have we seen a half million workers on the strike in a single month of the year 1894? Did not the reader feel that our country was "shooting Niagara" while he read the daily reports in the newspapers of June and July? Who can tell the wierd and ghastly story of the last quarter of the nineteenth century? And is this the proud country into which Grover Cleveland was born 57 years ago?³

The fury with which labor and capital battled in 1894 was the outgrowth of years of mutual distrust and hate; indeed, from the

dawn of the industrial revolution the interests of the two had clashed repeatedly. The bitter strikes and cataclysmic upheavals of labor resolved themselves into an attempt on the part of the employees to improve a standard of living which too often bred tragedy, suffering, and despair. Entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century enjoyed great financial success, but in large measure they failed to understand or appreciate the laborer as he evolved from the domestic worker and sought in unions the only real hope of escaping from the terrors of poverty.

During the nineteenth century the position of labor was not enviable. Rapid growth of the cities led to congested conditions and disgraceful housing facilities. The rise of tenements with their glaring evils followed in the wake of factory expansion, leaving few cities free of sprawling slum areas. Many thousands of workers lived in habitations that were filthy, badly crowded, and poorly ventilated.⁴ Tragic proof of such conditions was furnished by the high mortality rate from the dreadful epidemics that swept through the reeking slums of the large cities during the post-Civil War era.⁵ The miserable housing facilities furnished to thousands of miners in Pennsylvania were in large part responsible for the Coal Strike of 1873.⁶ Under such baleful influences as the slums provided, competence and efficiency among the workers could not easily be developed. Labor was keenly aware of the crying need for clean, livable homes and accorded recognition to this matter in their platform of principles.⁷ The manufacturer apparently did not realize that bad home environment militated against his own factory interests.

Wages for the most part were low and inadequate. Following the Civil War the plight of the laborer grew worse, in spite of the industrial boom which made work more plentiful and wages higher. Between 1860 and the close of 1866 wages rose approximately 60 per cent, whereas commodity prices during the same period soared 90 per cent. House rents increased an even greater percentage. Skilled employees in 1868 and 1869 were definitely worse off than they had been in 1860, judging from the shabbier homes in which they lived and the simpler fare which they ate. Pay cuts during the panic of 1873 were severe, and wages did not

take a turn for the better until 1880;⁸ but in the panic of 1893 wage slashes again reduced the wage-earner to a state of desperation.

Wretched housing and low wages were not the only causes for unrest among labor; long hours, child labor, and dangerous and unsanitary working conditions ranked also as major grievances. The standard factory working day after the Civil War was at least ten hours and frequently more. Before 1860 only skilled artisans and government employees were able to command the ten-hour day, while a large proportion of workers had to toil twelve and fourteen hours. Children under sixteen years then worked twelve or more hours a day; and almost as tragic was the plight of female textile workers, who at Lowell in 1846 were compelled to labor thirteen hours a day during the summer and from dawn to sunset in winter. Wages were often reduced one-half by the truck system of payment, which was especially prevalent in factory towns and mining regions.⁹ In view of such conditions it was only natural that the laborer should resort to methods of self-help.

Prior to the Civil War unionism was largely in the embryonic state. In the thirties the first trade-unions of the United States developed but could not muster enough strength to survive the panic of 1837. Numerous attempts to develop unions were made during the next twenty-five years, but none seemed to have any enduring results. Strikes were won and certain gains made, but such basic matters as wages, hours, and housing did not improve materially. The odds against labor were great. Employers' associations developed in order effectively to combat labor organizations. The courts rushed unhesitatingly to the side of capital by prosecuting unions for conspiracy; and not until the famous decision in the case of *Massachusetts Commonwealth vs. Hunt* in 1842 were unions held to be legal organizations. Yet during this transitional period the foundation was laid for the powerful labor organizations which later emerged.

Prior to the panic of 1873 there were in the United States no less than thirty national unions, of which the most significant were the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor. Both

of these unions enjoyed meteoric growth only to fade out of the industrial picture. Launched in 1866 as a confederation of all types of labor organizations, the National Labor Union soon possessed six hundred and forty thousand members; but participation in politics destroyed the movement when it was only five years old. Although short-lived, the organization contributed materially to the cause of national amalgamation, the eight-hour-day movement, and the establishment of labor bureaus.

In 1869 the Order of the **Knights of Labor** was founded by Uriah S. Stephens, a Philadelphia garment-cutter. The movement was at first cloaked in secrecy, and not until this feature was abandoned in 1881 did the organization enjoy rapid growth. It was launched as the **first great experiment in industrial unionism**, and virtually all workers, irrespective of skill or craft, were eligible to membership. The preamble to the constitution of the union announced: "When bad men combine, the good must associate, else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle." Under the leadership of Terence V. Powderly, who became grand master in 1879, the union mushroomed into a membership of over seven hundred thousand. Precipitate strike action in 1886 combined with unmerited public censure arising out of the Haymarket riot contributed to the disintegration of the union, and at the time of the Pullman Strike the organization was but a shadow of its former strength.¹⁰

Of more enduring character was the **American Federation of Labor**, which began its slow, steady growth in 1881. Concerned only with the aristocracy of labor, the movement rested on craft lines. Under the resourceful leadership of Samuel Gompers, the organization pursued a conservative course, eschewing all political action and following a cautious policy in industrial warfare.¹¹ During the tempestuous year of 1894 the federation voiced sympathy for embattled labor but otherwise deemed it better valor to hold aloof from the struggle.¹² So discreetly did this organization conduct itself that the turn of the century found it more strongly established than ever.

The industrialist was inclined to observe the rise of unions with apprehension and to view them as a deadly foe to be resisted and

exterminated. The future of labor organizations remained precarious, since they had not yet won a recognized place in the social order. Public opinion still frowned upon all strikes. Nevertheless, labor was grimly determined to compel capital to make concessions through higher wages and shorter hours. During this period the workers were sullen, embittered, and resolved to support their demands with their most effective weapon, the strike. With capital equally determined to thwart labor and destroy unionism, the stage was cleared for the industrial upheavals which shook the country following the Civil War.¹³

Before labor strife is discussed, a few observations about the industrialist are relevant. Prior to 1860 industry was being revolutionized, and the Civil War seemed to accelerate the movement. Through improved means of production and the rapid growth of home and foreign markets, transportation and manufacturing were beginning to broaden out on a nation-wide basis. In 1865 most businesses were conducted on a small scale, but not many years elapsed before consolidation of small competing firms occurred; and, by absorbing and crushing small competitors, giant monopolies evolved, capitalized at tens of millions of dollars.¹⁴ Often the growth of a monopoly was achieved through the shrewd calculations of one tycoon. Principles, honesty, and lawfulness were ruthlessly brushed aside as swollen fortunes were amassed. Industrial anarchy and social confusion prevailed as many of the capitalists, in order to gain their ends, resorted to unethical, illegal practices.¹⁵

Bribery—perhaps the worst of the prevailing evils—was employed in this ruthless era of industry, but to what extent cannot be determined. But prevalent it was, corrupting officials in both the federal and the state governments. Railway lobbying, for instance, was notorious, the Union Pacific alone disbursing in the national capital by 1868 no less than five hundred thousand dollars. The practice of winning corporate privileges from state legislatures was facilitated with the aid of large money gifts. Both the judiciary and the legislature of New York State in 1870 were conspicuously corrupt;¹⁶ but no less disgraceful were the legislative sessions of Illinois, which were literally swamped with the

demands of influential lobbyists, who succeeded in getting what they wanted. In 1869 approximately seven hundred acts of incorporation were jammed through the legislature of this prairie state.¹⁷ Everywhere the situation was ideal for the type of men who dominated industry.

Cornelius Vanderbilt, who typified the ruthlessness of the new era, successfully merged a number of roads into the famous New York Central and, through stock manipulation, boosted his fortune within twelve years from ten million to one hundred and four million dollars. He conducted his business relations upon the theory that the end always justified the means and, without compunction, pursued a policy of crushing small competitors, bribing legislators, corrupting courts, violating laws, and watering stock.¹⁸ But he was no more vicious than Daniel Drew, Jay Gould, and James Fisk, from whom he tried to wrest control of the Erie Railroad in the late sixties. The triumvirate, as officers of the Erie, printed enormous quantities of stock in order to forestall Vanderbilt's attempt to corner the securities of that railroad. Eventually they induced the state legislature of New York to legalize this issue but not without recourse to widespread bribery, in which state senators received all the way from fifteen thousand to one hundred thousand dollars apiece. Vanderbilt resorted to the same strategy but was outgeneraled.¹⁹

The methods employed by the Standard Oil Company were as unprincipled as they were successful. Competition was anathema to John D. Rockefeller, who crushed competitors by outrageously barbarous means and who ordered agents of the company upon threat of summary dismissal to secure control of the entire oil business in their respective districts. Railroad officials were bribed in order to gain access to the records showing the nature and extent of the business of all competitors; and with this information oil was secretly offered to the dealers of these competitors at greatly reduced prices.²⁰ The utter ruthlessness of this company was representative of many. It is not difficult to understand why the employers of this era with their untrammelled rights would brook no opposition from labor. Just as the capitalists overcame business competition in a cunning and savage manner,

so they tried to overwhelm labor unions in a manner no less pitiless.

Although there was a number of strikes immediately following the Civil War, it was not until the panic of 1873 that they assumed the character of industrial upheavals. As had earlier depressions, this one proved a severe blow to labor. Wages dropped rapidly, and unemployment mounted until it finally reached between two and three million men. In protest against shrinking pay checks, strikes were called; but defeat almost invariably confronted labor. Believing the time ripe to smash unions, the employers resorted to lockouts, blacklists, and legal prosecutions, with the result that labor organizations were greatly weakened.

In July, 1877, the country was shaken by a strike of major proportions. Having suffered from a decline of business, the railroads slashed wages. The managers of the eastern roads felt that the time was auspicious to destroy the powerful Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, which, because of some notable victories in 1875, had become very popular among railway employees.²¹ Angered by repeated wage cuts, the employees were in a militant mood; and an abrupt 10 per cent slash, effective in June and July on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, precipitated the strike. The latent hostility of labor found immediate expression, and the struggle quickly assumed national dimensions. Traffic on all eastern roads was paralyzed, and at such rail junctions as Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Reading, and Chicago there were strife and bloodshed. In Pittsburgh the mob dominated the situation for days, successfully resisting all efforts on the part of the militia to restore order. The infuriated civilians drove out of the city the state troopers who dared to open fire. The destruction here was estimated at three to ten million dollars.

Unable to cope with the growing violence, the governors of Maryland, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia requested federal military aid, and regular troops were rushed to the affected areas. For political reasons the executives in Indiana and Missouri hesitated to avail themselves of such aid; but, upon application of the United States marshals, federal troops were ordered into these states—a procedure which was destined to be-

come a vital part of the strategy of the federal government in 1894. Within two weeks the strike was crushed.²²

While starvation wages forced the struggle, the justification advanced by the railroads for their drastic wage policy was not very convincing. Especially was this true in the case of the New York Central, which throughout that turbulent year paid 8 per cent dividends on stock that had been capitalized at twice its real value. By reducing dividend payments to 6 per cent, Vanderbilt could have avoided the wage reduction of 1877.²³ The indifference of the railroads toward the plight of labor fostered among the workers a new feeling of solidarity. Railway managers were now conscious of the strength possessed by underpaid and dissatisfied laborers. Capital seemed determined to prevent a recurrence of such a cataclysmic outbreak; and to this end conspiracy laws were passed by several states and armories quickly erected in many places.²⁴

This strike was followed by many others. The great Anthracite Strike of 1877 furnished evidence that cause for discontent was confined not alone to railroad employees. With earnings reduced to fifteen dollars a month and less, the coal miners struck and forced a 10 per cent advance in wages.²⁵ The year of 1880 brought a flood of strikes; indeed, the situation became more feverish, culminating in 1886, "the year of the great uprisings."

Labor demonstrated a militant determination to battle for its "rights" in 1886, with the result that the number of strikes in that year doubled any previous record. During the early part of the year the Gould railway system in the Southwest was involved in a serious struggle. The Knights of Labor had gathered strength from two earlier victories on the road and were in no mood to see one of their members discharged for alleged incompetency. Refusal to reinstate him provoked the conflict which quickly paralyzed six thousand miles of railway and led to violence and property destruction. In some states the militia was ordered on duty; but within two months the strike wore itself out and ended disastrously for the Knights of Labor.²⁶

Deeming the times right, the American Federation of Labor abandoned for the moment its extreme caution and sponsored a

nation-wide movement for the eight-hour day. The general strike called on May 1 was partially effective, and tens of thousands of workers won the shorter day; but for the most part results were discouraging.²⁷

It was during this epidemic of strikes that the Haymarket riot in Chicago electrified the nation. On May 3 several strikers were killed and wounded by the police in a fray at the McCormick reaper works; and in protest against the brutality of these agents of the law a meeting was called at Haymarket Place, where violent remarks were uttered by some anarchists. When a bomb was hurled by an unknown hand at the police as they were trying to disperse the crowd, several were killed, and considerably more were wounded. A wave of horror swept the country and feeling ran high. While human passions were thus aroused, eight leading anarchists were placed on trial and pronounced guilty. One took refuge in suicide, four expiated on the scaffold a crime which they probably did not commit, and three languished in prison until pardoned in 1893 by Governor John P. Altgeld. In the considered opinion of this executive the entire trial had been a travesty of justice and was conducted by Judge Gary with "malicious ferocity." For this act of mercy, buttressed by a carefully prepared statement, Altgeld was universally criticized and bitterly denounced. The press raged, referring to him as "anarchist," "demagogue," "socialist," and "fomenter of lawlessness." Finally the storm subsided, but the vested interests did not forget.²⁸

In 1892 occurred the famous Homestead Strike which long rankled in the memory of organized labor. The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers was then one of the strongest trade-unions in the United States. Prior to 1889 the union was able to maintain friendly relations with the Carnegie Steel Corporation; but in that year Henry C. Frick became general manager of the company, and immediately antiunionism developed as one of its fixed policies. In 1892 the workers were confronted by an unyielding disposition on the part of the corporation to reduce wages; and before their union could take action the company assumed the initiative and declared a lockout. Other mills in the Pittsburgh area were soon involved. Andrew Car-

negie hastily departed for Europe, leaving Frick in full command to wage a war to the death against the Amalgamated Association.

Henry Frick acted quickly. He erected around the steel plant at Homestead a wire fence three miles long and fifteen feet high and then entered into an arrangement with the Pinkerton Detective Agency to furnish three hundred armed guards. As they approached Homestead in barges on the Monongahela River during the early morning of July 6, the workers gathered at the landing prepared to contest their arrival. Ten were killed, and many more seriously wounded when rifles blazed and a pitched battle was fought. Pinkerton's men were routed, but the victory of the workers proved illusory. The entire militia of Pennsylvania was soon concentrated at Homestead, where martial law was proclaimed; and under the protection of bayonets the mills gradually resumed production. The troops remained until the latter part of November, when the workers, forced by necessity, were compelled to call off the strike and return to the mills as nonunionists. By this one stroke the Carnegie Company successfully swept unionism out of Homestead and reduced it to a negligible factor in the steel mills throughout the Pittsburgh area.²⁹

The Homestead Strike was convincing proof to labor that the steel industry, despite its pretended interest in better living standards for the workers, was supremely indifferent to their fate. Labor beheld one of the most highly protected industries in the nation pursuing a policy of barbarism toward its employees, despite the major contention, long advanced and fostered by steel interests, that high tariff schedules would confer benefits on the workers. The employment of a private army and the militia to protect corporate interests against the demands of workers sharpened class feelings. Labor played a large part in the defeat of the protectionist-minded Republican party in 1892³⁰ and, in scanning the future, looked more and more to its own weapons of industrial warfare.

The rise of modern corporations and associations of employers was not paralleled by the growth of equally strong combinations in the field of labor. Despite the growing need for organization, the rank and file remained nonunionized. Too often the many

unions that existed worked at counterpurposes, defeating the long-range interests of the workers. Their only salvation seemed to lie in the unity and solidarity of a common front; and none realized this better than Governor Altgeld of Illinois, who sympathized profoundly with the cause of labor. In the fall of 1893 he admonished the workers that in the fierce struggle for existence labor could defend its interests only through unity of purpose. He deplored the fact that labor was still largely a scattered force. With emphasis he declared:

This is an age of concentration. Everywhere there is concentration and combination of capital and of those factors which today rule the world. . . . The world gives only when it is obliged to, and respects only those who compel its respect. . . . Let all men of America who toil with their hands once stand together and no more complaints will be heard about unfair treatment.³¹

What Altgeld urged and what Eugene Debs and other labor leaders believed to be a necessity³² loomed on the horizon as a dread specter to the industrialists. What they must have discussed in their inner chambers about the labor menace and the growing class consciousness of the workers has never been fully recorded, but it can hardly be denied that they were apprehensive and fearful about the trends of the times.

Some of these fears were enlarged upon in the summer of 1894 by the editor of the *Railway Age*, Harvey P. Robinson, who was closely in touch with the sentiment of railroad executives. Though he made his observations at the close of the Pullman Strike, in retrospect they shed light on the attitude of some of the corporation executives during the early part of 1894. The editor pointed out that those who were conversant with the objectives of labor had foreseen the gathering storms of industrial conflict. The plans of labor, he affirmed, have "accomplished nothing less than a general industrial rebellion, through which, by force of numbers, the labor organizations of the country proposed to obtain control of the legislative machinery of this government." The chief obstacle to the realization of this goal, it was explained, had been lack of unity, but this difficulty was gradually being overcome. The rise of the American Railway Union was cited as a part of the program to absorb all railroad workers in a