

# The Pullman Strike of 1894

George Pullman made a fortune by constructing luxury sleeping cars for the railroads as they quickly spanned the country in the post-Civil War era. Like many scientifically-minded men of his generation, he was certain that he could apply his business management skills to social problems as well. In 1880 he began the construction of the company town of Pullman, Illinois, built on vacant land just outside of Chicago to house the employees and works of Pullman's Palace Car Company. This was to be a "model town" in which all the benefits of urban life would flourish while all its ills would be resolutely excluded. The town was conceived as a place that would be good for workers, providing them with clean, modern, well-regulated housing and amenities such as churches and a library. Of course, such provisions would ultimately benefit George Pullman, as a healthy and loyal work force would be more productive, less likely to unionize, and less likely to complain if wages were lower than at competitors' factories. Thus, Pullman's town was meant to show that the interests of labor and management were really one and the same, and that responsible capitalists could solve some of the pressing social problems created by capitalism itself.

For a time, the town and the company were quite successful. During the World's Columbian Exposition, which opened in Chicago in 1893, over 10,000 tourists visited Pullman to admire its architecture and prescient social planning. But the economic depression that hit the United States in the summer and fall of that year was especially hard on Pullman's Palace Car Company, and, by 1894, the company had laid off two-thirds of its workforce and severely cut wages for those remaining. Employees complained that the company did not, however, lower rents in the tenements and houses in which they lived.

In early 1894, the workforce at Pullman was organized by the American Railway Union (ARU), which was under the leadership of Eugene Debs. The ARU was a national industrial union with about 150,000 members who came from all crafts in railroading. Under its leadership, the Pullman workers attempted to negotiate with managers to gain higher wages or lower rents. When management refused to negotiate or submit the dispute to arbitration, the workers struck on May 11. One month later, the ARU voted to support them with a national boycott of Pullman cars. Railroad workers refused to move any train that had a Pullman car attached to it, and railroad managers refused to uncouple the regular complements of Pullman sleepers from the trains. Since the strike was based in Chicago, the single most important rail junction in the country, the boycott had dramatic effects

all across the nation. Foodstuffs, raw materials, and manufactured goods of all kinds simply ceased to move around the country as train traffic backed up through the lines. Sabotage was also a factor, as tracks and switches were damaged and cars were burned.

The management side in the struggle was represented by the General Managers' Association (GMA), a "voluntary and unincorporated association" formed by twenty-four Chicago-based railroads. The GMA asked the United States Attorney General in Chicago to request a federal court injunction against the strike on the grounds that it violated the Sherman Anti-Trust Act (which was often used against unions) and that the strikers were interfering with the delivery of the U.S. mail. The strikers had offered to make up and operate mail trains without Pullman cars attached, but the railroads refused. The injunction was granted on July 2. Its terms placed a blanket restriction on all actions that could impede the movement of trains and mail and prohibited the officers of the ARU from directing the boycott.

Without consulting Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld, who was reputed to be a friend to labor, President Cleveland ordered federal troops to Chicago to enforce the injunction. On July 4 and 5 the violence of the strikers and supporters reached its height as they clashed with the soldiers and attacked railroad property. The soldiers responded with great force and, within a week, quelled the rioting and broke the strike. By mid-July trains were running more or less as before the strike, Eugene Debs and several other leaders of the strike were arrested for contempt, and those Pullman workers who were not blacklisted for playing leadership roles in the strike were rehired at their old wages, provided that they renounced membership in the ARU.

On 26 July 1894, President Grover Cleveland appointed a three-man commission to investigate the circumstances surrounding the strike. The commissioners interviewed leaders on both sides, reporters, city officials, and individual witnesses and issued an exhaustive final report. The primary sources for this lesson are drawn directly from the transcripts that make up the bulk of that report. In their final recommendations, the commission suggested that Congress pass a federal law requiring compulsory mediation in railway disputes, which was finally done in 1898. Thus we see that the Pullman strike was instrumental in pushing the federal government to begin taking a more impartial role in the battle between capital and labor,

where previously it had been noted for its strong support of business interests.

### Objectives

This lesson is suitable for American History students of varying abilities. At the conclusion of this lesson students should be able to: understand the motivations and actions of the various factions involved in the Pullman strike of 1894; evaluate the reliability of testimony and primary source evidence about the strike; draw conclusions and make judgments about the federal government's actions during the Pullman strike of 1894; and discuss the recurring issues of worker and management responsibility.

### Procedures

This lesson is a role-play in which students will re-examine the work of the original strike commission appointed by President Cleveland. Students will act as commissioners examining different groups involved in the strike, and, at the end of the lesson, the commission will vote on the following question: *Did the federal government behave properly in using force to end the Pullman strike?*

The teacher should explain the events of the strike to the class, and/or assign reading about it from the textbook being used by the class, and give the testimony from witnesses and participants as homework reading. In class, the students should be divided into groups according to their role: commissioners, workers, managers, and residents of Chicago.

Each group must prepare for a hearing: the commissioners must decide what they wish to ask each group, and each group must prepare an opening statement and anticipate and prepare for questions from the commission. The commissioners will run the hearing, taking an opening statement and then asking questions of each group in turn. They may, if they like, allow members of the different groups to cross-examine witnesses. The lesson ends with the vote of the student commission, but can be followed up by assigning the question to the entire class as an essay.

### Role Description Sheets for students

#### Members of the Commission

You will be the ones to make the final judgment on the question, based on the testimony that you gather. You must hear the opening statements of each group without interrupting, but you will then have time to ask any questions you like, of any member of the group. Remember that your mission is to evaluate the action of the United States government—and you need to be impartial in your investigation. After hearing all testimony, you will have a few minutes to deliberate before rendering your final evaluation.

#### George Pullman/The GMA

As the owner of the Pullman Corporation and the managers of twenty-four railroads that run through Chicago, you are expected to provide detailed information about the conditions that led up to the strike and about the chaos that resulted from the ARU walkout. You, of course, feel that the government was absolutely justified in its use

of force, but you need to convince the Commission members of that. You will need to emphasize the fact that the workers' demands were entirely unreasonable and that the strike posed a threat to public order and safety.

#### Pullman Workers/Eugene Debs/The ARU

You are perhaps the most important players in this drama, as you are the ones who created the entire crisis in the first place. Naturally, you feel that the Federal injunction and use of force were entirely unnecessary, since you feel you did nothing illegal. You simply refused to work under impossible conditions, and the ARU chose to support you in this refusal. To convince the Commission that your strike was justified and that the use of force was not, you will have to emphasize the difficulty of your plight and the orderliness of your protest.

#### The People of Chicago

You can provide a valuable point of view here, since you were presumably unbiased when the strike began. The Commission's final evaluation depends in part on your perception of the situation after the strike was declared. Was violence by the strikers serious and out of control? Were the strikers responsible for the violence that began in Chicago? How seriously were you hurt by the lack of rail service around the nation? Did you feel that the government troops were necessary at the time?

#### Select Bibliography

- Beebe, Ralph. *The Workers and Social Change: The Pullman Strike of 1894*. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1970.
- Buder, Stanley. *Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1903*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Ginger, Ray. *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1949.
- Leyendecker, Liston E. *Palace Car Prince: A Biography of George Mortimer Pullman*. Niwot, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 1992.
- Lindsey, Almont. *The Pullman Strike: The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942.
- Salvatore, Nick. *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- United States Strike Commission. *Report on the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895. Reprint, Clifton, New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972. □

---

*Jonathan Bassett teaches high school at Newton North High School in Massachusetts.*

# Pullman's Testimony Before the Strike Commission, 1894

*George Pullman, the owner of Pullman's Palace Car Company, testified before the commission that the economic situation in 1894 forced him to cut wages, and that he had, in fact, bid to make cars at a loss to keep men at work:*

During "the entire month of August [1893] we had not received an invitation to bid for any cars, and . . . during the months of September and October on more than one-half—quite a large proportion—a large majority of the bids that we put in for those months we failed to get the work. It was let to other parties because of lower prices.

I realized that some vigorous effort must be made to secure work for the large number of people that we had employed at Pullman, or great suffering would be the consequence. . . . [The managers] undertook, about November, to revise the piece-work prices and see how low we could make the cost of cars. Upon that basis I undertook [it] personally to attend the meetings and to contribute money in the way of bidding below the actual cost, for the sake of procuring orders. . . .

Up to the time of the strike, we had lost, I think, more than \$50,000 in the effort to keep our men at work. . . .

I explained it personally to the men in Mr. Wickes' office. . . . [They] said, 'we want the wages of 1893' . . . I said, 'It would be the most unfortunate thing for you, and for all the men here—all the men employed—if the wages of 1893 should be restored, because there is not more than six or eight weeks of work in the shops altogether, and it would be utterly impossible to get any more work at the prices measured by the wages of 1893, which were somewhere from 20 to 25 per cent higher than the wages of 1894,' and that I thought it would be most unfortunate for the men."

*When the commission asked Pullman why he did not keep wages up by using money from successful divisions of the company, he replied: "I would have no right to take the stockholder's money to give one set of mechanics a higher rate than the market price, or higher than we were paying other men—that is, to give them a contribution, as I understand you to say that if we had made profits, why, divide them. We can only divide profits in a corporation to its stockholders. The wages had been fixed between the managers at the shops and the men. They were to work at an agreed scale."*

Commissioner Worthington: "Had the men agreed to work at those reduced prices?"

Pullman: "They were working at them, yes sir."

Commissioner Worthington: "Well, they were forced to?"

Pullman: "No; they were not forced."

Commissioner Worthington: "They had to take that or quit?"

Pullman: "Exactly."

*In explaining why he refused to submit the dispute to arbitration, Pullman stated:*

"It must be clear to every business man, and to every thinking workman, that no prudent employer could submit to arbitration the question whether he should commit such a piece of business folly [as to give in to the workers' demands]. Arbitration always implies acquiescence in the decision of the arbitrator, whether favorable or averse. . . . Can I, as a business man, knowing the truth of the facts which I have stated, bind myself that I will, in any contingency, open and operate the Pullman car shops at whatever loss, if it should happen to be the opinion of some third party that I should do so? The answer seems plain."

# Two Different Cities: Chicago, 1893 and 1894

Joseph H. Kirkland and Caroline Kirkland, *The Story of Chicago* (1894)



Chicago, 1893: The Columbian Exposition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the Americas, brought record crowds to the city, which at the time was *the* hub for transcontinental train travel.

John Swinton, *Striking for Life: Labor's Side of the Labor Question* (1894)



Chicago, 1894: The results of the Pullman Strike were devastating as evidenced here by traincars destroyed by rioters.

# Financial Information about Pullman's Palace Car Company

Annual Statement of Pullman's Palace Car Company for the fiscal year ending 31 July 1894 [abridged]:

Total Revenue:	\$9,595,067.15
Total Disbursements:	\$7,274,650.25
Surplus:	\$2,320,416.90

Statements showing earnings of shop workmen at the Pullman Car Works:

APRIL 1893

	<u>#of men</u>	<u>total hours</u>	<u>\$ earned</u>	<u>10 hour average</u>
mechanics	2,625	592,159	\$155,861	\$2.63
others	1,808	418,790	\$69,720	\$1.66

APRIL 1894

	<u>#of men</u>	<u>total hours</u>	<u>\$ earned</u>	<u>10 hour average</u>
mechanics	1,950	384,892	\$78,306	\$2.03
others	1,311	275,278	\$40,602	\$1.47

*The workers at Pullman felt that their wages should have remained at their old levels, especially since Pullman was a company town and the company that cut their wages did not cut their rent, grocery bills, or other expenses. This testimony from Jennie Curtis gives her reason for striking:*

"My father worked for the Pullman company for thirteen years. He died last September, and I paid the rent to the Pullman company up to the time he died; I was boarding at the time of my father's death. He being laid off and sick for three months, owed the Pullman company \$60 at the time of his death for back rent, and the company made me, out of my small earnings, pay that rent due from my father. . . .

The contract was that I should pay \$3 on the back rent every pay day; out of my small earnings I could not give them \$3 every pay day, and when I did not do so I was insulted and almost put out of the bank by the clerk for not being able to pay it to them. My wages were cut so low that I could not pay my board and give them \$3 on the back rent, but if I had \$2 or so over my board I would leave it at the bank on the rent. On the day of the strike I still owed them \$15, which I am afraid they never will give me a chance to pay back."

Theodore Rhodie, a painter, explained why he struck:

". . . for work that I got \$9 per hundred last fall I only got \$4.25 at the time we struck. They kept cutting me down from last fall on the same kind of work and on the same amount of work [until] we could not make \$1.25 per day out of it; I told the foreman it was impossible to make anything at it, and he said if I didn't like it I could quit. There was also many other things which led us to strike—the abuse, and I owe them for rent and I could not pay it, and I was in debt to my grocery-man, to my butcher, and so on all along the line, and it was impossible for any of us to make a living."

# Additional Testimony, 1894

*The management of Pullman and the affected railroad lines argued that the strikers, by refusing to move any train with Pullman cars on it, were obstructing the United States mail (which was in those days carried on trains). The managers also felt that the strikers had resorted to violence to stop their business unfairly and deprive them of the right to make a profit. On July 2, they obtained a Federal Court injunction ordering the strikers to stop interfering with the business of the railroads. To continue the strike after that point was to be in contempt of court and in violation of the law.*

*In the following testimony, a Railroad Official describes what he saw at the Blue Island (Illinois) station.*

*“June 30—At 7 o’clock AM all switching crews and a number of switch tenders, yard clerks, flagmen, tower men, and round-house men left their work or failed to report for duty.*

*At 7 AM suburban train No. 110 was prevented from leaving Blue Island by a crowd of strikers and sympathizers, who threatened conductor. They also threw a switch in advance of train and spiked it to side track. Train succeeded in getting out about 7:20. . . .*

*Train No. 19 (Kansas City and St. Paul train) was started from Chicago at 5:30 p.m., not being able to get engine and crew before that time on account of mob at Forty-seventh street throwing switches and preventing engines from getting from shops to depot. This train was derailed at Blue Island by striking switchmen throwing switch under forward truck of engine, completely blocking both main line tracks. . . .*

*Train No. 11 (Fort Worth and Denver express), which left Chicago at 6 o’clock p.m., was stopped at Blue Island on account of No. 19 being off track ahead, and by strikers cutting off engine and fireman leaving his post. . . .*

*July 1—No freight handled into or out of Chicago or Blue Island and no suburban trains run. . . . No attempt was made to get trains out of Chicago. . . the force of deputy marshals and sheriffs on duty not being sufficient to cope with the mob.*

*July 3—No attempt made to move trains. . . .*

*On this date tracks between Blue Island and Chicago were obstructed at various points by cars being turned over and derailed.”*

\*\*\*

*The July 3 Chicago Tribune reported one reaction to a public reading of the injunction against the strikers:*

*“The rioters howled defiance at the Marshall and his deputies and promptly violated the injunction by throwing a box car across the tracks and stopping all traffic for the night.”*

*The strike was having significant economic effects across the country, as foodstuffs and other products were not able to be shipped to major east coast cities. But the strikers themselves and their sympathizers claimed that any violent acts were committed by young boys and criminals who were simply looking to cause trouble.*

*Eugene Debs made the following appeal to the strikers on July 10th:*

*“To all Striking Employees and Sympathizers: In view of the serious phases which the strike has assumed, I deem it my duty to again admonish you to not only refrain from acts of violence but to aid in every way in your power in maintaining law and order. We have everything to lose and nothing to gain by participating, even to the extent of our presence, in demonstrative gatherings. Almost universal unrest prevails. Men are excitable and inflammable. The distance from anger to vengeance is not great. Every precaution against still further aggravating conditions should be taken. In this supreme hour, let workingmen show themselves to be orderly and law abiding by freely cooperating with the authorities in suppressing turbulence and preserving the peace.”*

\*\*\*

*There were a number of fires set to railroad property, mostly box-cars, and riots were reported. John Fitzgerald, a member of the Chicago Fire Department responsible for protecting Railroad property, described what he saw of the burning of railroad cars:*

*Commissioner Kernan: “What did you discover, if anything, as to the causes of the fire?”*

*Fitzgerald: “Well, when we got there, the cars were burning, but I saw some youngsters setting fire to cars.”*

*Commissioner Kernan: “Did you see any of the youngsters doing it?”*

*Fitzgerald: “The oldest one I saw doing it was a boy about 19 years old, and a lot of women and children kind of urging him. I don’t know how many big ones there were, but I know that I got throwed in the ditch when I tried to stop them.”*

*Commissioner Kernan: “Did you have an acquaintance with railroad men employed in that vicinity?”*

*Fitzgerald: “A great many of them; yes, sir.”*

*Commissioner Kernan: “Did you see any of them engaged in anyway in connection with these fires, either in encouraging the boys in setting fire to them or aiding in preventing their extinguishing?”*

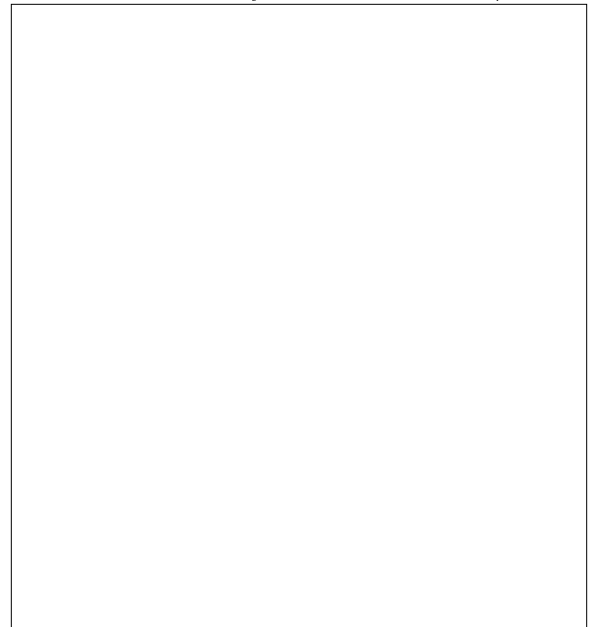
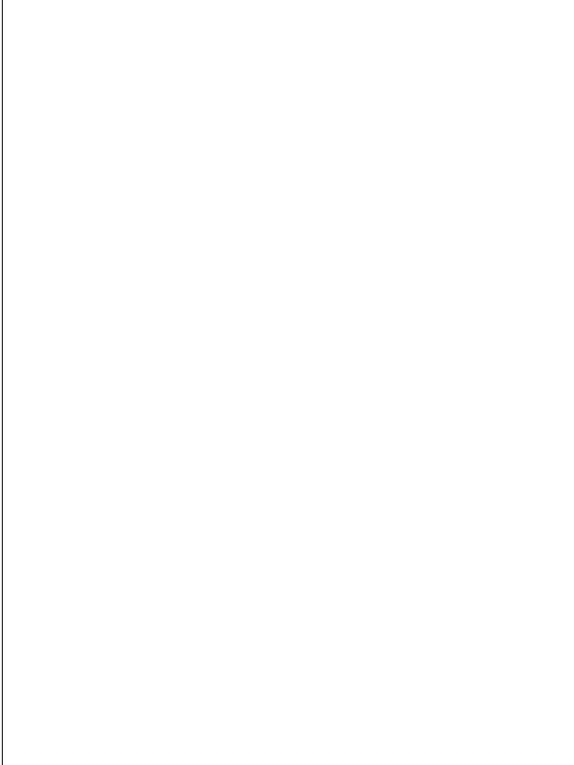
*Fitzgerald: “No, sir; I did not.”*

# Personalities

## Eugene V. Debs

Debs (1855-1926), originally from Terre Haute, Indiana, helped organize a local chapter of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen at the age of 20. Nearly two decades later, the members of the American Railway Union elected Debs president. In 1894, Debs helped lead the strike against Pullman, earning him six months in jail. While in jail, Debs read numerous socialist critiques of capitalism, and, between 1898 and 1901, organized the Socialist Party of America. Debs ran for president several times, and President Woodrow Wilson, seeing Debs as a threat, imprisoned him during World War I. President Warren G. Harding released Debs in 1921.

Theodore Calvin Pease, *The Story of Illinois* (1925)



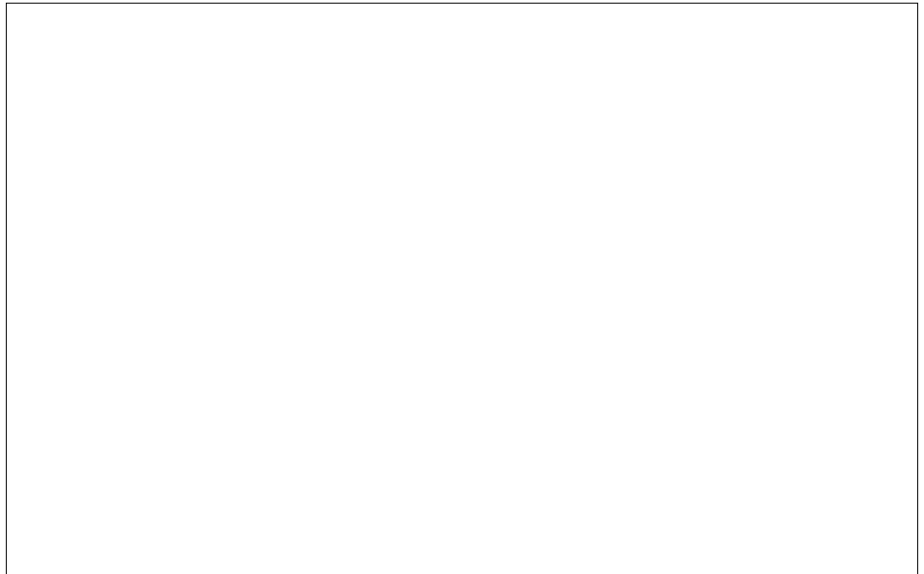
## John P. Altgeld

Altgeld (1847-1902), was born in Prussia. After immigrating to Ohio as a child, Altgeld left for Chicago in the 1870 and successfully pursued a career in real estate. In the 1880s, Altgeld, with an overwhelming concern for the poor, entered politics as a Democrat. In 1892, Illinois elected him governor. Altgeld gained fame and infamy when he pardoned several anarchists who had been convicted of conspiracy to set off a bomb in the Haymarket Square in 1886 during a labor protest. In 1894, Altgeld, after refusing to call out the militia to put down the Pullman Strike, denounced President Grover Cleveland's use of federal troops. Illinois failed to reelect him in 1896. Altgeld then practiced law with Clarence Darrow.

## Stephen Grover Cleveland

Cleveland (1837-1908), a man of extreme integrity and stubborn convictions, rose quickly in politics. Though virtually unknown in 1880, Cleveland served as mayor of Buffalo from 1881-1882 and governor of New York from 1882-1884. In 1884, 1888, and 1892, the American people gave Cleveland their popular support as president. Cleveland, however, failed to gain favor with the electoral college in 1888 and remains the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms (1885-1889 and 1893-1897). America entered into a depression in 1893, and Cleveland tried many things to increase confidence in the economy. One of his efforts was to send federal troops to stop the Pullman Strike in Chicago. Cleveland, pictured on the extreme left, sits here with his second administration.

George F. Parker, *Recollections of Grover Cleveland* (1909)



All sources for this page come from *Britannica Online*: [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com):190

# President Cleveland vs. Governor Altgeld

*Illinois Governor John P. Altgeld believed that President Cleveland had overstepped his powers in ordering federal troops to Chicago. He sent the President a series of telegrams, one of which is excerpted below:*

5 July 1894

Hon. Grover Cleveland, President of the United States, Washington D.C.

Sir: I am advised that you have ordered Federal troops to go into service in the state of Illinois. Surely the facts have not been correctly presented to you in this case, or you would not have taken this step, for it is entirely unnecessary, and, as it seems to me, unjustifiable. . . . At present some of our railroads are paralyzed, not by reason of obstruction, but because they cannot get men to operate their trains. For some reason they are anxious to keep this fact from the public, and for this purpose they are making an outcry about obstruction in order to divert attention.

*To which President Cleveland replied:*

5 July 1894

Hon. John P. Altgeld, Governor of Illinois, Springfield, Ill.

Sir: Federal troops were sent to Chicago in strict accordance with the Constitution and laws of the United States, upon the demand of the post-office department that obstruction of the mails should be removed, and upon the representations of the judicial officers of the United States that the process of the Federal courts could not be executed through ordinary means, and upon competent proof that conspiracies existed against commerce between the States. . . .

---

## And, in the end. . .

*By the end of July, order had been restored. Debs and other leaders of the strike were under arrest, and trains were running more or less as normal. In their final assessment of the costs of the strike, the commission said:*

“According to the testimony the railroads lost . . . at least \$685,308. . . . Some 3,100 employees at Pullman lost in wages, as estimated, at least \$350,000. About 100,000 employees upon the 24 railroads centering at Chicago, all of which were more or less involved in the strike, lost in wages, as estimated, at least \$1,389,143. Many of these employees are still adrift and losing wages.

Beyond these amounts very great losses, widely distributed, were incidentally suffered throughout the country. The suspension of transportation at Chicago paralyzed a vast distributive center, and imposed many hardships and much loss upon the great number of people whose manufacturing and business operations, employment, travel, and necessary supplies depend upon and demand regular transportation service to, from, and through Chicago.

During the strike. . . fatalities were as follows:

Number shot and fatally wounded: 12.”