



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Articles and Chapters

ILR Collection

---

1999

## Introduction to *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890's*

Richard Schneirov  
*Indiana State University*

Shelton Stromquist  
*University of Iowa*

Nick Salvatore  
*Cornell University, nas4@cornell.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles>

 Part of the [Labor History Commons](#), and the [Unions Commons](#)

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

**Support this valuable resource today!**

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [catherwood-dig@cornell.edu](mailto:catherwood-dig@cornell.edu).

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact [web-accessibility@cornell.edu](mailto:web-accessibility@cornell.edu) for assistance.

---

## Introduction to *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890's*

### Abstract

The strike of Pullman carshop employees and the subsequent boycott that disrupted rail traffic throughout the territory west of Chicago in June-July 1894 marked the culmination of nearly two decades of the most severe and sustained labor conflict in American history. Yet until very recently little new scholarship has focused on the meaning of the Pullman strike and its historical context. By offering a close reading of contemporary perceptions of the strike and by examining the organizational and political continuities and discontinuities the Pullman conflict reveals, these essays resituate the strike in its historical context. They demonstrate that Pullman played an important role in defining the crisis of the 1890s, shaping a changing legal environment, spurring the development of a regulatory state, and fostering a new politics of progressive reform.

On September 23-24, 1994, more than two hundred scholars, students, educators, labor activists, and interested members of the public gathered at Indiana State University in Terre Haute to reconsider the Pullman strike in the light of new historical scholarship in labor history. The conference featured public addresses by the historians David Montgomery and Nick Salvatore and Jack Scheinckman, the president of the Amalgamated Textile Workers' Union (now UNITE—the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Employees). Scholars delivered thirty-six papers at thirteen sessions that focused on various dimensions of the strike and its meaning. This edited collection contains revised versions of key conference papers addressing the significance of the Pullman strike in its wider historical context.

### Keywords

Pullman Strike, labor movement, worker rights

### Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

### Comments

#### Suggested Citation

Schneirov, R., Stromquist, S., & Salvatore, N. (1999). *Introduction to [The Pullman Strike and the crisis of the 1890's]* [Electronic version]. Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, ILR School site: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/820/>

#### Required Publisher Statement

© [University of Illinois Press](#). Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. Final version published as: Salvatore, N. (1999). Introduction. In *The Pullman Strike and the crisis of the 1890's* (pp. 1-19). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

# The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890's

## Introduction

*Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore*

The strike of Pullman carshop employees and the subsequent boycott that disrupted rail traffic throughout the territory west of Chicago in June-July 1894 marked the culmination of nearly two decades of the most severe and sustained labor conflict in American history. Yet until very recently little new scholarship has focused on the meaning of the Pullman strike and its historical context. By offering a close reading of contemporary perceptions of the strike and by examining the organizational and political continuities and discontinuities the Pullman conflict reveals, these essays resituate the strike in its historical context. They demonstrate that Pullman played an important role in defining the crisis of the 1890s, shaping a changing legal environment, spurring the development of a regulatory state, and fostering a new politics of progressive reform.

On September 23-24, 1994, more than two hundred scholars, students, educators, labor activists, and interested members of the public gathered at Indiana State University in Terre Haute to reconsider the Pullman strike in the light of new historical scholarship in labor history. The conference featured public addresses by the historians David Montgomery and Nick Salvatore and Jack Scheinckman, the president of the Amalgamated Textile Workers' Union (now UNITE—the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Employees). Scholars delivered thirty-six papers at thirteen sessions that focused on various dimensions of the strike and its meaning. This edited collection contains revised versions of key conference papers addressing the significance of the Pullman strike in its wider historical context.

### **The Crisis of the 1890's**

The Pullman strike was a central event in a broader "crisis of the 1890s," which scholars continue to regard as one of the important watersheds in American history<sup>1</sup>. The events of that decade had their roots in the Gilded Age, a period of accelerating and bewildering change as a northern agrarian society, composed largely of independent proprietors living in loosely connected small towns and rural areas, decisively entered the urban-industrial age, in which the majority were wage earners<sup>2</sup>. During this period small to middling family farms and shops producing for regional markets became integrated into national and world markets, subjecting farmers and small manufacturers to periodic gluts, price swings, and the dictates of railroads, Wall Street bankers, and the country merchants. In the old South a rural social structure dominated by large landowners strengthened its hold over newly freed slaves and reduced many white independent proprietors to the position of debt-ridden tenants and permanent laborers.

Even as the number of acres under cultivation doubled, for most Americans urbanization, industrialization, and immigration constituted the most compelling and remarkable drama of the time. The number of urban places increased from 400 at the start of the Civil War to some 1,737 at the end of the century, and the percentage of Americans living in cities almost doubled, from 19.8 to 39.1. The vast majority of urban residents worked for wages, but the nature of industrial wage work was changing. Although mass production technology was not yet dominant, many craftworkers found their autonomy, traditional skills, and working conditions threatened by the reorganization of work processes, mechanization, and new forms of business organization, though many other workers were able to parlay old knowledge into new skills that allowed them to survive and prosper in the new industrial workplace.

Increasing numbers of workers, especially the bulk of operatives, helpers, and laborers, worked in large impersonal factories run by regional and national firms. By 1890, 3,000 large firms employed 125,000 of Chicago's 360,000 wage earners. Sixty-six of these firms, each averaging over 500 employees, gave employment to approximately 75,000 of these workers. Meanwhile, the continuing influx—dating from midcentury—of immigrants from Germany, Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia made nonnative heritages and ethnic diversity distinctive features of the country's urban working class<sup>3</sup>.

Traditionally historians of Gilded Age politics have stressed the way that political machines won elections by engaging in corrupt practices while avoiding "the real" issues of industrial abuses. The "new political historians" of the 1970s, however, argued that conflicts among ethnic and religious groups defined voter loyalties and that such cultural issues as temperance mobilized party faithful. Recent work by political and labor historians has seriously undermined older characterizations of Gilded Age politics and has complicated the ethnocultural thesis. Historians now recognize that Gilded Age parties and the municipal and state governments they controlled, as well as nonpartisan reformers of both sexes, dealt substantively with such economic issues as the tariff, the currency question, and the curtailment of child labor and fought for the establishment of compulsory education and reform of the civil service. Corruption, it appears, was exaggerated, and state and municipal governments achieved significant structural reforms and expanded administrative apparatuses<sup>4</sup>.

Further evidence of the dynamism and importance of Gilded Age politics lies in the fact that large minorities of Americans, especially in the South and West and urban areas, expressed grave concerns that the social basis of a producers' republic was endangered by the appearance of railroad corporations, industrial and commercial "monopolies," ubiquitous urban poverty amidst new riches, mass violence during strikes, and urban mores, such as heavy drinking, that seemed to mock the work ethic. The constitution of the Knights of Labor referred with moral indignation to "the alarming concentration of wealth." Women temperance reformers crusaded against "demon rum." Even before the Populist Omaha platform of 1892 propelled the farmer alliances into politics, political unrest had generated a number of third parties, including the Greenback-Labor, United Labor, Prohibition, and a variety of rural antimonopoly parties that had considerable success at the state and local levels<sup>5</sup>.

The crisis of the 1890s appeared as the culmination of a quarter of a century of volatile socioeconomic development and growing social and political unrest. The crisis was triggered by the financial panic of 1893, which became a full-blown depression lasting five years. Unregulated market competition produced a surplus capacity in plant and equipment and endemic overproduction. The economy responded with falling prices and wages, a wave of bankruptcies, and a rate of profit below the level necessary for the reproduction of capital. The depression precipitated a national political crisis by undermining the ways party leaders had managed and contained the new issues and unrest of the previous two decades. The crash of July 1893 found a Democrat, Grover Cleveland, in the White House. Elected less than a year earlier at the head of a precarious coalition composed of regional, class, and ethnoreligious elements, Cleveland responded to the depression in ways that greatly energized the simmering insurgencies of southern and western farmers and urban workers, groups that threatened to bolt the Democratic party in favor of the newly minted People's (Populist) party<sup>6</sup>.

Cleveland tried to restore business confidence, which banking and commercial leaders told him meant maintaining gold as the basis for international exchange. That in turn required repealing the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, a piece of legislation that had barely satisfied agrarian advocates of a bimetallic currency. Cleveland's well-orchestrated repeal only exacerbated currency deflation, deepened the depression, and outraged Democratic farmers, many of whom believed that the demonetization of silver in 1873 had caused their troubles.

The 1890s crisis also had an important labor dimension. In business downturns in 1873-79 and 1883-85 industrial employers had reacted to cutthroat competition and overproduction by increasing their scale of production, concentrating capital, and joining cartels and vertical and horizontal

combinations to regulate production, prices, and investment so they could cut costs and restore profitability. When industrial employers cut labor costs, they often undermined the viability of existing bargains made with craft unions. In response skilled workers during the "great upheaval" of the mid-1880s began to ally with lesser skilled laborers and operatives in more broadly based, inclusive organizations, notably the Knights of Labor. Workers of different skills, races, nationalities, and sexes also adopted more militant and effective forms of collective action, such as the boycott and sympathy strike, and turned en masse to the movement for the eight-hour day. Though durable trade agreements had a precarious existence in the late nineteenth century, the aftermath of the great upheaval witnessed the first experiments by organized workers and employers to regulate and stabilize markets by taking wages out of competition<sup>7</sup>.

The Pullman strike of 1894 culminated almost a decade of labor unrest punctuated by episodes of spectacular violence, such as the Haymarket tragedy of 1886. The first three years of the 1890s witnessed the strike of Homestead Steel workers against the Carnegie Corporation, the miners' strikes in the coal mining regions of the East and hardrock states in the West, a longshoremen's strike in New Orleans that united black and white workers, and numerous railroad strikes. Particularly on the railroads both capital and labor experimented organizationally in regulating market conditions. The nation's railroads established patterns of management cooperation in labor matters through the tightly disciplined General Managers' Association (GMA), capable of directing the interests of the major transcontinental lines in a period of labor crisis. In the meantime railroad workers searched for the means to unify the disparate crafts. Despite resistance among craft brotherhood leaders, railroad workers joined the Knights of Labor in large numbers in the 1880s, and by 1893 many embraced the American Railway Union (ARU), a fledgling industrial union capable of challenging the GMA<sup>8</sup>.

The Pullman strike and its crushing defeat through intervention by the federal judiciary and the U.S. Army greatly exacerbated President Cleveland's political difficulties. Urban working-class constituents of the Democratic party joined southern and western farmers in their outrage and sense of betrayal at the hands of the Cleveland administration. In addition the strike coming amidst mounting unemployment—dramatized by the march on Washington of Coxey's Army—raised new fears among the nation's upper classes that a revolution of the dispossessed was at hand. The off-year elections of 1894 registered this discontent in a resounding Democratic defeat and set in motion an electoral realignment that reshaped the nation's party system by the end of the decade. In the aftermath of the Pullman strike rural-based Populists and segments of the labor movement sympathetic to the ARU hoped to create a labor-Populist alliance that might counter the growing power of monopolies, bankers, and industrialists. To their dismay significant numbers of urban workers instead switched from the Democratic to the Republican party. Republican William McKinley's 1896 victory over William Jennings Bryan, the neo-Populist candidate of the Democratic party, cemented the transition from the third-party system to the fourth-party system and secured national Republican party dominance through 1928.

The new Republican-dominated party system created the political climate for a resolution of the social and economic crisis of the 1890s. The decline of two-party competitiveness in different regions and a consequent decrease in the high levels of voter turnout that had characterized Gilded Age politics limited the political system's ability to register discontent. This was especially so in the South, where the defeat of the People's party and the legal disfranchisement of black voters eliminated any alternative to the Democratic party, the self-described "party of the white man." National turnout levels fell continuously from the high 70-80 percent range in the 1890s to a low of 49 percent in the 1924 presidential election. Strong parties with voter loyalties defined by ethnoreligious ties gradually gave way to weak parties; issue-oriented, nonpartisan progressive politics; and interest group lobbying in a greatly expanded regulatory state<sup>9</sup>.

A dramatic corporate merger wave between 1896 and 1904 that accompanied these changes extended corporate business organization beyond the railroads and restructured the nation's

manufacturing economy that had earlier been under proprietary ownership. Republican ascendancy allowed for the progressive legitimization of the corporation in law and its regulation by federal commissions affiliated with the executive branch, developments that by the Woodrow Wilson administration suggested an accommodation between big business and the country's democratic and liberal traditions. The triumph of a new corporate economy created the "seedbed of a new social and economic order." The new corporations' growing ability to centralize investment decisions, regulate production, and manage the demand for its products greatly restricted the cutthroat competition and the length and severity of the crises of overproduction that had characterized the late nineteenth century<sup>10</sup>.

Corporations had proved themselves capable of brutally crushing unions, as they had done at Pullman, when they deemed labor organization incompatible with their fundamental interests. But the Pullman strike proved to be an important moment in the development of new thinking on the relations between labor and capital. The efforts of the Civic Federation of Chicago to mediate the conflict, the critical appraisal of the strike by the U.S. Strike Commission, and Attorney General Richard Olney's new thinking on labor relations, despite his prosecution of the ARU strike leaders, signified acceptance by some corporate leaders and their reform allies of the need to recognize responsible unions of their employees. The Erdman Act of 1898 codified provisions that promised an expanded role for government and an era of labor peace on the railroads. The formation of the National Civic Federation in 1899 created a new institutional framework for enlisting the nation's largest corporations in a program designed to ensure stability in labor relations. These developments prefigured further expansion of efforts to legislate labor peace that would culminate in the path-breaking labor legislation of the 1930s. The Pullman strike of 1894, then, stands at the intersection of formative developments that have determined the shape of labor relations in twentieth-century American society<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Pullman Strike and Boycott**

The significance of the Pullman strike lies not only in the larger patterns of labor conflict and national crisis it revealed but also in the visibility of the town, the company and its founders, and the ways a local conflict grew into a strike of national proportions. In 1880 the pioneer manufacturer George M. Pullman constructed Pullman as a factory town south of Chicago<sup>12</sup>. The town was not simply a site for manufacturing railroad sleeping cars; it was also an experiment in urban living and social reform. In contrast to Chicago's unpaved, grimy streets, its paucity of public services, and its ubiquitous shacks and crowded tenements that served as wage workers' homes, Pullman town boasted clean, paved streets; pure air; beautiful parks and playgrounds; an indoor arcade containing retail stores, a theater, a bank, and a library; neat homes with indoor plumbing; and no saloons. By removing his workers from the city, Pullman hoped to insulate them from crime, intemperance, poverty, labor riots, and trade union-inspired strikes that mugwump reformers of the Gilded Age so deeply deplored.

Despite scattered labor unrest Pullman's experiment in planned living appeared to most observers a stunningly successful demonstration that philanthropy and reform could be a "paying proposition" and thus compatible with large-scale corporate enterprise. Its living conditions appeared particularly ideal for wives. Only a few observers commented on the coercive paternalism in the service of moral uplift and social harmony that lay at the core of Pullman's experiment. Pullman expected residents to live and shop in the town, but they could not buy their own homes and had no democratic self-government. Nevertheless, Pullman's shop employees engaged in a long battle over piece rates and through periodic strikes expressed resentment over arbitrary treatment from foremen.

The 1893 panic glaringly exposed the underside of the Pullman experiment. The industrial depression that would last five years forced the company to produce cars at a loss. In response Pullman reduced his work force, cut its wages on average by a third, and declined to reduce prices at his

company store or the rents on his homes. By December 1893 the *Chicago Times* reported that "great dissatisfaction and suffering prevails in Pullman."<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, to the north, Chicago was inundated with "tramps" and unemployed and homeless men, many of them building workers thrown out of work by the completion of the World's Columbian Exposition. Following a dreadful winter workers at Pullman, who had joined the ARU, decided to turn to their union for support.

Founded in 1893 by Eugene Victor Debs, an ex-official of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the ARU had grown out of the persistent efforts of railroad workers as far back as the great strikes of 1877 to find an organizational vehicle to achieve unity across skill lines and protect their pay and working conditions against the encroachments of railroad management. Mutual scabbing (strikebreaking) by members of the Knights of Labor and the craft brotherhoods during the mid-1880s (in strikes on the Gould railroads in 1885-86, the Reading Railroad in 1887, and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad in 1888) had continually stymied labor organization. Following defeat in the Burlington strike of 1888, the brotherhoods experimented with federations for several years, but eventually some brotherhood leaders and thousands of rank-and-file members turned to a new industrial union. The ARU sought to transcend divisiveness by enrolling railroad operatives, laborers, and skilled craftworkers of all trades in a single organization.

The Pullman strike originated in the aftermath of the electrifying April 1893 victory of the ARU on the Great Northern Railroad. On May 10 a committee of Pullman workers presented a petition of grievances to the company; the next day three members of the committee were fired. The Pullman affiliate of the ARU called a strike at once.

At this early stage of the dispute Pullman workers won wide public support in their pursuit of an arbitrated settlement. The Civic Federation of Chicago and John P. Hopkins, the city's mayor, as well as an ARU delegation, attempted to mediate the dispute without success. Chicago's press disapproved of the company's intransigence. Referring to Pullman, the national Republican party leader Marcus Hanna exploded with exasperation, "A man who won't meet his men half-way is a God-damn fool."<sup>14</sup> But Pullman remained adamant. Just as important, the GMA saw the opportunity to crush the fledgling ARU before it reached maturity. When the union's first convention in June 1894 declared a boycott of all railroads using Pullman sleeping cars, the GMA appointed its own strike manager and resolved to discharge any railroad worker who participated in the boycott.

Despite significant scabbing by members of the craft brotherhoods, which prevented the strike from spreading east, the ARU boycott soon brought the nation's rail traffic to a virtual standstill from Chicago to the Pacific Coast. In response the GMA worked assiduously to federalize the conflict. U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, himself a railroad attorney, appointed Edwin Walker, a legal adviser to the GMA, as a special U.S. attorney for Chicago. Meanwhile, a series of minor riots and confrontations with the militia became the occasion for the press to decry a breakdown in law and order instigated by "dictator Debs." On July 1, six days after the start of the boycott, Walker applied for, and the following day received, a federal court injunction declaring the strike a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The next day, despite an absence of violence, Olney convinced President Grover Cleveland to dispatch federal troops to Chicago over the strenuous protests of John Peter Altgeld, the first pro-labor governor in Illinois.

The events of these few days represented a fateful turning point in the strike. The presence of federal troops, which permitted strikebreakers to be employed by the railroads, and the demoralizing effect of the injunction, which led to the arrest of Debs and other ARU leaders on contempt of court charges, combined to facilitate the movement of trains by July 9. The blatant partiality of the federal government outraged organized Chicago workers, and sentiment grew for a general strike in support of the ARU strikers. Although 25,000 local unionists eventually struck in sympathy, most of the labor movement held back while Samuel Gompers and other American Federation of Labor (AFL) leaders met at Briggs House in Chicago on July 12 to consider Debs's plea for a general strike. Mindful that the strike

was virtually defeated and fearful that a direct confrontation with the federal government would jeopardize the rest of the labor movement, Gompers and the AFL's executive council counseled against a sympathy strike. The strike remained strong in many western railroad centers, but in Chicago it was all but over. It took until August 2 for strikers in the West and the ARU to concede defeat.

A bitter Debs never forgave Gompers for failing to back the strike. After serving a six-month sentence in the Woodstock jail for contempt of court, Debs returned to the labor movement as a hero. Believing that economic action was insufficient to challenge corporate domination of the lives of its employees, Debs soon turned to independent politics. He became the most forceful spokesman for the new Socialist Party of America and between 1900 and 1920 served five times as its presidential candidate.

### **The Essays in Historiographical Context**

Despite the strike's centrality to the crisis of the 1890s it remains neglected as an object of historical study. Historians have looked at the strike in different ways. Those writing in the progressive-New Deal tradition portrayed it as a rebellion of rational and liberty-loving workers against the suffocating paternalism of Pullman's planned community. For progressives the strike represented the failure of the laissez-faire model of industrial capitalism, with its willingness to sacrifice workers' basic rights and welfare to the dictates of the unregulated market. Progressives championed institutional intervention in the market in the form of unions and an activist state<sup>15</sup>. By the 1950s and 1960s a new generation of historians portrayed late nineteenth-century episodes of working-class unrest, such as the Pullman boycott, as marginal to core themes in American history. Some emphasized a pre-capitalist consensus they believed Americans of all classes shared. Others stressed a continuing process of social and economic modernization<sup>16</sup>. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s historians working in the burgeoning field of "new" labor history pushed the boundaries of scholarship beyond the institutionalism that the progressives championed as an alternative to the market, and they compellingly challenged the older social science assumption that conflict was the exception to the rule in modern American society. Much of the new labor history has been social and cultural in nature, embedding the lives and organizations of workers in artisan traditions, in class and ethnic communities, and, more recently, in relations of race and gender<sup>17</sup>. Despite its accomplishments the new labor history has not produced a study of the Pullman strike comparable in scope to the 1942 monograph by the progressive historian Almont Lindsey. Moreover, the general failure of labor historians—with some notable exceptions—to address the complex relations between workers and the political system has led them to neglect investigating the Pullman strike in the context of the crisis of the 1890s.

The essays in this collection emphasize several themes central to recent developments in labor and political history. They examine continuities and changes in the bases of labor organization and strikes stretching back from Pullman and the ARU to the Knights of Labor and forward to the shopmen's strike of 1922. They suggest how gender identities shaped contemporary views of the strike and how new photographic technology was used to construct and contest the meaning of the strike. Contrary to influential recent studies by historians of labor and the law, an essay in this collection views the role of the federal judiciary as qualified and ambivalent rather than as uniformly anti-labor. Many of the essays challenge the notion that the course of the labor movement in this period was determined by the state independent of social and economic pressures<sup>18</sup>. To the contrary, the social crisis precipitated by the events of 1894 and afterward powerfully influenced labor legislation and the course of politics. Finally, as these essays demonstrate, the strike was a political event that became an arena in which the meaning and future of producerism were contested. Out of the maelstrom of controversy surrounding the Pullman strike new currents of liberal reform gained impetus, seeking at once to revitalize democracy and promote the corporate reconstruction of American society.



In the first essay of the volume, "Dress Rehearsal for Pullman: The Knights of Labor and the 1890 New York Central Strike," Robert E. Weir offers an extended narrative account of the Knights-led New York Central strike in 1890 that bore "an uncanny resemblance" to the subsequent Pullman strike. The Knight's Grand Master Workman Terence V. Powderly, like Debs four years later, actively discouraged the strike but was forced by a rebellious rank and file to lend his support and authority to the walkout. Once it was undertaken, the strike was hobbled by persistent conflict with the railroad brotherhoods. Moreover, both organizations failed to enlist broader federations of workers in sympathetic strike actions that would have afforded critical support. Ironically, it was Debs himself who influenced the Supreme Council of the United Order of Railroad Employees to reject a sympathy strike in 1890, just as Gompers would later do in 1894. Both strikes faced a formidable array of opponents that included a hostile judiciary as well as the combined opposition from railroad capital. Ultimately, the New York Central strike tolled the death knell of the Knights of Labor, just as Pullman did for the ARU.

Susan E. Hirsch in "The Search for Unity among Railroad Workers: The Pullman Strike in Perspective" has also utilized comparison to illuminate the Pullman strike. But, unlike Weir, she looks ahead from 1894 to the 1922 shop craftworkers' strike and compares labor relations in Chicago with those in Wilmington, Delaware. Hirsch shows that Pullman strikers drew significant support from the community, both within Pullman and in nearby Chicago. But where such local solidarity did not exist, as at the Wilmington carshops and many eastern railroad centers, effective strike action did not materialize. By 1922 community support was less important to the success of strikes. Nationalizing forces, notably the intervention of the federal government beginning with the Erdman Act and intensifying during World War I, created new conditions for solidarity that transcended local class cultures and fueled the shopmen's strike. Yet, just as in 1894, weakened by the lack of solidarity from other segments of organized labor, the strikers succumbed to a federal injunction. Hirsch's conclusions return students of Pullman to a pervasive theme in this collection: the paramount importance of government and politics in any examination of the labor movement.

In "A Modern Lear and His Daughters: Gender in the Model Town of Pullman" Janice L. Reiff explores the town of Pullman as gendered territory. Reiff shows that the older progressive view that Pullman's paternalism undermined the independence—what was then termed "the manhood"—of his employees did not go far enough. A different kind of paternalism—men of all classes over women and children—also existed but was never criticized by progressive reformers. Indeed, as Reiff points out, contemporary American manhood required the subordination of women and children and created among workers and reformers a profound ambivalence toward life in Pullman. On the one hand, Pullman's shopmen chafed at the company's low wages that prevented them from supporting their wives at home; on the other hand, many approved of the way Pullman's paternalism in the town reinforced a Victorian family lifestyle. Reiff shows that the boundary between these two forms of paternalism was often porous, especially when the company intervened in family life over the heads of male heads of household.

Once the strike was proclaimed, Pullman seemed to have abandoned both kinds of paternalism. He not only did not care for his workers but also appeared to have abandoned the women and children of his town to destitution. Public opinion swung to the side of the strikers. Eventually, however, the Pullman women's active role in the strike belied their public image as helpless victims. After assaulting strikebreakers, they were tagged as "amazons," thereby forfeiting public sympathy. Meanwhile, Pullman's attempt to succor needy families and strikers' actions in keeping these families from crossing picket lines also undermined the formerly strong public support the strike had received. Reiff's

demonstration of the power of gendered discourse and the grip of the family wage in Pullman makes it clear that gender must occupy a central place in any reinterpretation of the Pullman strike.

Larry Peterson's essay, "Photography and the Pullman Strike: Remolding Perceptions of Labor Conflict by New Visual Communication," shows the Pullman strike was the culmination of an extended, profound crisis in the representation of the labor question. According to Peterson the pictorial record of the strike reveals a "crisis of representation" that derived from labor's new power and, coincidentally, precipitous advances in visual technology and artistry. In the 1880s and 1890s images of labor and capital had been influenced by styles of visual representation developed in new print media illustrations and popular stereopticon photographs. These stylized, often classical constructions arose from a process of deliberate selection and choice. The 1890s witnessed rapid technological changes that afforded greater spontaneity and opened new possibilities for creating images that embodied underlying patterns of class conflict. The flood of images from the strike, while still largely avoiding the actual moments of conflagration, reveals a medium capable of providing labor and its grievances new visibility.

The progressive settlement house reformer Jane Addams became one of the most fascinating and significant figures connected with the Pullman strike. In the early stages of the strike Addams sought to mediate. Victoria Brown in "Advocate for Democracy: Jane Addams and the Pullman Strike" shows how Addams tried to "carve out her own unique stance toward the Pullman strike in particular and the 'labor question' in general." Unlike previous historians who have viewed Addams as a timid and temporizing member of the middle class, Brown portrays Addams as a woman who developed a mature philosophical and political position grounded in, but transcending, her experience as a woman. Addams's distinctive contribution came in her article "A Modern Lear," which compared George Pullman with Shakespeare's King Lear and likened embattled labor to his daughter Cordelia. Addams argued that employers' refusal to recognize their employees' autonomy led to tragedy for all. Her goal was not for the rebels to win but for the larger interest of the industrial family to prevail.

Legal historians debate whether society or the law itself was the primary agent in structuring the rules by which business was regulated and the interests of workers and their employers adjudicated in the nineteenth century. Melvyn Dubofsky in his essay entitled "The Federal Judiciary, Free Labor, and Equal Rights" argues that the current fashion that sees an autonomous legal culture as determinative—a discourse that "creates" social reality—fails to account for the extent to which the law and the courts "echoed beliefs and values that resonated through broader spheres of popular culture." He offers an alternative, "mixed" narrative of labor and the law in the late nineteenth century that accords partial autonomy to the law and simultaneously sees it reflecting a broader cultural tension between individual and group interests. Victorian legal principles upheld a stark individualism that left little space for the collective action of workers. Those principles were nurtured by post-Civil War free labor ideas, popular social Darwinism, and a tradition of "civic republicanism" that enjoyed wide currency. The Victorian commitment to individualism and the free market was challenged by an alternative set of principles woven into the practice of trade unions, articulated by academic social scientists, and made palpable by the "rising intensity of class conflict." A new legal discourse emerged that rejected the unfettered rule of the market and justified group rights and collective action by labor as well as capital. Out of the turmoil of Pullman and the labor conflicts of the 1890s a new legal discourse appeared that accorded collective bargaining some legitimacy, set new standards of fairness for employment, and rationalized a more interventionist role for the state in the relations between railroad labor and capital. This new discourse was evident in the final report of the U.S. Strike Commission, in Richard Olney's rethinking of the proper relations between labor and capital, in the Erdman Act, and in the reports of the U.S. Industrial Commission.

The idea that Pullman should be understood in the context of the emergence of a "new liberalism" is developed by both Shelton Stromquist and Richard Schneirov. In "The Crisis of 1894 and the Legacies of Producerism" Stromquist sees a series of developments, not least the Pullman strike,

which promoted and then shattered an impressive producers' alliance based on the industrial unionism of railroad men, coal miners, and workers in other industrial sectors of the economy. The failure of the AFL to endorse the call for a general strike in support of the Pullman boycott and the federation's reaction to the producerist agenda in the debate over its political program suggest the extent to which developments surrounding the strike altered the political landscape. New reform alliances claiming a share of the producerist legacy surfaced to challenge the republican patrimony of the ARU and its collectivist supporters. Conservative trade unionists rode the crest of the crisis uneasily, neither disavowing their own producerism nor affirming the radicals' program. At crucial moments— the Briggs House conference, the Congress on Industrial Conciliation, and the AFL convention itself—the trade unionists put forward an alternative agenda and cultivated new allies. Among those whose support they sought was a diverse coalition of social reformers, mesmerized by a vision of social harmony, and reform-minded business leaders and professionals who promoted the federation of civic interests. This new liberal politics, which "used a discourse of social harmony to marginalize class-based ideologies," nonetheless found pragmatic support among trade unionists anxious to weather the storms of economic depression. Its most zealous advocates, however, were a new generation of progressive reformers whose contributions lay largely in the future.

That future is the topic of Richard Schneirov's essay, "Labor and the New Liberalism in the Wake of the Pullman Strike." Schneirov shows how Chicago was a laboratory where progressive reformers engaged in organizational and political experimentation. In doing so he challenges the emerging narrative adopted by many labor historians who view the defeat of the Pullman strike and the labor-Populist alliance as tragically foreclosing a more emancipatory set of possibilities in twentieth-century America. Schneirov argues that a new liberal political movement emerged partly in response to the newfound strength of craft-industrial organizations relying on the trade agreement and union label boycott. The new liberalism, contends Schneirov, was not fundamentally antilabor or antidemocratic. Rather, it was "a synthetic and inclusive movement and mode of thought that drew in significant ways on the democratic upsurge of the period and recognized the presence of organized labor and socialism." Schneirov focuses on the rise of the Civic Federation of Chicago and its offshoot, the Municipal Voters' League, to argue that a liberal reform politics enjoyed considerable cross-class support, including important segments of the labor movement. The prospects that this movement awakened among reformers served to stimulate the launching of the National Civic Federation, which after 1899 drew together corporate leaders, trade unionists, and reformers in furtherance of a new liberal agenda in the Progressive Era.

In the epilogue, "The Pullman Boycott and the Making of Modern America," David Montgomery points out that the Pullman confrontation "framed issues involving the most desirable relationship between organized society and what is called the 'free market' that haunt our current discussion of the Pullman boycott, not like ghosts of Christmas past but like ghosts of Christmas yet to come." Drawing on Karl Polanyi's classic study, Montgomery argues that corporate and government regulation of market activity was society's way of protecting itself from the ravages of the self-regulating market<sup>19</sup>. In our time, as the market is unleashed from regulatory control, we are compelled to ask, as Debs did a hundred years ago, who will champion society's interests vis-a-vis the market. Montgomery's point was given added poignancy by the fact that bitter, ongoing struggles, whether of Staley workers in Decatur, Illinois, Bridgestone/Firestone rubber workers in Des Moines and Decatur, or Caterpillar workers in Peoria, were never far from the minds of conference participants.

While the legacies of the Pullman strike continue to be contested, these essays testify to the pivotal importance of this strike and its aftermath for understanding the course of working-class history and American history. They also suggest the continuing vigor of the new labor history, even as it ages, and its engagement with questions that illuminate in new and unexpected ways one of the most important events in labor's past.

---

<sup>1</sup> Treatments of the 1890s as a period of crisis and adjustment are ubiquitous. See, for instance, Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 192; Harold U. Faulkner, *Politics, Reform, and Expansion, 1890-1900* (New York: Harper, 1959), chap. 1; Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), chaps. 3 and 4; Robert Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 113-16, 122-31; Walter La Feber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), chap. 2; Ray Ginger, *The Age of Excess: The United States from 1877 to 1914*, 2ded. (New York: Macmillan, 1975), chap. 8; Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), chap. 4; Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1977), chap. 15; Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1906: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chaps. 1 and 2; Martin J. Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U. S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chap. 2; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 43-57, 171-78; James Livingston, *Origins of the Federal Reserve System: Money, Class, and Corporate Capitalism, 1890-1913* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), chap. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Wiebe, *Search for Order*; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). For recent surveys of social and political change in the Gilded Age, see Charles W. Calhoun, ed., *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 1996); Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Gilded Age or the Hazard of New Functions* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Barrows, "Urbanizing America," in *Gilded Age*, ed. Calhoun, 92; *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1890; Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, "Class Composition and the Development of the American Working Class, 1840-1890: Immigrants and Their Children as Wage Earners," in *Power and Culture: Herbert G. Gutman and the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938); Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); John C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); William R. Brock, *Investigation and Responsibility: Public Responsibility in the United States, 1865-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). For surveys, see Vincent P. De Santis, "The Political Life of the Gilded Age: A Review of the Recent Literature," *History Teacher* 9 (November 1975): 73-106; Charles W. Calhoun, "The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics," in *Gilded Age*, ed. Calhoun, 185-213; and R. Hal Williams, "The Politics of the Gilded Age," in *American Political History: Essays on the State of the Discipline*, ed. John F. Marszalek and Wilson D. Miscamble (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 108-42.

<sup>5</sup> Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928* (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1928); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Worth Robert Miller, "Farmers and Third Party Politics," in *Gilded Age*, ed. Calhoun, 235-60; Richard Oestreicher, "Urban Working-Class Political Behavior and Theories of American Electoral Politics, 1870-1940," *Journal of American History* 74 (March 1988): 1257-86; Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> For detailed political accounts of this period, see H. Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1969); R. Hal Williams, *Years of Decision: American Politics in the 1890s* (New York: Wiley, 1978); Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Summers, *Gilded Age or the Hazard of New Functions*.

<sup>7</sup> Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, esp. 184-95, 2.2.1; Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), chaps. 3, 5, and 6; Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, chaps. 8 and 12; Daniel R. Ernst, *Lawyers against Labor: From Individual Rights to Corporate Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); James Livingston, "The Social Analysis of Economic History: Conjectures on Late Nineteenth-Century American Development," *American Historical Review* 82 (February 1987): 69-95; John R. Bowman, "When Workers Organize Capitalists: The Case of the Bituminous Coal Industry," *Politics and Society* 14, no. 1 (1985): 289-327.

<sup>8</sup> Stromquist, *Generation of Boomers*, chap. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*; Walter Dean Burnham, "The System of 1896: An Analysis," in *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems*, by Paul Kleppner, Walter Dean Burnham, Ronald P. Formisano, Samuel P. Hays, Richard Jensen, and William G. Shade (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981), 170-83; Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980* (New York, Praeger 1982); Paul Kleppner, *Continuity and Change in*

---

*Electoral Politics, 1893-1928* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1987); Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865-1901: Essays and Documents* (New London: Connecticut College, 1946); Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, 111.: Harlan Davidson, 1983); Skowronek, *Building a New American State*; Mary O. Furner, "The Republican Tradition and the New Liberalism: Social Investigation, State Building, and Social Learning in the Gilded Age," in *The State and Social Investigation in Britain and the United States*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Mary O. Furner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Sklar, *Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*; Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country*, chaps. 1, 2, and 7; Alfred D. Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston: Beacon, 1968); Glenn Porter, *The Rise of Big Business, 1860-1920*, 2d ed. (Arlington Heights, 111.: Harlan Davidson, 1992), 91 (quote); Livingston, *Origins of the Federal Reserve System*.

<sup>11</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Mary O. Furner, "Knowing Capitalism: Public Investigation and the Labor Question in the Long Progressive Era," in *The State and Economic Knowledge: The American and British Experiences*, ed. Mary O. Furner and Barry Supple (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*; Bruno Ramirez, *When Workers Fight: The Politics of Industrial Relations in the Progressive Era, 1898-1916* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978); Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> The following summary account can be supplemented by Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike: The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Upheaval* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942); Harry Barnard, *Eagle Forgotten: The Life of John Peter Altgeld* (Secaucus, N.J.: Lyle Stuart, 1938); Stanley Buder, *Pullman: An Experiment in Industrial Order and Community Planning, 1880-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Stromquist, *Generation of Boomers*; and Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Hay market Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). 289-327.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief*, 234

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Lindsey, *Pullman Strike*, 318-19.

<sup>15</sup> Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 235-38; Perlman, *History of Trade Unionism in the United States*; Lindsey, *Pullman Strike*; Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956); Donald McMurray, *The Great Burlington Strike of 1888: A Case History of Industrial Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956).

<sup>16</sup> Major consensus historians include Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955); and Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); modernization is the major theme in Wiebe, *Search for Order*; and Hays, *Response to Industrialism*.

<sup>17</sup> For surveys of the new labor history, see J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, eds., *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (De Kalb, 111.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989); Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Workers, 1865-1921*, 2d ed. (Arlington Heights, 111.: Harlan Davidson, 1985); Leon Fink, "American Labor History," in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 333-52. For recent discussions of race and gender, see David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York: Verso, 1994); and Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Victoria Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Christopher L. Tomlins and Andrew J. King, eds., *Labor Law in America: Historical and Critical Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Compare Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944).