

---

# The Situation

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* [Terre Haute, IN], v. 18, no. 8 (Aug. 1894), pp. 760-762.  
Untitled article attributed to editor Eugene V. Debs.

On Friday, May 19th [1894], the employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company, at Pullman [Illinois], struck against a reduction of wages, tyranny, and degradation, and the strike has steadily progressed until it has attained continental proportions.

It is not the purpose of this article to recite incidents of the strike, but rather to point out the reasons why of the strike that has led to present conditions, with such reflections as the subject suggests.

Let it be said at the start that the Pullman employees never, at any time, objected to the rapid increase of Mr. George M. Pullman's great wealth, though his multi-millions represented very accurately the amount he had, by financial legerdemain, abstracted from them. What they wanted, and the utmost they demanded, was fair wages and honorable treatment.

The employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company, like the great mass of their fellow toilers, preferred to submit to extortion and injustice as long as the wrongs could be borne rather than interfere with the plans of the company or create any disturbance. The testimony that such is the distinguishing trait of the great body of American workingmen is overwhelming.

There is not a strike on record which, upon investigation, does not disclose the fact that labor had been cruelly wronged, and the wonder has been that American workingmen could be induced to bear the outrages inflicted upon them so long and so patiently.

In writing of the situation it were supreme folly to so much as intimate that workingmen have been unmindful of the losses and sacrifices incident to the adoption of extreme measures to maintain their rights. They have comprehended more fully than others the bitterness of the ordeal they would be required to pass

in vindicating their manhood and their just demands, and the strikes which have occurred, whether success or defeat attended them, have, in every instance, added indefinitely to the glory of the sturdy manhood of American workingmen.

No one questions the declaration that a strike is quasi war, now necessarily sanguinary, though now and then, blood and carnage have told the terrible penalties labor has paid in its efforts to obtain the privilege of living as becomes American citizens.

For the strike now on, as we write of the situation, George M. Pullman is responsible. It is becoming awfully tragic, and history will declare, when peace is restored, that it had its origin in the venality, despotism, and oppression of George M. Pullman. He is the author of the present situation. He began years ago to lay the foundation of his autocracy at the town of Pullman. This fact is vividly shown in an editorial article in the Chicago *Herald*. That paper says:

In advance of the inevitable trial, Mr. Pullman will do well to consider certain facts. He has set up in the town of Pullman a modern satrapy — a survival of medieval feudalism repugnant to the thought and spirit of the 19th Century. He has endeavored to combine a great industrial establishment with a hodgepodge jumble of Bellamy socialism and Russian autocracy. He has attempted to revive in America an institution that has not been seen since the 15th or 16th Century.

How well the experiment has succeeded he himself can testify. Satisfactory at first, like all things novel, the "model town" has degenerated. The "thousands of happy, contented, well-paid workers" have been transformed by degrees into sullen, discontented strikers — justified, unhappily, in their sullenness and discontent. The wheels are idle, the chimneys of the mills stand smokeless.

Does Mr. Pullman feel justified in continuing the strike? Granting that he may defeat his striking employees this time, does he care to invite another and another — and yet another — inevitable so long as wrong conditions exist?

These are the conditions he should consider carefully, and any true friend — if he has one — will advise him as to their answer.

He should subdivide his town and sell lots to anyone who will buy. He should abolish the system of overseers and inspectors and quasi-spies. He should enfranchise his men and make them freemen instead of feudal retainers. He should come down from his ducal throne and take his place among Americans as an American. He should become a democrat instead of an autocrat; a benefactor rather than a slave driver. He should be a man.

In the foregoing the reader has a graphic pen picture of George M. Pullman. In his “Russian autocracy,” his sub-autocrats and “quasi-spies” we have the origin of the strike and the cause of the present situation, aided by the railroad managers combined to perpetuate the strike regardless of the cost of money and blood.

The policy of George M. Pullman to rob his employees is characteristic of the man. His insatiable thirst for money is not confined to his piracies upon his employees, but extends to the public, and his methods of robbery are so much like those of an outlaw as to make them a subject of congressional investigation. As a consequence, Senator John Sherman, of Ohio, introduced a resolution to investigate George M. Pullman’s piracies, and the resolution was adopted by the United States Senate, the purpose of the resolution being to put an end to Pullman’s plunderings of the public.

In an interview, published in the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, Senator Sherman took special pains to point out the infamies practiced by George M. Pullman, and among other things said:

I regard the Pullman Company and Sugar Trust as the most outrageous monopolies of the day. They make enormous profits and give their patrons little or nothing in return in proportion.

Senator Sherman gives George M. Pullman a certificate of character so infamous that the government proposes to clip his claws and restrain his rapacity. He is, probably, the first plutocrat made rich by plundering employees and the traveling public to be subjected to investigation and punishment for his crimes, and yet this rogue receives the aid of railroad managers, who form an alliance with him that they may perpetuate his piracies and reap a percent of the plunder.

This fact brings into view the question of sympathy on the part of labor organizations for the oppressed and robbed Pullman employees.

This sympathetic feeling has had much to do in creating present conditions. This purpose of workingmen to aid their fellow toilers when in trouble, a trait of human nature worthy of the highest eulogy, is almost universally denounced by the press of the country, while the action of railroad managers is commended. Such exhibitions of high consideration of Pullman and his pals and brutal denunciation of workmen who have by words and deeds shown sympathy for the Pullman employees, is a feature of the situation which has tended to aggravate conditions. The men who sympathize with their fellow-men in distress are those who are animated by the spirit of Christ, and those who denounce them and malign them for such exhibitions of brotherly feeling, without which the world would be transformed as if by Jehovah’s decree into a hell, are the Pharisees, the canting hypocrites, who “devour widow’s houses,” and for a “pretense, make long prayers,” and who, therefore, as Christ said, are entitled to “special damnation.” These “whited sepulchers,” these plutocrats and their sycophantic parasites — fleas in the hair of the Pullman dog — do not complain of sympathy when one corporation or a dozen corporations combine with the Pullman corporation and express their profound sympathy for Pullman, though they see the 4,000 victims of his rapacity reduced to suffering.

We do not write of the situation to approve or to extenuate violence. We deplore such incidents of strikes. The *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* has never, since it passed under our control, applauded a wrong. It has been our purpose to enthrone and uphold the right. But there has never been a strike of any notable proportion that deeds of violence, more or less deplorable, have not occurred. Why? Is it because men are depraved? Is it because men are brutified? By no means. Admitting that a strike is war presupposes resisting forces — power confronted by power. Strikes are always based upon a principle, exceptions confirm the rule. Labor demands fair wages, it strikes against oppression, poverty, squalor, degradation, and all the numberless woes that oppression, injustice, and tyranny inflicts. The enemies of labor, those who oppose the workingmen, are those who rob them and the con-

scienceless gang of boot-lickers, who hope to profit in some way by their fealty to power. In good old colony times, when the king imposed the tea tax, brave men, disguised, boarded a ship loaded with tea and threw the entire cargo overboard. The king and his Tories protested, and out of such acts of heroic defiance came the revolutionary war, and from out of the war came the American republic. Where labor has triumphed in a strike society has always been benefited, and where the strike was lost society has always been the lose. Why? Because society is profoundly interested in the preservation of manhood, independence, and prosperity of the masses, while plutocrats, governed only by their greed, look only to their own interests, which they hold are promoted by the degradation of labor, because with that degradation wages go down and their piracies become the more profitable.

Under such circumstances it is not only not strange but natural that in the contention for supremacy by the forces of right and the forces of the wrong, deeds of violence should sometimes occur. It is human nature — it is history, and history will repeat itself until the day of darkness comes for our land, when plutocrats are supreme, or think themselves supreme. Before an amazed country, the preliminary acts of a mighty tragedy are being acted, and it were well to let the curtain fall.

The condition of the country is becoming hourly more momentous. The camps are all astir, where drums beat the long roll and the bugles call to arms. The President of the United States, the commander-in-chief of the army and the navy, is concentrating his battalions in various places. When a semi-savage queen had been

dethroned in the interest of good government and of civilization, the President became so profoundly stirred that he sent a private commissioner to feel the pulse of the old queen and report to him how matters stood; but when 4,000 Pullman employees were being ground to dust between corporation millstones, the commander-in-chief goes a fishing, and at the call of courts concentrates soldiers of his standing army, *a la* tsar, at various points with the orders to fertilize American soil with the blood of American workingmen. As we write the work of bloodletting has begun and the street gutters of Chicago are running red with blood.

The situation is one of terrible significance. The country is alarmed. More than one-half of the continent is involved and the army of the idle is increasing. George M. Pullman's greed, depravity, and despotism aided by the alliance of railroad managers have brought about conditions of peril from the contemplation of which bold men turn away.

As we conclude the article, it must be said that the situation is full of premonitions that the worst has not been reached. There are no encouraging symptoms. The outlook is in all directions disheartening. Around the horizon and overhead naught but storm clouds meets the vision. The vivid flash of the lightnings of anger accompanied by the sullen, deep-toned mutterings of human voices mingled with the explosions of powder, bode only evil. But, regardless of the outcome, it will be written that George M. Pullman and his confederate despoilers of labor were responsible.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.*