

The Pullman Strike

George Pullman made a fabulous fortune building the first sleeping cars for railroads. He did not sell these cars to the railroads but rented them. They were the most comfortable rail cars made. As rail travel became increasingly popular, Pullman's fortune grew. Pullman built a model town to house the workers for his large factory just south of Chicago. He described it as a utopia, a perfect community. Churches, schools and recreation were provided by the Pullman Company.

The Depression of 1893 created financial difficulties for the Pullman Company. Pullman responded by reducing the salaries of his workers. Jennie Curtis, for example, a seamstress, had her wages cut from 17 cents an hour to 11 cents. Robert Coombs, a car builder, took a cut from 30 cents an hour to 20.5 cents. The rents and charges for utilities in the company town were not reduced. This made it difficult for the workers to pay the rent and feed their families.

Below is a list of grievances presented by the workers, and the position of the Pullman Company management. What kind of compromise would you make to keep the workers happy if you were George Pullman?

WORKERS' COMPLAINTS

1. Rents in the village of Pullman are 25% higher than they are in nearby Chicago.
2. Pullman charges nearly 7 times as much for gas to light the houses as it costs the company.
3. The Pullman Company does not allow any labor union activity among its workers.
4. The Pullman Company hires spies to listen to workers. If any worker says anything the company doesn't like, he or she will be fired.
5. Public meetings are not allowed in the Village of Pullman (except for church).
6. The Pullman Company in spite of the Depression is making a profit.

How would you solve the problem?

THE PULLMAN COMPANY POSITION

1. The village of Pullman is a model village. Parks and schools are provided as well as new housing which is superior to the housing in Chicago.
2. The company wants to avoid firing workers. That is why it is necessary to reduce wages.
3. The people who invest in the company expect to make a profit. That is why it is necessary to make a profit even during a depression.
4. The company has a right to fire any workers who are opposed to the company.
5. The company does not allow any trouble or troublemakers in the village. No saloons are allowed.