Eugene Debs

Eugene Debs was born in 1855 in Indiana and died in 1926. Debs went to work at age fourteen in railroad shops and advanced to the position of locomotive fireman. He began his career as an organizer in 1875, when he assisted in forming the Terre Haute Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and was subsequently elected the national organization’s secretary and treasurer. In addition to his work with the brotherhood, he served as city clerk to Terre Haute and as a member of the Indiana Legislature in 1885.

In 1893, Debs was elected president of the American Railway Union (ARU) and set about organizing railway workers across the country. The ARU’s first major win came with a strike against the Great Northern Railway, which led to higher wages for workers. Debs was later arrested and jailed for six months when the ARU conducted a strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company.

In prison, Debs read and was profoundly influenced by a wide variety of radical views. Out of prison, he threw his support behind the populist movement and worked for William Jennings Bryan’s presidential campaign in 1896. After Bryan’s defeat, Debs helped found the Socialist Party of America and unsuccessfully ran for president as the Socialist Party candidate in 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920. During this time period, Debs also formed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an explicitly Socialist union and the only union to oppose the United States’s entry into World War I.

Although Debs eventually distanced himself from the increasingly radical IWW, he maintained opposition to World War I. He expressed his position in Canton, Ohio, in 1918. He made a speech in which he expressed both anti-war sentiments and criticized the American government’s arrest and conviction of anti-war socialists under the Espionage Act. Debs was arrested for his speech under the Espionage Act and sentenced to ten years in prison. President Warren G. Harding ultimately commuted Debs’s sentence in 1921.

The Pullman Strike

The Pullman Strike took place in 1894 and involved workers from the Pullman Palace Car Company, 35 percent of whom were part of Debs’s ARU. The strike was precipitated by Pullman’s decision to cut wages that were already low. Pullman also operated a “company town” near Chicago, Illinois, where most of its workers lived. Because Pullman planned to cut wages by 25 percent without reducing rent and other charges that workers paid as residents of the company town, the wage cut would force many of the already poor workers and their families into starvation. Workers also went to the company with grievances about the sixteen-hour workday and their poor living conditions. George M. Pullman, the president of the company, refused to meet with the workers and had them fired. In a show of solidarity, large numbers of Pullman employees organized a strike.

To support the striking workers, the ARU planned a boycott, and union workers refused to handle any train that used Pullman cars until railroads stopped using Pullman cars altogether. Debs correctly predicted that railroad workers would be fired by the railroads for participating in the boycott. Massive numbers of railroad workers then went on strike in solidarity with workers fired for the boycott. By the third day, one hundred thousand workers had walked off the job.
The strike caused severe disruption of rail traffic, and violence broke out at several strike locations. The governor of Illinois responded by sending militia forces to put down rioting and protect the passage of trains. Eventually, the federal government stepped in and issued a federal injunction, allowing President Grover Cleveland to send troops to Chicago. Violence broke out between troops and striking workers in early July, leading to several arrests, substantial damage to railroad property, and up to thirty deaths. By the time order was restored, the defeated workers were rehired only if they signed an agreement to refrain from union activity, and public opinion had turned against organized labor.