

After the Strike: A Century of Labor Struggle at Pullman. By Susan Eleanor Hirsch. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. x + 292. Index, notes, appendix, photographs. Cloth, \$44.95. ISBN 0-252-02791-4.

Reviewed by Judith Sealander

Susan Hirsch's longitudinal analysis of labor-management relations at the Pullman Company concludes that deep divisions based on race, gender, ethnicity, and skills prevented workers from achieving true power. That judgment echoes the conclusions reached by many scholars. What makes Hirsch's study useful is its analysis of why these divisions occurred and how they changed over time. The struggles involved three major players—managers, workers, and the federal government—and complicated, shifting agendas and alliances.

As the nation's largest manufacturer of railroad sleeping cars and the leading provider of sleeping-car service for rail lines all over the country, the Pullman Company tried to exploit differences among workers, especially race, as a management technique. However, workers' own prejudices made that task much easier. And both sides tried to enlist the federal government as an ally.

The strike to which the title refers is the famous 1894 action that began in Pullman's Chicago car works and spread nationwide, provoking violent confrontations in rail yards across the country. However, *After the Strike* is not really a book whose story begins in 1894 or ends a century later. Rather, Hirsch examines the history of labor and management strategies at Pullman for the entire life of the company, 1867 to 1981, particularly the decades between 1894 and 1945, when Pullman exercised monopoly control of the U.S. sleeping-car business.

Clearly, sexual discrimination was a force shaping company policy and workers' organizing strategies. White males both in Pullman's corporate suites and in the repair rooms defined the sleeping-car business as one with few opportunities for women. The company was even slow to hire women as office workers, maintaining a nineteenth-century view of clerks as managers-in-training into the 1920s.

After the Strike, therefore, provides no insights into the uses of gender as a tool for managing labor. However, since its founding, when Pullman hired newly freed slaves as sleeping-car porters, the company had large numbers of both black and white workers. The book's analysis of Pullman's complex racial policies is fascinating, especially for the period between 1918 and 1944. The company segregated some jobs by race. Porters were black men. Conductors were white. Despite the fact that a conductor's better-paid tasks could be quickly learned, no Pullman-car porter ever became a conductor. However, the company sometimes integrated workplaces, particularly its car-repair operations, often over the fierce opposition of white employees. Integration, in fact, was sometimes a punishment for worker organization. When white crews struck the company's Wilmington, Delaware, yards in 1923, for instance, management replaced them with blacks. Elsewhere, Pullman officials viewed integrated shops as a way to cut costs, since blacks received lower wages. In many parts of the country, the percentages of African Americans employed by Pullman far exceeded their ratios within local populations.

Hirsch's examination of the consequences of such policies is careful and thought provoking. Pullman simultaneously championed strict color bars and selective workplace integration, provoking bitter fights between different groups of African American employees. However, the company underestimated the ways that race could be powerfully used by workers themselves. Black porters and maids enthusiastically supported the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In 1935 it became the first union to win independent representation for its members, critically undermining Pullman's internal company union system and preparing the way for the United Steelworkers' eventual victory in 1944. And Brotherhood locals pushed the federal government to fight racism throughout society.

Hirsch rightly notes that the Brotherhood's history needs to be told as part of the larger struggle between Pullman's managers and workers. But Pullman's story was in turn part of larger contexts, often absent from *After the Strike*. Hirsch mentions, for instance, that the federal government was more interested in gender than racial equity during World War I, but that it then offered more support to blacks than to women during the next big war. Nowhere does she reveal the context: the final years of the suffrage fight, 1916 to 1919, made politicians very woman conscious, while southern agricultural

mechanization and a mass exodus of rural blacks to the cities in the forties prompted more attention to African Americans.

If the background that would better explain labor relations at the Pullman Company is often missing, so too is any serious attention to the history of Pullman in decline between 1950 and 1981. Perhaps Hirsch was not given the page count she wanted, but a book about relations between workers and their supervisors in a railroad company gives oddly short shrift to the post-World War II appearance of a mighty competitor—the government-subsidized national highway system.

Nor does *After the Strike* give personalities to the public leaders who favored trucks over railcars. Indeed, the people who made such decisions are usually anonymous, their actions described as having been taken by “the federal government” or “Congress” or “the U.S. Commissioner of Labor.” The people of Pullman are more frequently named, but, sadly, rarely come to life on these pages. Impressively, Hirsch has made exhaustive use of the Pullman Company Archives at Chicago’s Newberry Library, compiling computerized databases from thousands of employee service records. But this research has not humanized her subjects. Perhaps the archives note only that Girolamo Venturelli, for instance, was born in Italy and worked as a riveter. Does his picture exist? Did he ever record his thoughts?

Venturelli’s life story might indeed have been reduced in the historical record to a few words in a payroll ledger. However, that is emphatically not true for George Pullman, Eugene Debs, or A. Philip Randolph. George Pullman’s monumental personality is reduced to a brief mention of a bad temper. Debs and Randolph do not even get that much attention. And while Hirsch correctly notes the growing importance of the state as a labor-relations mediator, colorful figures from Frank Walsh to Bernard Baruch to Paul McNutt are lumped together, unnamed, as “the government.”

Finally, this volume, part of the University of Illinois Press’s excellent Working Class in American History series, devotes remarkably little attention to the question of class. This is particularly puzzling given *After the Strike*’s conclusion, which laments the absence of workers’ political parties in the United States. Differences between middle- and working-class cultures at Pullman are occasionally mentioned. Managers who didn’t mind parading around “in their birthday clothes” in golf club lockers were surprised

when paint sprayers objected to mass showers. But Hirsch never subjects American attitudes about class to the critical scrutiny she gives to race. That said, she has produced a solid case study that deserves a readership.

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