

HOW WOMEN ARE TREATED BY THE PULLMAN COMPANY

1894

----- *Jennie Curtiss* -----

In 1894, George Pullman, the owner of a company that produced railroad cars, responded to an economic downturn by severely cutting wages and firing one-third of his workers. The workers went on strike, led by the future Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs. Jennie Curtiss, who had gone to work for Pullman at the age of 14, was one of the Pullman Strike leaders at age 20. In this letter she describes the working conditions that led to the strike.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : Analyzing Causes, Recognizing Effects

What reasons did the Pullman workers have for going on strike?

Being an employee of the Pullman Company for the past five years, I can truthfully state the following. There are two sewing rooms in the Pullman works; one is where all the new work is done, such as new carpets, window curtains, silk, satin, velvet, and plush draperies made for parlor, dining and chair cars only. We also sew the plush and tapestry with which the seats and backs of the sleepers are upholstered, and make all the sheets, pillow-slips, tablecloths, towels, napkins and linen of all descriptions used in the dining cars and sleepers. We also make all kinds of berth curtains.

Then there is the Repair shop sewing room, where all of the repairing is done. I have worked in both departments; three years and a half in the new sewing room, and one year and a half in the Repair shop sewing rooms. The work in these sewing rooms is made mostly piece work and some day work. I will state some of our prices.

1893 carpet, 90 cents a section.

1894 carpet, 20 cents a section.

It is true we were making these carpets (under the reduction) by machine, that is about half of them, and the other half of them had to be finished by hand, and the machine sewing did not save ten percent of the work, and I have known girls that made these carpets by machine at twenty cents a section, to only make five cents an hour. These carpets are cut and made in sections. The carpet is all in one, but it is cut in such odd shapes and slashes made to fit the cars that from one cut to the other we call a section. These carpets are large and small, they run from four to nine sections; therefore a nine section carpet that we received ninety cents a section for in 1893, would be \$8.10; in 1894 at twenty cents a

section, only \$1.80. There have been a great many mistakes made about the prices of these carpets in the statements of the papers, and that is why I have tried to explain as much as possible in regard to them.

1893	A three window drapery	\$1.50
1894	“ “ “ “	.80
1893	A two window drapery	1.25
1894	“ “ “ “	.48
1893	A one window drapery	1.00
1894	“ “ “ “	.45
1893	1 enclosed section curtain	.35
1894	“ “ “ “	.15
1893	1 mattress tick, folding (37 1-2)	.40
1894	1 “ “ “	.18
1893	1 “ “ “ (27)	.25
1894	1 “ “ “	.10

These prices are in the Repair shop sewing room, in which place I worked last. They get the same price for the same work in the new room, but the prices on the linen and several other things I can not give. There are numerous other kinds of work we make for the cars, which would take too much time and space to mention, which has all been cut from time to time to the very lowest standard. For four years we were allowed to make \$2.25 a day at the prices of 1893, which was very good wages for a girl, but which we well earned, as it was very tedious and confining, and long hours. At the time the shops closed on account of the strike, I was earning on an average eighty cents a day, at the prices of 1894. It was very hard to have to work for such small wages as that, which would afford a person a mere existence. But the tyrannical and abusive treatment we received from our forewoman made our daily cares so much harder to bear. She was a woman who had sewed and lived among us for years, one, you would think, who would have some compassion on us when she was put in a position to do so. When she was put over us by the superintendent as our forewoman, she seemed to delight in showing her power in hurting the girls in every possible way. At times her conduct was almost unbearable. She was so abusive to certain girls that she disliked, that they could not stand it, and would take their time and leave, who would otherwise have been working there to-day. If she could make you do a piece of work for twenty-five cents less than the regular price, she would do so every time. In fact she cut a great deal of work down *herself*. I have had many a dispute with her myself about cutting down our prices just to get the work done cheaper, thinking she would stand in better with the Company. She was getting \$2.25 a day and she did not care how much we girls made, whether we made enough to live on or not, just so long as she could figure to save a few dollars for the Company. When a girl was sick and asked to go home during the day, she would tell them to their face they were not sick, the cars had to be got out, and they could not go home. She also had a

few favorites in the room, to whom she gave all the best work, that they could make the most money on. We would complain of her to the foreman and general foreman, but they all upheld her, and if you were not willing to take her abuse you could go. There is now lying in Mr. Wickes' office in Chicago a petition signed by fifteen girls in the sewing room, requesting her removal. There are only eighteen girls working under her. No doubt she will remain in the employ of the Pullman Company, as that is just the kind of people they want at the heads of their departments—one who will help grind down their laborers. My father worked for the Pullman Company for *ten* years. Last summer he was sick for three months, and in September he died. At the time of his death we owed the Pullman Company about sixty dollars for rent. I was working at the time and they told me I would have to pay that rent, give what I could every pay-day, until it was paid. I did not say I would not pay, but thought rather than be thrown out of work I would pay it. Many a time I have drawn nine and ten dollars for two weeks' work, paid seven dollars for my board and given the Company the remaining two or three dollars on the rent, and I still owe them fifteen dollars. Sometimes when I could not possibly give them anything, I would receive slurs and insults from the clerks in the bank, because Mr. Pullman would not give me enough in return for my hard labor to pay the rent for one of his houses and live.

JENNIE CURTISS

Source: *The Pullman Strike*, edited by Leon Stein (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 75–78.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Pullman workers went on strike because of their extremely low pay, abusive treatment by supervisors, and unfair treatment by the company. Students may note that Curtiss describes the precipitous drop in wages between 1893 and 1894 and the tedious sewing that the job required. Other students may point out that the reduction in wages was caused by a general economic downturn. Curtiss also describes the deliberate cruelty of her supervisor. Students may also note the high rents in the Pullman-owned housing where workers lived, which caused some workers to fall into debt to the company.