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A 1936 banner publicizing newly available Social Security. See "Old New York: Part IX—The Great Depression," p.6. Image credit: FDRL.

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Blackwell's Almanac

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Backstage at Radio City Music Hall

Part 3

by Dean Irwin

Irwin's father was Musical Director of the famous venue. The biggest indoor theater in the world, seating an audience of over 6,000, the hall alternated a new stage show with a first-run movie premiere four times a day, seven days a week.

Our February and May issues featured two installments in Irwin's personal narrative of growing up behind the Music Hall scenes.

At one point in his working career, Irwin took over as summer relief stage manager. It is from that vantage point that, in our final chapter, he relates the changing times and ultimate demise of the stage show/movie format.

Much of a stage manager's time is spent anxiously waiting for the next cue, often standing next to a performer about to step out in front of the audience, and the Music Hall held a really big audience. I recall standing on the "O.P." (Opposite Prompt) side, stage left, waiting to give my cue to the stagehands while next to me a stunning woman from Eastern Europe in a sequined costume would also be waiting for her entrance. Since this happened four times a day, I could not help trying a little conversation.

"Hello Olga. How are you?" Olga's eyes were fixed on her fantastically muscled husband, already doing flips on stage, as she replied. "Fine." "It must be difficult to do what you do." "Yes. Difficult." And so on. Weeks later, when Olga warmed to me slightly, she told me that once she had

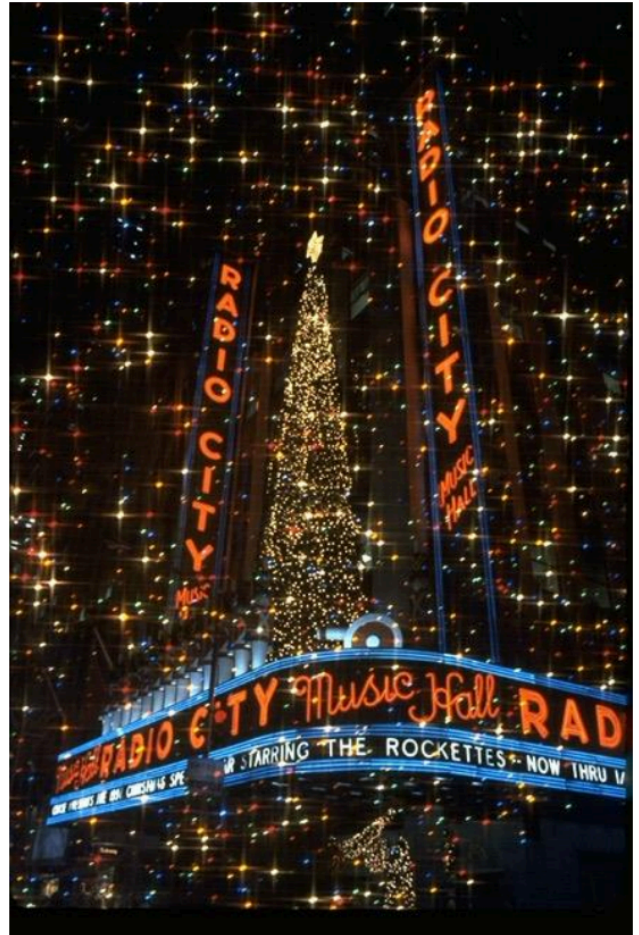


missed her grip on the trapeze, taking a long fall to a circus floor, breaking every bone in her back, including her heels. A month later, she was back on the trapeze, making up for lost time. “My gosh, Olga, that must have been terrible...” but she had already stepped on stage, her sequins flashing in the arc lights, joining her husband on the high wire. I gave my cue and wondered how long it would take to learn the trapeze.

The stagehands usually had a big poker game between the second and third shows, winning and losing sums that dwarfed my earnings as a stage manager. They were wonderful guys who told salty stories, but who would risk their lives in a second if an emergency happened on stage. And it sometimes did.

The backstage twilight seemed frozen in time, but I could see that things were changing. Alan Cole, a talented vocal soloist my dad often hired, no longer gave his live announcement at the start of every Christmas pageant: “And there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night...” Alan was gone, and his voice now played back on tape.

Jack Ward, an assistant organist who always wore a white dinner jacket and smoked with a long cigarette holder before he slipped out to the console, suddenly passed away. George Cort, a fellow stage manager who’d attended his funeral, told me that Jack had appeared in his casket wearing an identical white dinner jacket, as if he’d just gotten back from playing a break. Looking down at him, George automatically checked his watch, to make sure he wouldn’t be late for the show.



Radio City was still drawing big crowds at holiday times, but fewer feature films were being made that could play to a family audience and the Music Hall was no longer the only place in New York for big cinema premieres. There was more pressure to save money. The Corps de Ballet was disbanded, and guest dancers were hired only if a show needed them; the number of musicians in the orchestra was allowed to diminish drastically, which upset my father, and even the number of Rockettes were cut.

Russell Markert, creator of the Rockettes, whom I’d always admired for his waxed moustache, pin-striped suit and the goodwill that flowed around him in the theater, decided to retire. The Rockettes stole his dancing shoes and had them bronzed as a farewell gift

Producer Leon Leonidoff remained, older and grayer, issuing commands in his thick, Romanian accent and still able to create spectacular stage effects using the equipment built into the theater like the Steam Curtain, which could envelop the Cathedral set for the Easter show in a mist that looked like incense. Or the Rain Curtain, which sparkled under the lights but presented a hazard for dancers who had to step through the puddles. But by the late 1970's, the last of New York's Presentation Houses was losing money and running out of time.

When Leon Leonidoff retired after 42 years, empty seats were the norm for the first and second shows. To the horror of the dedicated performers still working to make good stage shows, it became clear that the Rockefeller Organization, the company that owned and operated Rockefeller Center, wanted the big theater to fail so they could tear it down and build an office building or a hotel, something that would make them more money. Money was more important to them than preserving the most famous theater in America and, in 1978, the Music Hall very nearly met the same fate as [the earlier movie palace] the Roxy Theater had in 1960.

A ballet captain named Rosemary Novellino-Mearns courageously began a campaign by the Music Hall's performers to save the theater. Singers and dancers in costume walked the block at Sixth Avenue and 50th street, getting people to sign petitions, spreading the word on local television that the great theater faced annihilation. As Rosemary lays out in her book, *Saving Radio City Music Hall*, the New York City Landmarks Commission granted the theater last-minute landmark status, preventing any changes to the structure by Rockefeller Center. Without Rosemary and the group she created, there would be no Radio City Music Hall today.

For her efforts, management blackballed Rosemary from ever performing at the Music Hall again. But as it turned out, the stage show and movie format was almost over. Landmark status prevented the theater from being torn down but could not save the type of entertainment it had presented since 1932. Probably nothing could have. The bridge from stage to cinema was no longer needed.



The last performance of the old Radio City Music Hall took place on April 25th, 1979. I was there to see my dad conduct the orchestra for the last time. It was a fourth show, so he wore his tuxedo. John Jackson, a former stage manager who had become a producer, introduced my dad and the performers on stage, thanking the audience for their loyalty and marking the moment in history. The curtain came down, the audience got up and the pipe organ played one more break to march us out. The theater closed for renovations, my dad retired, and when the Music Hall reopened, only the stagehands remained as a permanent presence.

Radio City still stages a Christmas Spectacular for a couple of months every year, where you can see the Rockettes dance once again, watch the orchestra rise out of the basement and hear the pipe organ. But for the rest of the year, the theater is a venue for special events and concerts. The little village of entertainers packed up long ago and was the last of its kind.

But the Music Hall and the glittering presentation houses that preceded it in the 1910's and 20's got audiences to accept motion pictures as a new way to see performance, by surrounding them with something familiar and reassuring. It turned out that movies, like radio, were not the end of live theater. The end of the old Radio City's long run came when it was no longer necessary to present both on the same stage.

Video streaming hasn't killed our appetite for performance. Just the opposite. It makes us more curious about the entertainers we see from the intimacy of our homes, more eager to learn about them and seek them out in other places.

If you wish to read the article in its entirety, click the link below.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GOlfvYt0n0EnEaJmb1NVyhDRNM5baEjO/view?usp=sharing_eil_m&ts=64b18ccb

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Old New York: Part IX—The Great Depression

As the 1920s advanced, the economy soared. But with that dramatic expansion came irrational exuberance and unchecked speculation: stock prices reached levels that had no basis in reality; margin purchases were rampant; banks handed out loans lavishly and imprudently; and giddy product production resulted in a vast oversupply of goods.

On Tuesday, October 29, 1929, it all came crashing down. After an erratic week in which stocks, including blue chip stocks, mostly declined, waves of panicked investors sold off their shares, driving the market ever downward. On that one day, now known as Black Tuesday, the market lost \$14 billion in value; over the ensuing week, it erased another \$30 billion—eventually suffering the staggering loss of 89.2% over its peak in early September. Bank failures and business bankruptcies followed, presaging a decade of unprecedented economic hardship.

New York came to be viewed as “the symbolic capital of the Depression, the financial capital where it had started, and the place where its effects were most keenly felt...” Many residents lost their savings, their jobs and their homes. By 1932, half the city’s factories were closed, almost one-third of New Yorkers were unemployed (vs. one-quarter of the rest of the country and over one-half in Harlem), and some 1.6 million residents were on relief. Those who remained employed and therefore ineligible for the dole were often forced to take severe pay cuts.

At the time of the crash, under Mayor Jimmy Walker, there were few centralized municipal services that could be tapped for jobs or rescue: there were no central traffic, highways or public works departments; street-cleaning was a function of individual boroughs; there were five separate parks departments; unemployment insurance was non-existent and, in the beginning, the Department of Public Welfare had no funds

available. New York City, like most cities, was dependent on charitable institutions and alms houses to succor the poor, the homeless and the hungry. Yet these organizations publicly admitted their inability to meet the heavy demands being made of them.

Protests and People’s Lives

In March 1930, 35,000 out-of-work protesters marched toward City Hall as part of International Unemployment Day organized by the Communist Party. They were met with violent pushback by the police.

Several years later, it was the Black and Latino population’s turn. In addition to being jobless, they had to deal with blatant discrimination, including exclusion from more than 24 of the city’s trade unions and rejection at public work sites. With tempers boiling, a furious Harlem mob vandalized white-owned stores. Some 4,000 individuals took part, inflicting over \$2 million in damages, resulting in 30 hospitalizations and several deaths. While an investigation into discriminatory practices was launched, little



Breadlines punctuated the City’s landscape during the Depression. Credit: History of New York City: A TLTC BLOG.

came of it and the situation continued unchanged.

Riots in New York flared and petered out. What didn't peter out was the sheer fight to survive... for the hungry, the need to eat, and for the homeless, the need to find shelter.

Breadlines and soup kitchens were one aspect of the fight. People lined up daily in long, snaking queues outside bakeries or pantries to score a ration of day-old bread or thin soup. To hide their humiliation from neighbors, many would leave their homes dressed up as if they were going to work. Once on the line, they just stared straight ahead, refusing to interact with their downtrodden peers—in fact, refusing to admit to themselves where they were.



Shantytowns called Hoovervilles sprang up to house the homeless. Credit: History Daily.

Thousands evicted from their homes took to living in jerry-built shacks in parks or backstreets. As more and more homeless joined these camps, they grew into little shantytowns nicknamed “Hoovervilles” in condemnation of the inactivity of President Hoover to remedy the situation. The largest such settlement was located next to the Reservoir in Central Park. Ironically, many of the Hooverville men were construction tradesmen—bricklayers, stone masons,

carpenters—who had helped build the luxury buildings surrounding the park and who now set to building their own shanties out of scavenged materials. Despite the skill and artistry with which these abodes were constructed, they were illegal; so both local and federal authorities regularly raided the settlements, destroying the shelters and scattering their inhabitants.

Some Short-lived Remedies

Conditions were dire and pleading letters from city officials and residents alike piled up in the Mayor's office. Finally, in October 1930, Jimmy Walker created the Mayor's Official Committee for Relief of the Unemployed and Needy, and things started to happen. By November there was:

- a City Employment Bureau, which obviated the problem of job-seekers having to pay private employment firms
- a stop to the eviction of poor families for rent arrears
- a large-scale investigation by the police to determine needs in all 77 precincts
- a windfall of contributions to unemployment relief from police and other city employees
- an expansion of city lodging facilities
- a special Cabinet Committee to deal with questions of food, clothing and rent

In the first eight months of its existence, the Committee raised some \$1.6 million. Direct relief funds were paid to 11,000 families, while 18,000 tons of food, including Kosher food, was given out to almost a million families. (Night patrolmen spent a good part of their shifts packing and wrapping these food parcels.) The money also paid for coal, shoes and clothing.

Another city agency, the Welfare Council, disbursed over \$12 million for relief and emergency work wages. These funds too came from voluntary donations. Private citizens contributed; sports teams organized exhibition matches (for example Notre Dame football vs. the New York Giants); and Broadway staged special benefit performances.

An Experiment

For a while spirits rose and hopes of normalcy returned. But by April 1931, it was clear that private welfare measures and one-off City actions could not keep up with the growing distress. Help was needed and it came from a now-familiar individual—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, not as president, but as Governor of New York State. Despairing of any constructive efforts by the Federal government, Roosevelt, unique among governors to accept liability for his constituents, declared: "...upon the State falls the duty of protecting and sustaining those of its citizens who, through no fault of their own, find themselves...unable to maintain life."

By August 1931, foreshadowing elements of the future New Deal, a robust public works program was in effect to reduce unemployment. State income tax was increased by 50% and the Comptroller authorized the issuance of revenue bonds at both the state and local level. Some would say that New York City was in better shape than many other cities. Yet it was still on the critical list.

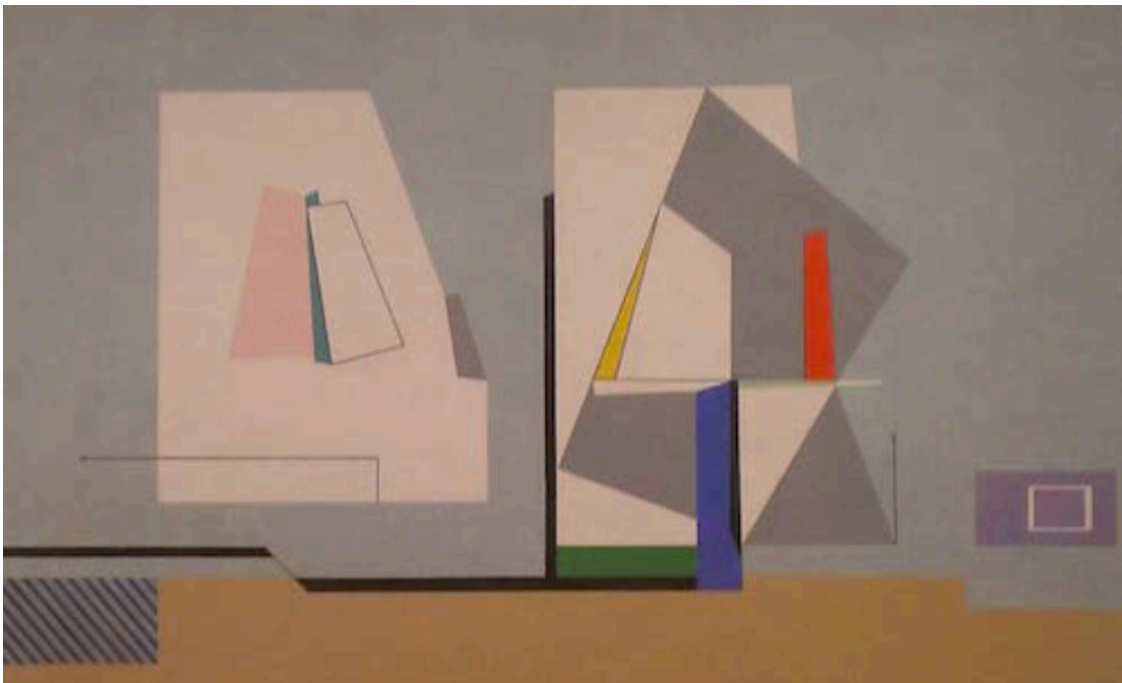
It wasn't until 1932, when Walker resigned amid an investigation for graft and Herbert

Hoover was voted out of office, that the way was paved for major innovations. Newly elected President FDR embodied the optimism of his catchy campaign song, "Happy Days Are Here Again." Within a couple of years, he promulgated the historic, blockbuster New Deal, and working in close partnership with newly elected Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, transformed both the country and the City.

The "New Deal"

New York—the most populous American city with almost seven million residents—was the single greatest beneficiary of the New Deal's Works Project Administration (WPA) in the entire U.S.

Jobs, jobs, jobs: Under the WPA, more than a dozen federal agencies paid for the labor and materials to support hundreds of projects designed to put New Yorkers back to work. The New Deal built housing, schools, courthouses, roads, hospitals and health clinics, libraries, post offices, bridges, and highways. It was the impetus and money behind the Triborough Bridge, LaGuardia Airport, the Lincoln Tunnel, and the East River (FDR) Drive. It also gave the City an extensive system of recreational facilities,



Among the murals commissioned by the WPA to adorn hospitals, schools, municipal buildings and other public spaces was this one by Ilya Bolotowsky. It originally embellished a "day room" in Goldwater Hospital, but now resides in the Tata Building on the Cornell Tech campus.

including swimming pools, playgrounds, ball fields, hiking trails, and parks. But construction wasn't its only recipient.

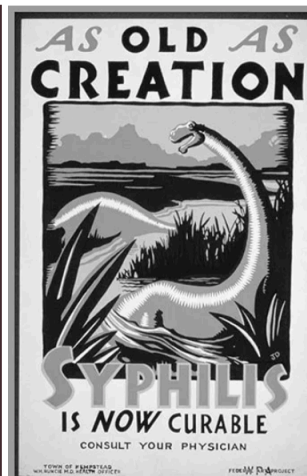
FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins (head of the WPA) recognized that funding culture and practitioners of culture was just as important. ("Hell, they've got to eat just like other people," Hopkins is reported to have said). So...jobless artists, designers, craftsmen and photographers were hired to embellish public spaces with murals and sculptures, while posters publicized other WPA programs, and illustrations, photos and crafts found their way into newly opened galleries and respected museums. Playwrights, writers, actors and singers were paid to create theatrical shows—even Yiddish and German theater. And out-of-work musicians and composers of all stripes (classical, folk, jazz, light opera) were employed to give concerts indoors and out.

At the same time, New Deal legislation began strengthening workers' rights by allowing them to organize, earn a minimum wage and, as discussed below, obtain unemployment compensation and sign up for Social Security.

The social safety net: When Frances Perkins, a fierce advocate of social justice and economic security, was tapped as Secretary of Labor, she brought a list of proposals for FDR's approval. Among them were unemployment insurance and what she called "old age" insurance. Both of them knew that the development of such programs would encounter many obstacles, not the least of which would be challenges to their constitutionality. Be that as it may, in 1935, the enabling legislation passed

overwhelmingly and FDR authorized the establishment of unemployment insurance and Social Security. And in 1937, the Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of levying taxes to fund both programs.

IBM won the bid to create the largest and most complicated data processing system ever built. It even designed novel equipment for the unprecedented task of enrolling some 30 million employers and workers, and registering their contributions into the Social Security system for later retirement payouts.



The WPA commissioned posters to support and publicize health, educational opportunities, theater and musical performances, etc. <http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/exhibits/new-deal-new-york-city/>

According to Perkins, "Nothing [other than the Great Depression] would have bumped the American people into a social security system except something so shocking, so terrifying, as that depression."

Housing: Above and beyond the homeless, 30% of the City's housed population lived in deteriorating, squalid tenements. There were other slums deemed "unfit for human habitation." The National

Recovery Act of 1933 authorized the clearance of slums, repair of salvageable structures and construction of low cost housing. And the country's very first "public housing"—a previously unheard of concept—was built in New York under the newly formed New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).

The first three public projects were: First Houses, between First Avenue and Avenue A, from Second to Third Streets in the East Village; Williamsburg Houses, Scholes to Maujer Streets, Leonard Street to Bushwick Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn; and Harlem River Houses. Seventh Avenue to Macombs Place, Harlem River Drive, 151st to 153rd Streets, Harlem. Their public ownership represented a radical step that both created jobs and sheltered people in up-to-date

homes. By 1941, nine such projects had been developed in New York City, providing 11,570 units. They are all still with us and the first three have been designated New York City landmarks.

Education: The sheer range of educational programs implemented by the New Deal was remarkable. From kindergarten to college (for example, Hunter College, Brooklyn College, the Merchant Marine Academy in the Bronx), new buildings expanded the student population. Thousands of teachers were hired, and adjunctive programs such as preschool, work-study programs for young people, and vocational classes for adults were instituted. Community education classes were held in libraries, settlement houses, local facilities, trade union halls, park buildings, and even on the radio.

There was no end to what a willing individual could learn, including driving, English, home arts, visual arts and new vocational skills. Much of the funds secured for New York City can be directly attributed to LaGuardia's force of personality. According to Roosevelt, he would show up in Washington "and tell me a sad story. The tears run down my cheeks and tears run down his cheeks and the first thing I know he has wrangled another \$50,000,000."

Health: For many City residents, lack of work had devolved into declining health, malnutrition, and increasing rates of infant mortality. New Deal funding produced new hospitals and neighborhood health clinics. The latter were often located in or near public housing developments and provided free medical and dental care, including immunizations, for all ages. The clinic doctors and nurses also visited homes and schools, and gave classes in healthy living. The clinics even sent housekeepers to help out where parents were ill. Access to regular health care was a first for many New Yorkers and its effects were incontestable: decreased infant mortality, a drop in serious illness and a decline in the suicides that so darkened the Depression years.

A Still-Living Legacy

It took our entry into World War II to completely obliterate the Great Depression. Tens of thousands of men went off to battle, while the rest of the country was galvanized into full employment by the war effort.

Still, the New Deal, with its plethora of alphabet soup subsidiaries, was nothing short of miraculous. It carried the country and our City through one of the most challenging eras in our history. It transformed the relationship of government to its citizens—embodying a dynamism that has strengthened New York through the years and continues to empower it to this day.



Harlem River Houses were among the first housing projects built by the WPA. <http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/exhibits/new-deal-new-york-city/>

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How We Came to Celebrate Labor Day: An Historic Irony



An illustration from "Frank Leslie's Weekly Illustrated Newspaper," September 16, 1882, depicting the New York City "Labor Day" parade organized by the Central Labor Union.

The history of the labor movement is long and bitter. Through most of the 19th century, workers had no rights. They worked long hours, often in unsafe, even blatantly dangerous, conditions, and could be terminated at a moment's notice. Any sort of protest not only fell on deaf ears, it was very often met with violence.

A major breakthrough occurred on September 5, 1882. On that day, a parade asserting the unacknowledged contributions of labor was organized by New York City's Central Labor Union. It was to begin downtown and march to the Reservoir in Central Park. By 9 am, columns of foot police and cops on horseback wielding billy clubs and truncheons surrounded City Hall.

Emotions were high. But, for whatever reason, the parade was allowed to pass.

In a much heralded triumph, some 10,000 to 20,000 individuals took part in what was called by the *New York Times* "the first Labor Day celebration." "The windows and roofs and even the lamp posts and awning frames were occupied by persons anxious to get a good view of the first parade in New York of workmen of all trades united in one organization."

That didn't mean, however, that the tensions between labor and capital had ended.

Over the next few years, workers seemed emboldened by New York's parade; strikes and protests became more and more frequent. In May 1886, a demonstration erupted in violence in Chicago's Haymarket Square. Characterized as anarchists, eight protesters were ultimately convicted of murder and four were executed.

It could be said that the suppression of Haymarket and its “judicial” aftermath had a perverse effect. Suddenly labor activists in countries around the world began observing May 1st as Workers’ Day. In the U.S., a number of cities emulated New York, sponsoring worker-affirming festivities in early September. Even more brazen, in 1887 Oregon was the first state to designate an official Labor Day holiday and, by 1894, 22 other states had followed suit.

The Pullman Strike

Meanwhile, the Panic of 1893, in which there was a run on the U.S. Treasury’s gold, set off a severe economic depression. The Pullman Sleeping Car Company let go hundreds of workers and lowered salaries by 30% for many of those who remained. Aggravating the situation, the rents and store prices in Pullman, Illinois, the company town near Chicago, remained at their usual elevated levels.

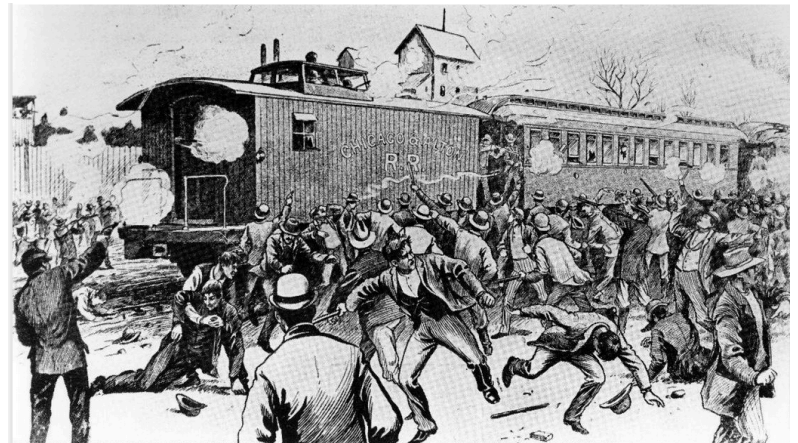
Pullman workers were outraged. So much so, they finally staged a walkout in May 1894. In support of their brethren, Eugene Debs and his American Railway Union declared a boycott of all trains containing Pullman sleeping cars. Together, the work stoppages brought rail service from Chicago to the West Coast to an absolute standstill. The railroad industry’s General Managers Association was quick to retaliate, petitioning President Grover Cleveland to shut the strike down.

We will never know what might have happened if the strike had remained peaceful. Unfortunately, an angry mob set fire to some buildings and damaged a U.S. mail train. This was all the excuse the Federal government needed. An injunction was issued against the strike and its leaders, followed by the dispatch of National Guard troops to the site. Mayhem and violence ensued. The crowd proceeded to destroy hundreds of railroad cars in South Chicago, while the Guardsmen unleashed a volley of bullets at the rioters, killing some 30 of them and injuring many more.

And yet, never underestimate the power of politics.

In an era of Republican dominance of the presidency, Cleveland was the first Democrat elected to the White House in decades. Labor and labor unions were a significant part of the party’s constituency and suppressing a strike could be harmful to its image and its future. Cleveland and his administration wanted to somehow show support for labor. And so, in June 1894, in the midst of the strike and its hostilities, the government acted. Congress passed and Cleveland signed into law a bill establishing the first Monday in September as Labor Day.

It would be many years before FDR made the right to organize and collective bargaining a Federal statute. But, out of a witch’s brew of contention came an unlikely social advance: a nationally observed holiday honoring labor’s value.



A mob of strikers attacks a train during the Pullman Strike. Credit: Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

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