

# Critical moment



**T**HE 1894 PULLMAN STRIKE NEAR CHICAGO prompted US President Grover Cleveland to establish a new federal holiday: Labor Day.

But that was political posturing. The strike was a disaster for most Pullman workers, and a tragedy for others. As many as 30 strikers died at the hands of trigger-happy federal troops that Cleveland had dispatched to Chicago. Untold numbers of other workers were fired. Those who did return to their jobs gained no concessions in pay or conditions. The leader of the strike was jailed.

Before the strike, George Pullman, founder of Chicago-based Pullman Palace Car Co., whose sleeping cars offered first-class travel, was known as a benevolent employer who provided housing for his workers in a company town just south of Chicago. That reputation never was legitimate, as Pullman made a profit off worker rents. When the so-called Panic of 1893 struck, softening demand for sleeping cars, Pullman lowered wages without lowering rents, inciting a strike.

When the strike threatened mail service, President Cleveland sent about 6,000 soldiers to ensure the movement of trains. In the violence that ensued, the

**THE STRIKE BEGAN after George Pullman lowered wages without lowering rents in the company town he ran south of Chicago. After federal troops shot dozens of strikers, public opinion turned against Pullman. In 1898, the Illinois Supreme Court ordered Pullman to divest the town, now a Chicago historic district.**

troops killed and wounded dozens, effectively ending the strike.

The strike's end was not a victory for Pullman. Berated even by other business leaders for his harsh handling of the strike, Pullman died of a heart attack three years later, at age 66. So hated was Pullman in Chicago that his family buried him in an extra-thick vault to keep his remains from being desecrated.

Nearly a century and a quarter later, the Pullman strike stands as a monument to how wrong a labor dispute can go. "Everyone lost something," says Susan E. Hirsch, Professor Emerita of History, Loyola University Chicago, and author of a book *After the Strike: A Century of Labor Struggle at Pullman*. "Many Americans felt the strike and government response had torn the country apart."

Six days later, Cleveland signed legislation creating Labor Day, a move largely seen as an attempt to placate labor members ahead of mid-term elections. It didn't work. That November, Cleveland's Democratic party suffered its worst loss in decades.

**JAYNE ROSEFIELD**, a Partner, leads Brunswick's newly opened Chicago office and the firm's US Consumer Industries practice.