

## Chapter 7

# Career Making at Pullman: Employment Stability and Job Mobility for Railroad Repair Shop Workers, 1915 to 1970

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### **Introduction**

The concept of career would seem to have little application to the job histories of blue-collar workers in the United States before the 1940s. Workers had no legal claim to their jobs and faced frequent layoffs and much unemployment. The possibility of stable employment including well-defined job ladders for upward mobility seemed a chimera to most. One industry—the railroads—did provide such opportunities, and the experience of railroad workers prefigures that of many other groups of blue-collar workers. The history of American railroad workers suggests that when stable employment and the possibility of upward mobility to skilled jobs were available at one employer, most men, whether white or black, immigrant or American-born, responded positively and chose to stay with that firm. Of the two, however, security was the most prized attribute of ‘careers’ for American blue-collar workers, and they would also stay at one job without prospects for individual upward mobility as long as it was a stable one.

The structure of ‘careers’ that developed on the railroads was a product of the struggle between workers and their employers and of compromise and cooptation. From the late nineteenth century on, unions set standards that influenced the policies of all railroad corporations, even those that were militantly anti-union. Railroad workers formed unions to guarantee the skilled craft status (and remuneration) of their jobs as well as security through the application of the principle of seniority to layoffs and recalls (Licht, 1983; Stromquist, 1987). This would allow craftsmen to have stability—to stay within their chosen craft—and at the same time have long employment with a single railroad. In their attempt to combat unions and to control their dispersed work forces, railroads pioneered bureaucratic methods of labour relations and tried to deskill the crafts through scientific management. Rules and regulations, along with grievance procedures to assure their fair enforcement, came to characterize conditions of employment on

the railroads, whether or not they were enforced by union contract. At the same time, railroad corporations continually sought to break the hold of craft traditions in their repair shops by using less skilled, and thus less costly, workers. The federal government was also an important player in the development of this structure for careers. The railroads were the first industry to be regulated by the state, which increasingly intervened in labour relations in the industry.

The mix of employer and worker agency and federal oversight produced internal labour markets within individual corporations, as seniority became a prime criterion for upward mobility. This created a situation of choice for individuals but one fraught with insecurity. Because of the railroad unions' attachment to the concept of craft, seniority accrued for each job but not for a man's total employment with one railroad. Upward mobility meant starting over in terms of seniority and opening oneself to the possibility of layoffs. Even after the advent of unemployment compensation in 1937, this was a risk men might hesitate to assume. This essay explores how workers at the Pullman Company, a company closely associated with the railroads and greatly influenced by their labour policies and railroad unions, chose to negotiate that choice between seniority and upward mobility during the years from 1922 to 1969.

### **The Pullman Company and its Records**

Incorporated in 1867, the Pullman Palace Car Company both manufactured rail cars and operated sleeping cars designed to make rail travel more comfortable. In 1880, it built its car works and famous industrial community just south of Chicago. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Pullman, one of America's largest corporations, manufactured passenger, freight, and street cars in its Chicago manufacturing plant, operated repair shops in various locations around the country, and operated sleeping cars on American, Canadian, and Mexican railroads. The company reached its peak in size and profitability in the mid-1920s as passenger travel flourished and it expanded its manufacturing division through the purchase of competing firms. In 1929, the company reorganized: manufacturing operations became part of the new Pullman-Standard Car Manufacturing Company while its repair and on-train operations remained the tasks of the Pullman Company. Both were part of Pullman Incorporated until 1947 when, in response to an anti-trust suit, the Pullman Company was sold to a consortium of fifty-seven railroads. The company ceased operations in 1969, although it remained in existence until 1981 when an equal pay for equal work lawsuit was finally settled.

The records of the Pullman Company provide an opportunity to explore the career choices of repair shop workers within changing managerial, union, and governmental contexts over a long period of time and in different economic and geographic environments. After the Pullman Strike of 1894, the company pulled back from the paternalistic relations with its workers for which it was famous (Hirsch, 2003, chaps. 1, 2). Thereafter it followed railroad industry norms for welfare benefits and bureaucratic methods of labour relations and personnel management (Edwards, 1979; Jacoby, 1985). The company began to keep

standardized and centralized records on employees in 1904. Demographic information and data on previous employment were recorded on the standardized forms that also detailed job histories. When the company first ceased operations and again when it closed, it donated significant parts of its records including those for the Department of Industrial Relations (personnel and labour management) to the Newberry Library in Chicago. From those records, we have created a database for three repair shops situated in Chicago, Illinois; Wilmington, Delaware; and Richmond, California based on payroll records and the service records of individual employees.<sup>1</sup>

Although service records of workers who were employed in 1904 often contain information about their job histories prior to that year, these cannot be considered representative of the work histories of repair shop workers in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the extant records for those hired before the 1920s overwhelmingly represent workers who stayed with the company into the 1920s. Indeed, company record retention policies seem to have guaranteed that long-term workers were more likely to be represented in our samples than were short-term workers, but from the 1920s on the database is reasonably comprehensive for both types of employees. Except for brief periods during World Wars I and II when women were employed temporarily in 'men's' jobs, virtually all Pullman repair shop workers were men. Only a few jobs were typed as 'women's work'—primarily the position of seamstress (Hirsch, 1986; Hirsch, 1999; Reiff, 1999). Thus we analyze the careers of male blue-collar workers between the 1920s and the 1950s, when the company began to close repair shops in response to the decline of rail passenger traffic.

### **Pullman Company Employees and the Structure of Work**

'Careers' in the sense of long-term employment were possible at Pullman repair shops because the company recognized seniority accrued for each job as governing employment even in the absence of union contracts. Those who left a position voluntarily, either quitting the company or transferring to another job, lost their seniority. Those who quit and later sought re-employment and those who transferred jobs began at the bottom of the seniority list. Although there was a discretionary element to the application of seniority during non-union eras (most of the years between the late 1910s and the early 1940s) because foremen could lay off or fail to recall workers who were 'not much good,' continuous service made long and, after a few years, steady employment possible. It also provided access to the Pullman pension plan, introduced in 1914 long before the federal government created the U. S. Railroad Retirement system in 1937. Unlike the union-inspired

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<sup>1</sup> The employee service records are in the Pullman Company Archive, Newberry Library, Chicago (record group 06/02/03). The databases are available on request from the authors. A description of the databases and a discussion of the samples can be found in the Appendix of Hirsch (2003).

system of seniority, the Pullman pension plan was not based on continuous service in one job, but on total employment with the company.

Although long-term employment was a possibility at Pullman repair shops before the 1920s, formal internal job ladders facilitating upward mobility from the lowest levels did not exist. In the nineteenth century Pullman repair shops hired primarily skilled (craft) workers along with smaller numbers of semi-skilled helpers and unskilled workers. Crafts were learned through apprenticeship and practitioners enhanced their market power by limiting the number of teenagers they trained. Helpers, who assisted craftsmen, were not taught enough to assume skilled jobs. Unskilled labourers in the repair shops, who toled and hauled heavy loads and objects, similarly found no formal path upward. Most skilled men pursued their crafts for their entire lives, as long as they were well paid and had control over their work. A few would be promoted to supervisory ranks as foremen, but most would not, and few assumed this to be a natural job progression.

As Pullman management sought to enhance productivity in the 1910s even as the company's rolling stock shifted from wooden to steel cars, it began to transform repair shop work to use mass production methods. This entailed breaking down each craft into specialties and assigning men to one and only one task. Men were now tied to their tasks by the company's recognition of seniority on the basis of specialty rather than craft. With a much narrower range of skill required for a 'craft' job, more helpers and unskilled men could aspire to move into such jobs. But Pullman's craftsmen resisted this specialization, and, during World War I when the federal government assumed control of the railroads and the Pullman Company, they like other railroad repair shop workers joined American Federation of Labor craft unions. To minimize strikes, the federal administrators recognized workers' right to unionize, and the AFL unions established contracts with every corporation. At Pullman, the new contracts abolished specialization and task breakdown in the repair shops. After the war, when Pullman and the railroad corporations tried to break union contracts, four hundred thousand railroad shop workers, including virtually all of the twelve thousand Pullman repair shop and yard workers, struck for three months beginning on July 1, 1922. With the help of a new and again pro-business U. S. president, the corporations broke the 1922 Railroad Shopmen's Strike. After the strike, the Pullman Company found it had to rebuild its shop forces, since most men initially refused to return to work when the shops reopened. Although many came back in defeat the following year, management began to train new workers who would better fit their plan to re-establish task breakdown in the crafts (Davis, 1997; Hines, 1928; Hirsch, 2003, chap 4).

During the war, federal administrators had created a new position—helper apprentice—designed to overcome a shortage of skilled labour by training adult helpers in a three- to five-year process to become craftsmen. After the strike, Pullman shops adopted this method to train new workers for the specialties and thereby created the first formal internal labour market. Shops could hire adult men in unskilled and helper positions, give them the possibility of learning a specialty through the helper-apprentice position, and finally employ them as skilled workers getting skilled workers' pay. Thus, as long as the company needed new craft

workers, unskilled men had a choice to advance to helper positions and helpers had a choice to train for skilled ones. Although the percentage of workers holding skilled jobs decreased in Pullman repair shops during this rebuilding phase, at least half of the jobs in the shops remained in the skilled category.

In order to increase control over craft workers even further, the company again subdivided craft specialties, this time into three levels of difficulty with increasing rates of pay. Skilled workers now had the possibility of moving up a job ladder from level A positions to B and C ones. Level A positions all paid one rate, initially 70 cents per hour, but B and C jobs could pay more (up to 75 cents per hour). Foremen had discretion as to whether to award the higher rates, thus making the decision to upgrade even more difficult for individual employees offered the choice.

Both the path to skilled work and that between the craft specialties conflicted with the desire for steady employment since company policy decreed that when one moved up one went to the bottom of the seniority list for that position. During the 1920s, the general prosperity meant workers, both at Pullman and considering working at Pullman, had other choices, often in industries with seemingly more promising futures than the railroads. Under those conditions, we might expect upward mobility within Pullman as workers risked their seniority for better jobs and pay. At the time same, we might expect also that workers who were not upwardly mobile would be more inclined to leave the company in search of better jobs. On the other hand, during the Great Depression of the 1930s when the company needed fewer workers and workers had few prospects elsewhere, we might expect less upward mobility because workers fearing layoffs opted to preserve their seniority by remaining in the jobs they had.

Beginning in the mid 1930s when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal established workers' right to unionize, Pullman shop workers began to organize again. The company responded in a piecemeal fashion beginning in 1937 to revise its existing structure of employment. Workers sought to restore the crafts as the unions and their traditions had defined them, and, by 1949, all Pullman repair shop workers were unionized, the specialties were gone, and seniority was once more based on craft and skill level. The helper-apprentice position remained as a route to upward mobility, but with a new twist. Whereas men who had completed the program earlier had been able to wait for a propitious time to risk going to the bottom of the seniority roster, those completing the program after 1937 had to upgrade immediately (Hirsch, 2003, chaps. 5, 6).

During World War II, when defence industries offered workers so many opportunities and wages at Pullman and the railroads lagged behind those in armaments production, we might expect greater numbers of workers to voluntarily leave the company and more workers to choose upward mobility over security. In the post-war years, when the company and the railroad industry declined precipitously, we might expect workers, especially younger men, to look elsewhere for opportunity and to leave voluntarily in larger numbers. Older men might have been less likely to try to upgrade because the loss of seniority might put their employment at risk during increased layoffs and thus undermine their pensions.

Using those assumptions, this analysis explores blue-collar careers over five periods: 1) pre-strike—up through June 1922; 2) rebuilding—September 1922 through 1929; 3) depression—1930 through 1940; 4) World War II—1941 through 1945; and 5) post-war—1946 to the shops' closings. Although the choices of all Pullman repair shop workers were made in this context of five periods, the extent to which other employment was available locally entered into their calculations too. The different locations of the three Pullman shops in our sample allow us to investigate this phenomenon. The Chicago shop was in a region of the city with extensive heavy manufacturing subject to the business cycle for that sector. The Richmond shop was in the fast growing San Francisco region with its more transient population and great booms and busts of employment. The Wilmington shop was in an old industrial city that had been losing heavy industry since the 1880s with only brief upturns in blue-collar employment during World Wars I and II. In general, workers at Richmond had the best opportunities for other employment and were probably the least wedded to the locality and the most mobile geographically. Both factors might encourage Richmond employees to be the greatest 'risk takers.' In Wilmington, not only did workers have few job opportunities that were as attractive as employment at the Pullman repair shop, but many were locally born and thus tied more to the area. They might be the most risk averse. We might posit Chicago workers at some in-between position, but whether they chose to make careers at Pullman, stay in one job, or go elsewhere and why is the subject of this analysis.

### **Career Choices at Pullman**

The database for this study consists of male workers who were hired into jobs labelled unskilled, helper-level, or skilled. Of those hired before the 1922 Railroad Shopmen's Strike only men who stayed with their shop at least through June 1922, when the strike began, are included in the analysis. The database for the Chicago shop consists of 1,379 men; 1,111 from random samples of workers on specific payrolls, plus 268 from an oversample designed to include sufficient numbers of black men for detailed analysis. As Table 7.1 shows, the sample allows us to analyze the careers of men hired at Chicago in all periods except World War II. The small number in the database reflects the reality that it was so difficult for the Chicago shop to attract male workers during the war that most of the new hires then were women.

The databases for the Wilmington and Richmond shops were constructed from random samples of workers on specific payrolls with no oversampling. The Wilmington shop was the oldest, and company executives considered it marginal by the 1930s. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of the 819 men in the Wilmington database were hired before 1930. Thus, our analysis of Wilmington workers necessarily focuses on the two earliest cohorts. With its more transient population and because of its importance as the only western repair shop, the Richmond shop continued to hire and the 583 male sample members are relatively evenly divided

between the five periods. However, their distribution does not always provide enough workers for in-depth analysis of specific skill levels.

**Table 7.1 Workers by period hired and propensity to quit and return**

Period of Hire	Chicago		Richmond		Wilmington	
	N	Propensity (in percent)	N	Propensity (in percent)	N	Propensity (in percent)
Pre-Strike	359	53	143	20	396	36
Strike-1929	487	19	162	13	263	16
1930-1940	266	5	94	9	73	10
1941-1945	39	13	104	13	51	16
1946-1969	228	10	80	4	36	3

*Source:* Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

*Note:* The propensity to quit and return is the percentage of quitting workers that returned for employment.

The Chicago repair shop was Pullman’s largest, with over 1,000 employees at any one time, and the one where management innovated in methods of supervision and production. What worked at the Chicago repair shop could then be introduced elsewhere. In the 1910s the Chicago shop felt the brunt of scientific management, and its workers resisted and spearheaded the union movement during the period of government control. The extent of turmoil at the shop in the period before the 1922 strike can be seen even in our sample that over-represents those who stayed long-term. On average these men worked at the Chicago repair shop for 22 years and 60 percent left for ‘natural’ reasons (retirement, death, sickness, or injury). Yet the type of behaviour that the seniority system might mitigate and that long-tenure with the company seemed antithetical to, quitting voluntarily and then returning to company employ, was characteristic of workers at all skill levels in that period: 49 percent of helpers, 53 percent of skilled workers, and 57 percent of unskilled workers quit and returned, the vast majority (92 percent) during the pre-strike period itself. Before the strike, management was only beginning to impose the new procedures at Wilmington and Richmond, and workers in those shops were much less likely to quit and return. After the strike, once management control had been firmly established at all the shops, Chicago workers ceased to evidence particularly high rates of this behaviour, and for most shop workers quitting became a permanent decision.

As Table 7.2 reveals, virtually all skilled workers and helpers went on strike in the summer of 1922, as did most of the unskilled workers. Only those who had been upwardly mobile to supervisory or clerical positions generally refused to strike. Although over time 72 percent of strikers returned to the Chicago shop, neither age, length of service, or skill level at the time of the strike correlated with a return to the shop.

**Table 7.2 Percentage of workers who struck in 1922 by skill level of job**

Skill Level	Chicago		Richmond		Wilmington	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Supervisor/ Clerical	20	15	16	0	54	24
Skilled	190	97	68	93	217	98
Helper	31	97	23	87	36	89
Unskilled	15	87	11	64	14	57

*Source:* Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

The only significant correlate with returning after the strike was having quit previously and come back to the shop. Of those who returned from the strike, 59 percent had quit before, but of those who did not return, only 27 percent had quit previously (chi-square=17.4,  $p=.000$ ,  $\phi=.281$ ). Men with a less firm attachment to Pullman apparently found it easier to accept the loss of the strike. Perhaps, having tried employment elsewhere, they found Pullman jobs superior even with task breakdown. Although quitting and returning had not been nearly as common at the Richmond and Wilmington shops, the strikers there evidenced similar behaviour. Sixty-four percent of Richmond strikers eventually returned to the shop, but the only correlate of who would return was whether a man had quit previously: 19 percent of those who quit previously returned as compared to three percent of those who had not (chi-square=3.28,  $p=.070$ ,  $\phi=.222$ ). For Wilmington strikers, only 42 percent of whom returned after the strike, both having quit previously (chi-square=11.3,  $p=.001$ ,  $\phi=.214$ ) and longer employment with the shop were significant correlates of whether a man would return ( $F=20.06$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $\eta=.265$ ). As Tables 7.3 and 7.4 show, when the company rebuilt its shop forces in the 1920s, management also began to hire large numbers of black men for the first time and to hire them outside unskilled positions. This represented a significant shift in a company policy that had initially relegated African Americans to positions as porters on trains and as car cleaners in train yards. It was, however, consistent with the 1920s strategy of other American employers in integrating work forces in order to use workers' racial prejudices to counter the unity needed for organizing. The first black workers had been hired at the Chicago shop in 1917, all as unskilled labourers. They comprised 1.5 percent of the pre-strike shop force, but 28 percent of those hired after the strike in the 1920s. Black men had been hired earlier at Wilmington, but also only in unskilled positions. They comprised three percent of the pre-strike work force there, but 36 percent of new hires after the strike. No black men had been hired at the Richmond shop before the strike. They comprised 14 percent of new hires afterward. As Table 7.3 demonstrates, the new racial hiring policy had its greatest impact at the helper and unskilled levels. After the strike, 44 percent of those hired as helpers at the Chicago and Wilmington shops were black, while, reflecting the far smaller local African American population, eight percent

of those hired at Richmond were black. Those hired in unskilled positions in both Chicago and Richmond were even more likely to be black.

**Table 7.3 Helpers and unskilled workers by period of hire**

Period of Hire	N	Average Age at Hire		Average Career in Years		Percent Non-White	Percent Foreign Born
		mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.		
Chicago Repair Shop, Helpers							
Strike-1929	221	26.8	8.6	22.9	13.6	44	33
1930-1940	107	27.8	8.1	12.3	11.8	14	18
1946-1969	71	27.6	7.5	8.7	7.4	79	1
Chicago Repair Shop, Unskilled							
Strike-1929	140	31.9	9.5	16.5	13.3	71	24
1930-1940	52	30.5	9.0	15.9	12.1	39	22
1946-1969	62	30.6	8.2	7.3	6.8	89	7
Richmond Repair Shop, Helpers							
Strike-1929	49	27.6	6.9	19.6	11.1	8	51
1930-1940	49	27.1	7.9	7.0	8.3	2	10
Richmond Repair Shop, Unskilled							
Strike-1929	58	30.0	7.6	16.6	11.3	33	33
Wilmington Repair Shop, Helpers							
Strike-1929	179	27.8	7.2	17.0	11.0	44	6

*Source:* Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

*Note:* s.d refers to standard deviation. The employment records include too few unskilled workers hired at Wilmington after the strike to be included in the analysis here. The strike occurred in 1922.

In the 1920s, the shop forces were composed of two distinct elements—returned strikers and new hires—but the major fault lines remained those of skill level. The majority of those who returned from the strike were skilled workers—74 percent at Chicago, 63 percent at Richmond, and 59 percent at Wilmington—and those newly hired in skilled positions after the strike resembled them in race and nativity, although they were younger on average. Virtually all men who began at the skilled level after the strike were white. The differences between the shops in the nativity of skilled workers—Chicago craftsmen were primarily foreign-born, Wilmington native-born, and Richmond divided—characterized returning strikers, newly hired men, and the populations of the communities in which the shops were located.

**Table 7.4 Skilled workers by period of hire**

Period of Hire	N	Mean Age at Hire (s.d.)	Average Career in Years	Percent Non-White	Percent Foreign Born	Percent Attaining Job Level		
						A	B	C
Chicago Repair Shop								
Pre-Strike	214	38.7 (10.8)	24.6 (11.3)	0.5	78.5	34	25	34
Strike-1929	126	34.0 ( 7.8)	22.4 (10.3)	5.6	72.2	35	37	25
1930-1940	107	39.3 ( 9.1)	9.9 ( 9.3)	1.9	67.3	37	40	14
1946-1969	95	34.9 ( 8.8)	8.4 ( 6.8)	35.8	10.8			
Richmond Repair Shop								
Pre-Strike	74	37.7 ( 8.8)	24.5 (11.3)	0.0	62.2	7	26	39
Strike-1929	55	30.6 ( 7.1)	19.1 (10.9)	0.0	45.5	16	46	16
Wilmington Repair Shop								
Pre-Strike	140	44.0 (12.8)	25.6 (12.6)	0.7	22.9	1	2	2
Strike-1929	64	31.4 ( 6.9)	19.5 (10.3)	1.6	1.6	2	3	2

*Source:* Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

*Note:* The mean age for the pre-strike period is the age in 1922. The percent attaining the job level refers to the percent ever in a particular job classification. Group C was the highest-skilled group of workers. There was also an unknown share of workers who were never in a classified job. The strike occurred in 1922.

How did these workers respond to the possibility for upward mobility in the 1920s? Table 7.5 shows that half of newly hired helpers at Chicago and two-fifths of newly hired helpers at Richmond were upwardly mobile in the 1920s. Age at hire was not a significant correlate of whether a helper was upwardly mobile in the 1920s at any of the shops—men of any age were apparently eager for the opportunity to attain skilled jobs. At Chicago, where the shop superintendent was most committed to developing black skilled workers to counter unionization (Hirsch, 2003 chap. 4), black helpers may have been offered more opportunities to

upgrade than white helpers, as they were significantly more likely to be upwardly mobile (chi-square=7.2, p=.007, phi=.180).

**Table 7.5 Upwardly mobile workers in the 1920s by race and shop**

Group or Period	Chicago		Richmond		Wilmington	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Unskilled						
All	140	60	56	59		
Black	56	72	19	42		
White	84	32	37	70		
Helpers						
All	221	51	49	41	179	11
Black	98	61	4	25	161	5
White	123	43	45	42	18	14
Skilled in Categories A and B						
Pre-Strike	126	33	24	21		
Post-Strike	90	37	34	29		

Source: Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

In contrast, at Richmond, where relatively few helpers were black, the latter were less likely to be upwardly mobile than white helpers, but the difference was not statistically significant. At the Wilmington shop where most new helpers were black, only 11 percent of helpers were upwardly mobile in the 1920s. Although more white helpers than black helpers became skilled workers, as at Richmond the difference was not statistically significant. The Wilmington shop manager kept most helpers, white or black, doing skilled workers' jobs for helpers' pay until 1934, when workers at other Pullman shops pressured the central office to force him to follow company policy. Perhaps not surprising, as Table 7.3 shows, average length of service for helpers hired in the 1920s was longest at the Chicago shop where opportunities were greatest and shortest at Wilmington.

Comparison of helpers who moved up in the 1920s and those who did not also underscores the desire for upward mobility. As Table 7.6 illustrates, helpers who did not rise in the 1920s were more likely at every shop to quit than those who did. At the Chicago shop the average length of service was significantly longer for helpers who rose in the 1920s than for those who did not ( $F=17.4$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $\eta^2=.271$ ). At the Wilmington shop, those who were upwardly mobile in the 1920s also averaged longer careers with the company than those who remained helpers, but the difference in average length of service was not statistically significant.

**Table 7.6 Tenure and reasons for leaving: Helpers hired in the 1920s**

Shop	Tenure in Years Mean (s.d.)	Reasons for Leaving			
		Natural	Fired	Layoff	Quit
Upwardly Mobile in 1920s					
Chicago	26.5 (12.8)	61	4	20	15
Richmond	17.3 (9.4)	35	0	45	20
Wilmington	21.0 (10.0)	50	0	50	0
Not Upwardly Mobile in 1920s					
Chicago	19.1 (13.5)	34	10	26	30
Richmond	21.2 (12.0)	38	0	38	24
Wilmington	16.6 (11.1)	22	3	55	19

*Source:* Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

In Wilmington, helpers who were not upwardly mobile had many fewer job opportunities than those in Chicago did. Only at Richmond did helpers who rose in the 1920s actually stay with the shop for less time than those who were not upwardly mobile, although this difference was not statistically significant. Perhaps the pattern at Richmond reflects men's reasons for leaving. Richmond was the only shop where helpers who rose in the 1920s were more likely than those who did not to end their employment because of a layoff. That is, during the depression, those who embraced upward mobility at Richmond were hurt by their lack of seniority.

The experience of unskilled workers in the 1920s also reveals workers' desire for upward mobility. Three-fifths of those hired as unskilled workers at Chicago and Richmond became helpers in that decade. At Chicago, younger men were more likely to upgrade than older ones ( $F=6.2$ ,  $p=.014$ ,  $\eta^2=.207$ ), and, as was true of the helpers, black workers were also significantly more likely to upgrade than white workers: 72 percent of black men but only 32 percent of white were upwardly mobile ( $\chi^2=17.7$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $\phi=.372$ ). We may surmise that the black men who were hired in unskilled jobs, having had few opportunities to excel in the past because of discrimination, had considerably more potential than unskilled white men. Not surprisingly, those who became helpers in the 1920s at Chicago stayed with the company significantly longer than those who did not (19.4 years on average vs. 12.3 years,  $F=10.2$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta^2=.262$ ). Yet, there were no significant differences between unskilled workers who were upwardly mobile and those who were not in why they finally left company employ. The very steadiness of unskilled jobs at Pullman, compared to most unskilled labour, may have appealed to many men without skills whether they had the opportunity to move up or not.

The careers of the men hired for unskilled jobs at Richmond in the 1920s underscore the existence of a group of men who preferred steady employment to upward mobility, even when the risk it entailed was relatively low. At Richmond,

there was no significant difference in age between unskilled workers who became helpers in the 1920s and those who did not, and although white workers were more likely to become helpers than black workers, the difference was not statistically significant. Those who rose, however, stayed with Pullman for fewer years and were more likely to quit than those who did not: 35 percent of those who became helpers quit, but only 13 percent of those who did not. Unskilled men who were upwardly mobile stayed on average 11.5 years, while those who remained in unskilled jobs stayed 23.8 years ( $F=23.0$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $\eta^2=.540$ ). Those who had taken the risk to upgrade seemed to be willing to take more risks, while some unskilled men clung to a steady job regardless of other opportunities.

New job ladders for the unskilled and helpers seemed to provide a welcome choice for men in the 1920s, but the three-level system designed for skilled workers did not have as pervasive an impact. At Wilmington, the shop manager simply did not implement the new job titles and pay rates. Just as he exploited the helpers, he insisted that the skilled each do one task, but without the designations that would entitle them to higher pay for more difficult jobs. Having few opportunities for better jobs in the depressed Wilmington economy, these skilled workers stayed with the shop for long periods, comparable to those of men at the Richmond and Chicago shops where the new system was implemented.

Yet, as Table 7.5 reveals, even at the Chicago and Richmond shops skilled workers were less likely than helpers or unskilled workers to experience upward mobility in the 1920s. At Chicago, newly hired skilled workers and those hired before the strike had relatively similar careers despite their initial differences in age and Pullman experience. Only about one third of those at the A or B levels were upwardly mobile in the 1920s. At the Richmond shop, more workers hired before the strike began at C level jobs than was true at Chicago, and more newly hired skilled workers began at B level ones. Perhaps the tighter labour market in the Richmond area induced the shop manager to rate workers more highly. At the same time, the fact that more men were rated highly to begin with may have limited opportunities for lower rated men. A- or B-level workers at Richmond were somewhat less likely to rise in the 1920s than were workers in similar jobs at the Chicago shop.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of A- and B-level workers at Chicago and Richmond would not rise to a higher level in the 1920s, they made long-term careers with Pullman. At Chicago, those hired before the strike who did not rise stayed on average 23.1 years; those hired in the 1920s who were not upwardly mobile stayed on average 21.6 years. While A- and B-level workers who did rise had longer careers, the differences were not statistically significant. At Richmond, A- and B-level workers hired before the strike who did not rise had careers of 20.9 years on average, and those hired in the 1920s who were not upwardly mobile stayed on average 13.7 years. As at Chicago, those who were upwardly mobile had longer careers on average, but the differences were not statistically significant. Being somewhat older when hired than the helpers and unskilled may have made skilled workers willing to stay put despite the lack of upward mobility. They also acted like traditional craftsmen, however—either they made their peace with their job and stuck to it or they sought to improve their prospects through collective

action. Indeed many of those who ‘rose’ after the 1920s did not do so by individual choice, but when worker pressure forced the company to change the classification system. In the 1937 contract, foremen’s discretion over pay rates was eliminated and some A and B level jobs were upgraded to a higher level. At Chicago 18 percent of the A-level workers who had been hired before the strike and 11 percent of A-level workers hired after the strike rose to the B level in 1937. Through collective action these men were able to move up in pay without risking their seniority. Similarly, all remaining B level jobs were made C level in 1941. At Chicago 17 percent of C-level workers hired before the strike and 28 percent of C-level workers hired afterward moved to C level jobs in 1941 without threat to their seniority.

**Table 7.7 Percentage of workers who left employ by period of leaving and reason**

Period	N	Natural	Fired	Layoff	Quit
Wilmington Repair Shop					
Strike-1929	106	34	7	12	47
1930-1940	144	50	4	38	8
1941-1945	71	68	3	3	27
1946-1960	339	31	2	61	7
Richmond Repair Shop					
Strike-1929	27	18	0	22	59
1930-1940	130	21	7	49	24
1941-1945	80	35	3	1	61
1946-1957	115	66	0	6	28
1958-1960	198	8	1	89	3
Chicago Repair Shop					
Strike-1929	97	24	11	30	35
1930-1940	266	33	8	41	18
1941-1945	135	44	2	16	38
1946-1957	330	65	4	9	23
1958-1969	436	42	3	29	26

*Source:* Employment database from the Pullman Company Archive.

The value that skilled workers placed on secure employment also can be seen in the absence of significant differences between those who were upwardly mobile in the 1920s and those who were not in why they eventually left the shop. At Chicago, most A and B level workers left for ‘natural’ reasons and few quit: of those hired before the strike, 76 percent of the upwardly mobile and 77 percent of

those who did not rise left for 'natural' reasons. Of those hired in the 1920s, 73 percent of the upwardly mobile and 68 percent of those who did not rise also left for 'natural' reasons. Similarly, for A- and B-level workers hired at Richmond before the strike 60 percent of those who were upwardly mobile and 79 percent of those who were not left for 'natural' reasons. A- and B-level workers hired after the strike at Richmond were less likely to leave for 'natural' reasons and much more likely to quit or be laid off, but again there was no statistical difference between those who were upwardly mobile and those who were not. Only 30 percent of the upwardly mobile and 46 percent of those who did not rise left for 'natural' reasons, while 40 percent of the former and 33 percent of the latter left because of layoff.

The layoffs experienced by these skilled workers at Richmond point to the impact of the Great Depression. At every Pullman shop, as Table 7.7 demonstrates, the percentage of men who ended their careers because of layoffs increased substantially during the 1930s. At the same time, workers' concern for security was visible in the precipitous drop in the percentage who quit. Not surprisingly, those hired during the depression did not have as much opportunity for long-term employment as those hired in the 1920s. At the Chicago shop, the average length of careers declined significantly for helpers and mechanics hired in the 1930s in comparison to those hired in the 1920s, as Tables 7.3 and 7.4 show. At the Richmond shop, the average length of career also declined significantly for helpers hired in the 1930s. The only group hired at the Chicago shop in the 1930s that did not evidence a significant decline in average length of career was the unskilled. Indeed, unskilled workers had, on average, the longest careers of those hired in the 1930s. This reflects again the existence of a core of unskilled men who clung to steady employment when it was offered. Unskilled workers who did not rise to helper level in the 1930s had careers of comparable length (15.1 years) to those who did (16.6 years).

Upward mobility did not disappear during the depression, but as the company had less need for new workers opportunities to rise declined. Thirty-one percent of helpers hired at the Chicago and Richmond shops during the 1930s rose to the skilled level in that decade. In comparison 51 percent of helpers hired during the 1920s at Chicago and 41 percent of those hired at Richmond had become skilled workers in the 1920s. Opportunities for the unskilled to rise also declined during the depression; only 39 percent of those hired at Chicago in the 1930s rose during that decade, compared to 60 percent of those hired in the 1920s.

When the American economy rebounded in 1941, new and better job opportunities for blue-collar workers suddenly appeared, and many men were eager to take them. As Table 7.7 shows, quitting became a more common reason for leaving at every Pullman repair shop than it had been during the depression decade, as some men responded to the higher wages and chance to upgrade in armaments manufacture and shipbuilding. However, there was no mass exodus of workers from Pullman repair shops. For older men the stable employment that Pullman shops offered remained attractive, especially as many were nearing retirement age. Indeed the percentage of those leaving for 'natural' reasons—primarily retirement or age-related health concerns—was increasing at all the shops. Even for younger men who had remained employed during the depression

and built up seniority, new job opportunities were problematic. Many people did not expect the boom to outlast the war, and so switching jobs raised the spectre of layoffs and unemployment. As Table 7.8 reveals, for skilled workers at Chicago, age was the only variable that correlated highly with reasons for leaving during the war. Men who quit were younger than those who left the shops for other reasons, but neither lack of mobility nor race had any significant effect on propensity to quit. (Length of service was highly correlated with age at leaving, and so drops out of the regression equations.) Only for helpers, who as a group were somewhat younger when hired than the skilled and had always shown the greatest mobility, did other variables correlate with quitting during the war. For Chicago helpers, both age and lack of previous mobility correlated with quitting. Here are the workers who were willing to take a chance for a better job.

**Table 7.8 Regression equations: Correlates of quitting rather than leaving for other reasons at the Chicago shop**

	N	AgeL	Mobil	Race	Tenure	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>
1941-1945						
skilled	59	-.565**	.072	-.061	.076	.31
helpers	50	-.439**	-.281*	.164	.094	.31
1946-1957						
skilled	146	-.848**	.040	.190**	.039	.57
helpers	102	-.752**	.018	.184*	.027	.47
unskilled	74	-.624	-.207*	.093	.016	.49

\* significance  $p < .05$

\*\* significance  $p < .01$

*Source:* Results of ordinary least squares regressions.

*Note:* Variables in the analysis include AgeL (age at leaving), Tenure (length of employment), Race (if white), and Mobil (if upwardly mobile).

Although the war boom did not induce most Pullman workers to reject security for higher wages and possibilities for upward mobility, the postwar decline of the company and the railroad industry made jobs at Pullman significantly less desirable than they had been. As Table 7.8 shows, after the war age remained the primary correlate of quitting, as younger men looked to other industries for opportunity and older men—by 1955 the median age of Chicago workers was 52—held on hoping to get their pensions. Among the unskilled workers at the Chicago shop, lack of upwardly mobility also correlated with the propensity to quit, as men who saw no opportunity at Pullman looked elsewhere in the booming economy. But race played a new role in the postwar era, too. At Chicago, white men in skilled or helper level positions were more likely to quit than black men were. Given the persistence of racial discrimination in the late 1940s and 1950s, white men had much more opportunity than black men did to find good jobs elsewhere (Harris, 1982, chap. 6).

Despite the company's bleak prospects, the shops continued to hire, because repair shops are only cost-effective if run at full strength. As large numbers of older workers retired and others quit, Pullman shop managers replaced most of those who were leaving until the point at which the shops had to be closed. The Wilmington shop closed in 1958 and the Richmond shop followed suit two years later, both with massive layoffs. The Chicago shop was the last to close, in 1969, and so is the only one to generate a large enough number of postwar hires in our database for detailed analysis.

Not surprisingly, those who came to the Chicago shop after the war were much less likely to see it as a suitable place for a career. Forty-nine percent of those hired after the war quit of their own volition, as compared to 29 percent of those hired in the 1930s and 21 percent hired in the 1920s. Moreover, only workers with few other opportunities chose to work for the shop. This is most apparent in the racial composition of the new workers, as Tables 7.3 and 7.4 reveal. The shop had no policy favouring employment of black Americans, but almost all the men hired at the unskilled or helper level after the war were black as were one-third of those hired in skilled jobs. African Americans still faced significant discrimination at many work places in Chicago, and thus jobs at the Chicago shop might still be good ones from their perspective (Baron and Hymer, 1968). Even though unskilled workers and helpers hired in the post-war period stayed for much shorter times than those hired in the 1930s, similar percentages were upwardly mobile and they moved up more quickly. Those who were upwardly mobile stayed significantly longer than those who did not move up. Unskilled workers who were promoted stayed, on average, 10.0 years, while those who did not remained only 4.7 years ( $F=10.9$ ,  $p=.002$ ,  $\eta^2=.395$ ). Helpers who moved into the skilled ranks also stayed significantly longer, 11.3 years, than those who did not, 4.7 years ( $F=16.4$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $\eta^2=.441$ ). For black men, opportunities in American industry were still limited enough that they were willing to make a career in a dying industry.

## **Conclusions**

The experience of Pullman repair shop workers during the early to mid decades of the twentieth century reveals the importance of stable employment to American blue-collar workers. For many, it was more highly valued than the possibility for upward mobility. Indeed skilled workers clung to their craft traditions and resisted the establishment of job ladders within the skilled division; they saw such plans as a way to narrow the content of the jobs and depress wage rates. When the risk to job security was minimal, skilled workers, as individuals, might take advantage of job ladders to upgrade, but when possible they used collective action to abolish them. Steady employment also appealed to many unskilled workers, who were happy to take it, whether or not they had chance to move up to a better job. Most unskilled jobs in America were short-term, and the application of seniority to unskilled jobs at Pullman and the railroads made this sector unusual. Only in the post-war era, as the future of the industry looked grim and long-term employment

was no longer assured, did unskilled workers who were not upwardly mobile show a willingness to look elsewhere.

At Pullman, helper-level jobs were the key site for upward mobility. But even though many helpers valued the opportunity to upgrade, men would take those opportunities only when the risk to stable employment seemed minimal. This suggests why the policy of plant-wide seniority appealed to workers in other industries, like automobiles. Where workers' seniority is determined by total employment, not just employment at a particular job, the appeal of upward mobility is not lessened by the threat of insecurity. The degree to which workers stayed with Pullman even as it declined also speaks to the importance American labour unions have put on protecting the jobs of current workers, often to the detriment of younger workers and the unemployed. With no government supports for the unemployed comparable to those in European countries, American workers find the promise of long-term employment hard to resist.

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