

Testimony – CONGRESSWOMAN ROBIN KELLY

Staff: Charles – Remarks: Charles

Date & Time: Wednesday, April 21, 2021

Location: WebEx

Role: YOU are testifying in front of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands.

Thank you, Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher for holding this hearing as we celebrate National Park Week. It is my honor to be here today before the subcommittee and share what Pullman means to the City of Chicago, the workers' rights and civil rights movements, and the history of African American pioneers.

You all may know the remarkable story of the Pullman community – a uniquely hard-working, problem-solving, innovative, inspirational, transformational treasure of Americana.

The story began some 140 years ago. George Pullman built his factory and worker housing side-by-side on Chicago's southside.

America's burgeoning railroad industry needed better rail cars for passengers who, for the first time ever, were travelling across the country by train.

For many years, Pullman set the standard by building state-of-the-art railcars for American travelers. When those production workers and craftsmen began getting shortchanged, they held out for fair wages and unwittingly launched the American labor movement.

When the luxurious railcars needed a similar upgrade in their customer service, the workers of Pullman delivered by providing the best porters of the day. But, once again, when those workers

were being treated unfairly, they formed the first black trade union in the country, and the International Brotherhood of Pullman Porters stood up for the rights of African-American working men and woman across the country.

Pullman workers refused to waver in the struggle for civil rights. They stood strong in the face of deadly riots and ultimately forced Congress and the President to recognize the monumental contributions that working men and women were making every day.

Indeed, these events in Pullman ultimately led to the creation of our Labor Day holiday, something which all Americans still celebrate each year on the first Monday in September.

And while Pullman workers played pivotal roles and forced historic breakthroughs in workers' and civil rights, that struggle continues to this day.

Their fight for fair wages and workplace safety continues in America. Pay disparity is still a reality in 2021. Civil rights, workers' rights, and voting rights are again under attack.

But like the Pullman brothers and sisters who came before us, we will continue to stand up for hard-working families.

A few decades back, when many felt Pullman had outlived its usefulness, some Chicago leaders proposed bulldozing the entire town.

But as its history reflects, Pullman community leaders and residents – descendants of railcar makers and porters alike –

stood together, stood firm, and saved their neighborhood, their heritage, and this unique piece of American history.

Pullman has also overcome its fair share of adversity, including the accidental fire that nearly destroyed much of the iconic clock tower building more than a decade ago. But again, the community united to rebuild the clock tower, which has stood watch over residents for more than a century.

In 2014, Pullman finally earned the recognition that it's long deserved. President Obama proclaimed Pullman to be a National Monument.

Today, before you, we consider H.R. 2626, the Pullman National Historical Park Act to elevate Pullman Monument to a National Historic Park. This will further efforts to protect, preserve and promote this uniquely American site, its many historic achievements, and its multiple roles in promoting labor and civil rights.

Throughout its long and glorious history, there's been one common thread to life in Pullman: Unity in the face of all odds.

This community's commitment, perseverance, innovation, humanity, and overriding sense of place, dating back five and six generations, forever shaped America.

Often times, stories like Pullman are overshadowed by other news from Chicagoland.

But H.R. 2626 will shine a light on Chicago's unique, positive history as a confluence – a switchyard, you could say – of

innovation, transportation, manufacturing, customer service, civil rights and the labor history.

Pullman is a national success story, where a diverse group of local residents, for more than a century, repeatedly and sometimes painstakingly, have always been able to overcome adversity through unity. It's a powerful story about America.

I know from my constituents who reside in Pullman, this new designation will generate more opportunities for jobs and spur the local economy. Additionally, its location near the proposed Obama Presidential Library and Museum, will help make Chicago's South Side a major tourist destination for all Americans.

In short, elevating the Pullman National Monument to a Pullman National Historical Park will further preserve this community, honor these many compelling stories, and celebrate a place where adversity and diversity garner unity.

Thank you.