
The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Federation

by Eugene V. Debs

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We pay the members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers no idle compliment when we say the great majority of its membership favor federation, as it exists with the four federated Orders of railway employees, viz.: B of LE, B of RT, SMAA, and the B of RC.¹

To make this alliance equal to any and every emergency, the B of LE is required. With the engineers in line with the conductors, trainmen, switchmen, and firemen, ample protection to the members of each is assured, and now, as from the first, we are unable to discover any well grounded objections the B of LE can propose to such an alliance.

We do not hesitate to admit the numerical strength of the B of LE. It would be supreme folly to equivocate upon the conquering power of the B of LE when in alliance with other orders of railway employees it demands that the right shall triumph over the wrong, and the fact that the B of LE can muster a larger force under its banners than some other orders of railway employees, is an argument in favor of rather than in opposition to federation.

It should be said in this connection that notwithstanding its numerical strength of membership, the B of LE, in case of trouble with a corporation, is not strong enough under all circumstances to "go it alone, and engineers know that such exigencies do sometimes arise when the united voice and strength of all are required to secure simple justice, and that in the absence of such an alliance, defeat is almost inevitable.

¹ The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (formerly the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen), Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, and Brotherhood of Railway Conductors, respectively. The last of these was an upstart "dual" organization established in parallel to the much larger Order of Railway Conductors.

We but repeat a thrice told tale, but as true as trite, that had the engineers, firemen, trainmen, conductors, and switchmen been in compact alliance, acting as one, unified for the welfare of all, the history of the CB&Q affair would have read differently. In this notable battle had federation existed a victory would have been won for the right, and it is universally admitted that the battle was lost because such an alliance did not exist.

It occurs to us that just here it is well to introduce figures approximating actual conditions as illustrative of cogent reasons why the strong, numerically, should federate with the weak. Stated in tabulated form, we have something like the following :

B of LE membership		20,000
B of LF membership	18,000	
B of RT membership	16,000	
SMAA membership	6,000	
B of RC membership	2,000	
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TOTAL	42,000	20,000

It will be seen that as matters now stand the federated orders number 22,000 more members than the B of LE, and it is fair to presume that this percentage of difference holds good on most of the railroad systems of the country. With such figures in full view, the arguments in favor of federation are greatly strengthened.

But there is another view to take of the subject. It will doubtless be conceded that in proportion to numbers, the greater the liability to have grievances, hence the B of LE would have more grievances than firemen, trainmen, switchmen, or conductors. The idea which we desire to present is, that in proportion to the numbers of the federated orders, the greater the liability for grievances and the greater the demand for the support of the orders of less numerical strength. In a word, federation is productive of a sense of security to all against wrongs. And thus it happens that the conclusion is almost universal that with federation strikes disappear.

In saying this we are fortunately in possession of facts which triumphantly demonstrate the conclusion. It was not long since demonstrated on the Erie Railroad. It was as conclusive at Pittsburgh when the employees contended with some *fourteen different* railroads. It was

a notable victory on the Q&C,² and in many ways demonstrated its power for good on the O&M.³ On the Erie the engineers won a victory, at Pittsburgh the yardmen, on the Q&C the conductors and trainmen, and on the O&M, the engineers and firemen. And just here let it be said that without federation, for in every instance federation was invoked, there would have been a strike.

We do not permit ourselves to believe the B of LE, in the face of all the facts, in the face of logical conclusions, the trend of the mind forces of railway employees will *sit down* on federation. Once in the federated body, the B of LE's power and influence would be acknowledged and every problem solved.

We shall not permit ourselves to discuss any proposition calling in question the honor or integrity of the representatives of the federated orders. It is only required to state that any intimation of dishonorable acts is unworthy of consideration and that the B of LE, should it become a member of the Supreme Council, will have no cause to regret its action. It will find men and orders honest and courageous, ready when the exigency arises to maintain every obligation to win victories for the right and to stand firmly by every pledge.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² The Queen & Crescent was a railway connecting Cincinnati and New Orleans. Trouble erupted early in 1890 over a demand by management that the line's employees terminate their membership in the various railway brotherhoods as a condition of further employment.

³ The Ohio & Mississippi Railway connected Cincinnati with East St. Louis, Illinois.