
The Improvement of Railway Management

by Eugene V. Debs

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It is not our purpose at this writing to be statistical. We propose to write of moral, rather than physical forces. We have about so much space at our disposal, and shall endeavor to use it to the best, advantage practicable.

It must not be regarded as a departure from our plan to state that there are now in operation, in this country, about 100,000 miles of railroads, which, according to estimates, represent an investment of about \$8 billion of which it is safe to say, \$2 billion represent water. These roads employ about 1 million persons.

Such figures furnish a basis for theory and for argument. They establish, beyond controversy, the fact that railroading is the most stupendous enterprise of modern times. A century ago the wildest imagination did not so much as touch the outermost rim of the sphere of the established facts of the present.

Necessarily, railroad management began with railroad building and railroad operations. As a consequence, we have had some sort of railroad management since 1830, when there were, in the United States, 23 miles of railroad track in operation. The difference in railroad management then and now may not be as the difference between 23 miles and 100,000 miles of track. But while the difference is not so wide, it is scarcely less distinctively marked.

Railroad management, as we write of it now, relates to men — not to machines — and in commenting upon such changes as have occurred during 70 years, we shall include employers, as well as employees.

Men of an investigating, analytical disposition will find in the subject which it is our pleasure to discuss, numerous facts of startling significance. As they proceed in their investigations, they will discover

that long established theories, relating to mental and moral improvement, gradually, perhaps, suddenly disappear, while others, less medieval, come into prominence.

A writer, discussing “what an American philosophy should be,” remarks:

If a genuine American philosophy arises, it must reflect the genius of the people. Now, Yankees are distinguished from most others by their practical observations and invention. They have a pretty clear notion of what a thing is, and, if it is of value, they take steps to secure it.¹

That is to say, realism, not idealism, is to be the basis of the coming school of American philosophy. It is to be fact instead of fancy. The world, and we are not particular about the starting point, has believed that improvement in men’s conditions, always came to them from a real or an assumed upper strata of society, that is to say, that what is called the “upper tendom” of society, by some inscrutable influence, improved what it was pleased to denominate the “lower milliondom.” That the man in the castle exerted an elevating, sublimating power over the man in the cottage, and this theory has prevailed throughout Christendom, and still numbers its devotees by millions. Trace it back to its fountain head, find the egg from which it was hatched, and it will be found in the same nest with that other egg, from which has come the “divine right to rule” idea, which is not and can never be taught in any American school of philosophy. In this country, one man is just as “divine” as any other man, has the same right, the same prerogatives, the same privileges. That is the fundamental law — the eternal law. It is the “higher law” — the irrevocable law. If it is disregarded, it is because, here in America, men voluntarily abdicate their rights, uncrown themselves and go into voluntary servitude and degradation.

The “divine right to rule” idea, is a disease, worse than smallpox, cholera, yellow fever, or the plague, and, strange to say, the man who by inheritance, or by processes known to our much vaunted Christian civilization, gets money, no matter by what method, assumes a sort of a divine right to rule other men who have less money. That there is power in money, goes without saying, but it is not “divine” power,

¹ James McCosh, “What an American Philosophy Should Be,” *New Princeton Review*, vol. 61, no. 1 (Jan. 1886), pg. 17. McCosh (1811-1894) was the President of Princeton University.

nor does it confer “divine” rights. There is power in official position in authority, but it is not “divine” power, nor “divine” authority men can fall prostrate before it, men can crawl in its presence, men can cringe and fawn under its frown, but they do not have to — and here in America such claims to autocratic power meet with robust opposition, but it must be said that, so far, the antiquated error has not been entirely overcome.

There are thousands of our readers, whose familiarity with the history of railroad management in the United States will at once supply all needed testimony to establish the fact that there has been altogether too much of this “divine right to rule” business in conducting the great enterprise, as well as in other enterprises, to carry forward which employees were required to attempt the task of managing themselves, and in doing this, there being a vast multitude of them, their action necessarily involved, to some extent, the management of their employers, and of the railroads.

To the superficial thinker, to a man impregnated with the autocratic divine right to rule or what is about the same, the dollar right to rule, the idea that employees have a right to any voice in the management of a railroad becomes immensely preposterous. But a moment’s reflection ought to dissipate the error. The right to manage ought to be in proportion to the investment, and employes on railroads, if merely dollars are considered, invest vastly more than many stockholders. Besides, they invest their health and their lives, and in all matters pertaining to their wellbeing, ought to have a voice, and to this, on many roads, it has come and is coming, we believe, to be accepted as a right on all roads.

If history is worth the paper and parchment upon which it is written, there is not to be found a single instance demonstrating that the “divine” or dollar right to rule class ever helped the victims of their authority one inch on an upward career. But it can be shown that in every case, where there has been improvement in conditions, the work was begun by those whose surroundings demanded improvement, that the forces set in operation were from beneath, and not from above, and necessarily so, because those on top were satisfied, they lived above the line of agitation, they breathed the pure upper currents. Their homes were on the highlands. The decrees from above were never for the employe to come up, unless it was in bowed attitudes to pay homage or tribute.

If there has been improvement in the railroad management of the country, which has elevated the employee to a higher plane, it has had its origin in the councils of the employees, not in one instance, nor a dozen, but in every instance. That there has been such improvement, the proof is overwhelming. Who has gained by it? Everybody. In securing fair wages, the employee has been benefitted. Society has gained in peace and prosperity, and the railroad management has gained immensely and indefinitely in the contentment and fidelity of its employees, what toploftical writers call the *esprit de corps* of employees, the animating spirit of the entire force.

It is now about 16 years since the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was organized and during most of the same period this *Magazine* has watched with ceaseless solicitude the moral and intellectual advancement of railway employees in every department of the service, as also their advancement in skill, and ability to grasp every new invention adopted to facilitate business. Nor has it been unobservant of any method in management which employers have adopted and which have been improvements upon former methods.

It would appear paradoxical to talk of moral growth downwards, and yet, when pride, ostentation, and arrogance get a fall, the victim is really *elevated*. The man who yields up a vagary for a fact, who surrenders an error and adopts a truth, whatever he may have thought of himself, or whatever exaltation he may have fancied he occupied, has really achieved a moral excellence to which he had previously been a stranger, and he should be thankful for the change, without regard to the origin of the influences and forces which have brought about the beneficial change.

Who, of all our readers, has seen a supercilious individual, wrapping around him his robes of authority, and saying to others in acts, which speak louder than words, "Stand thou there. I am better than thou," and has not felt in every fiber of his mental organism that if such an individual could be reduced to the level of common sense, he would not be greatly elevated, and have a much more rational conception of himself? A great many railroad magnates, during the past 16 years, have been thus elevated by influences that have been put in operation by railway employees. But in no one instance have employers sacrificed their dignity. There has been no dwarfing force applied. It has simply been the elimination from their education and training, of a brood of vicious errors, and, as a consequence, in coming down, they have really gone up.

It will be admitted, we believe, that an employer who has experienced such a change, has become a vastly better manager, because he is more in sympathy with those he is required, by his position, to manage.

Our purpose is to avoid all appearance of chicane in argument. Sophistry is not our forte, and we leave to others the triumphs of word jugglery. We hold that the improvement in railroad management began with employees and not with employers. The employee was the first to discover the necessity for the improvements. For illustration, we shall confine, at this writing, our references to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen with which we are identified. The organization was based on the idea of moral, intellectual, social, and financial improvement of conditions. For about 16 years it has gone steadily forward in its chosen field of endeavor. The organization was not suggested by the employers of locomotive firemen. Railroad officials rarely, if ever, discover defects, except in employees. Not so with the firemen. They saw the necessity for improvement all along the line. They concluded to educate themselves first, that they might the better point out to others when changes in the management could be introduced with positive advantage. The great public, quick to discover changes for the better, admits the claim put forth by the brotherhood and applauds the improvement, and railroad officials, stockholders, and bondholders, at least those of them who study conditions critically, yield their assent and willingly declare that a vast improvement in railroad management has occurred.

In this connection, let it be distinctly understood, that we claim nothing for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, in the way of improving the railroad management of the country, that does not attach to the Brotherhoods of Engineers, Conductors, Brakemen, and Switchmen. They have all been inspired by the same ambition. All have been studiously trying to educate themselves for the positions they occupy and for higher positions. In the progress of their work, they have been able to point out where wrongs existed and where mistakes were made. They have been capable of presenting their own grievances and of convincing officials, and as a result, the management has improved. And thus the work of improvement has worked upwards until it has touched Presidents, Vice-Presidents, General Managers, Master Mechanics, etc. As we have said, we make no allusion to improved machines, better tracks, rails, bridges, etc., but to better men, better management.

We are not Utopians, nor are we looking for the immediate coming of the millennium. Human nature is the same in all ages. It is not more sublimated now than when Noah built the ark, or Pharaoh's slaves built the pyramids, but it is possible to bring the human nature of the employer and the employee into closer and a more friendly alliance by leveling up the one and leveling down the other, and thus move along together toward the point of mutual appreciation and recognition.

Disagreements are still rife, and the revolution is still going forward. What next? We hold that the next thing to be done to perfect railroad management, is for all the Brotherhoods of Railway employees to federate for mutual protection. Their interests are greater than those of any other class connected with the railway service of the country. One illustration must answer our purpose. Suppose employees are receiving as wages what will barely suffice to sustain themselves and their families, and to lay by a few dollars for sickness or old age, and the order comes to reduce their pay 10 percent, or any other percentage. Instead of reducing the pay of the employees, the demand is made to reduce dividends 1 percent or a half of 1 percent, and the same with bondholders. The reduction of dividends and interest would cause the rich no inconvenience, while the reduction of wages would cause widespread distress. This would be a proposition upon which federation could act, resist a wrong successfully and impose no burden upon any one. And thus we could go through the list, demonstrating that federation as it would prevent strikes and make arbitration a certainty, the railroad management of the country would be so improved that the world would wonder why it should have been so long delayed. As a clincher, had federation been applied in the incipency of the CB&Q strike, who does not believe that the strike would have been prevented? Had it been prevented the strikers would have saved \$1.2 million and the road would be today \$10 million better off. Federation will prevent such occurrences in the future, and employers, as well as employees, should hail with satisfaction the signs of the times which betoken the coming of federation.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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