
“The Commercial and Political Considerations Involved in Sympathetic Railroad Strikes”

by Eugene V. Debs

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Mr. Joseph Nimmo, Jr.,¹ is the author of a pamphlet in which he discusses the subject indicated in the caption we have reproduced from his pamphlet.² Mr. Nimmo was statistician of the United States Treasury Department for many years, and for aught we know to the contrary, may still be occupying that responsible position.

Mr. Nimmo deems it advisable to come to the rescue of Messrs. Taft³ and Ricks,⁴ the United States judges whose judicial jugglery with the law in the case of men vs. the corporation in the Toledo, Ann Arbor & North Michigan Railroad was such as to remind one of cuttlefish tactics, so that when they had exploited their erudition the case became utterly incomprehensible to lawyers, to say nothing of laymen. It was very kind in Mr. Nimmo to come to the rescue of the judges for the purpose of rendering clear what was exceedingly inky, and if he has not succeeded in his self-imposed task, he has by the exhibition of intentions, doubtless secured a *free railroad pass*, and possibly more substantial rewards from railroad corporations, for his *sympathetic* contribution.

¹ **Joseph N. Nimmo, Jr.** (1831-1909), was a civil engineer turned economist who was head of the US Government's Bureau of Statistics for ten years.

² Joseph Nimmo, *The Commercial and Political Considerations Involved in Sympathetic Railroad Strikes*. Washington, DC: n.p., 1893.

³ **William Howard Taft** (1857-1930) is best known as the 27th President of the United States. A former Ohio state judge, Taft was appointed to the Sixth Circuit of the US Court of Appeals in March 1892 by President Benjamin Harrison.

⁴ **Augustus J. Ricks** (1843-1906) was appointed to the US Court for the Northern District of Ohio in July 1889 by President Benjamin Harrison.

Mr. Nimmo deploras “sympathetic railroad strikes.” In the fierce struggle which workingmen experience to obtain and maintain their rights against the rapacity of corporations, Mr. Nimmo would eliminate all indication of sympathy, which means fellow feeling, an agreement of inclinations, kindness towards one who suffers wrong and injustice, and which embodies to the fullest extent, the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have others do unto you; to that sort of flapdoodle Mr. Nimmo is opposed with all the heart he has at command.

Mr. Nimmo, and men of his ilk, explode with the force of a shooting cracker when dealing with the sacredness of commerce, particularly “interstate commerce,” the sum total of which he estimates at \$40 billion a year. It is to him what Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image was which he set up and then demanded that nations and tribes and tongues should fall down and worship, and in the frenzy of his idolatry and self-importance, human rights were totally obscured.⁵ Mr. Nimmo lifts up his voice and shouts, “Commerce! Commerce! Corporation! Law!” He would have trains move though every man employed in the work should be ground to powder by the wheels of commerce.

Mr. Nimmo admits “the right of the employees of railroad companies to organize for their mutual advancement as a class,” but this “protection” must not include the slightest inconvenience to commerce. If, however, the corporation strikes for protection against employees and discharges a hundred or more of them, neither Mr. Nimmo, Messrs. Taft and Ricks, nor any other free pass advocate of justice, utters so much as one word in regard to the “inconvenience of commerce;” their fees do not invite to such argumentative gymnastics; there is no butter on such cornbread — but, when it comes to the railroad employe, then law, logic and lucre, mingle and flow together in a resistless tide; it is the one tide in the affairs of the corporation that leads on to fortune, and court and corporation straddle it while the entire tribe of Nimmos, shout as the pageant passes along and distributes nickels for their support.

Mr. Nimmo quotes the law to show how the railroads of the country are tied together endwise and the tremendous obligations imposed upon them by statute, and then endeavor to show that Messrs. Taft and Ricks by their decisions have pretty effectually welded the railroad employe to their inter-state tracks and machines.

⁵ Reference to *Daniel*, chapter 3.

Have they done it? That is the real question before the country — all else is quite immaterial. The question is going to the Supreme Court of the nation. It is vital, it is far reaching. In some of its aspects it is terrible.

Mr. Nimmo thinks there is a vital “political question involved,” in which he is right. Nothing less than the enslavement of men by statute to guard commerce to protect the corporation. “It is a question,” says Mr. Nimmo, “which involves the integrity of our political institutions.” What is this overshadowing question which startles Mr. Nimmo? This, a “sympathetic strike of railroad employees” — and Mr. Nimmo says, “this is no exaggeration; for the power to stop every wheel on the great trunk lines of the country, time and time again asserted, is evidently a much more strenuous exercise of power than that which the National Government has ever seen fit to exercise under the constitutional authority of regulating commerce among the states.”

If then it is determined by the supreme judicial power of the nation, that the law ties men to the machine, makes them a part of the rolling stock of the corporation, strikes down one “inalienable right” of the citizen, it may come, and it should come as a last resort, to maintain the rights of citizens, to “stop every wheel on the great trunk lines of the country.” But before such a calamity befalls the country, Congress will be required to banish such an infamous law from the statute books of the nation — and it will be done. Mr. Nimmo, if he has the leisure, should write another pamphlet and introduce his fancies, indicative of the task which would be performed of reducing to bondage the railroad employees of the country, and further, to intimate the ways and means by which the sympathy one workingman has for another may be successfully crushed out.

Mr. Nimmo proceeds to discuss “concrete facts which have an important bearing upon the matter” to which he refers. He says:

There are employed on the railroads of the United States about 35,000 locomotive engineers and 36,000 firemen — in all about 71,000.

The total number of persons employed in gainful occupations in the United States is about 21 million.

The total population of the United States is now about 65 million.

The total number of persons employed as locomotive engineers and firemen therefore constitutes about the 1/300th part of

one percent of the persons employed in the United States in gainful occupations, and about 1/900th part of one percent of the total population of the country.

The wages paid annually to locomotive engineers and firemen in the United States amount to not far from \$76.5 million this being about 1/15th of the total disbursements of all kinds by railroad companies annually.

The value of the railroad property of the country is not far from \$10 billion.

The value of the commodities transported annually on the railroads of the country exceeds \$40 billion. The aggregate sum paid annually in wages to locomotive engineers and firemen amounts, therefore, to only 1/5th of one percent of the total annual value of the internal commerce of the country.

There are transported on the railroads of the United States about 530 million passengers annually.

During the year ended June 30, 1890, each passenger locomotive engine hauled 58,735 passengers.

The foregoing serves an important purpose in the discussion — since but for the railroad employees, not a wheel would turn and the entire establishment would go to ruin, and since the employees play such an important part, are those who seek to oppress and degrade them entitled to more consideration than any other class of tyrants may claim? We are quite willing that Mr. Nimmo should here have a hearing as to his estimate of locomotive engineers and firemen. He says:

The locomotive engineers of the United States are engaged in an exceedingly important occupation, involving peril, and full of heroic fascination. They perform an essential function in the conduct of the grandest system of transportation ever seen on this planet — the American railroad system — a vast and complex organization formed by the co-ordination of many elements, personal, commercial, financial, and mechanical, and sustaining vitally important relations to the commercial and social life of the nation. This system of transportation, with its multiform relationships, constitutes the business environment of the locomotive engineers and firemen of the country, an environment with which they must live in harmony in order to secure their own well-being, and in order that they may be useful in the great work of Internal commerce. This is beyond all question.

Read the foregoing and then ask if it is to be presumed that the men Mr. Nimmo eulogizes are likely to submit without resistance to statutes or decisions which reduces them to degrading vassalage that commerce may be prosperous among the states? The men who work on railroads are the friends of commerce, progress and prosperity, quite as devoted and sincere as an average judge, corporation, president, bondholder, merchant, princely manufacturer, or even Mr. Nimmo himself — but they do not propose to be enslaved — nor will oceans of panegyrical adulations quiet them while judges of the Taft and Ricks style or any other model are applying the branding iron. This country has had quite enough of slavery and if the shackles struck from the limbs of negroes are to be riveted by court decrees upon the limbs of white men, then there will be trouble, which will be Vesuvian volcano compared to an ordinary smoke stack. Enslaving statutes will not stand, decisions of judges will not stand the onset. But the form of American government as the fathers made it, will not pass away in the struggle — not much — but it will be wrested from the grasp of plutocrats and their aiders and abettors — and with its pristine beauty and glory reinstated it will stand and the “gates of hell” shall not prevail against it, and the Nimmos, Tafts, and Ricks may as well take notice.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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