
“There Should Be No Aristocracy in Labor’s Ranks” :
Speech to Railway Employees at
Knights of Labor Hall, Ft. Wayne, Indiana
(January 23, 1894)
[excerpt]

In the creation of a new organization of railway employees, certain reasons prompting the movement are demanded and should be set forth with becoming candor. The number of men now in the service of the railroads in America has been estimated at 1 million, and of this number less than 150,000 are members of the various railroad brotherhoods, leaving 850,000 who are not enrolled in the ranks of organized labor. It is not my purpose to detract from the present railway organizations, as they have done [a great deal] for their members. The old plan of organization is not now practical. The railway corporations are consolidating as is shown by the 92 roads that passed out of existence, they being gobbled up by the larger corporations, and now practically only 20 organizations represent the business — and when vital issues are at stake, but one exists. The general managers have formed an organization, so that strikes will not cripple any road, they helping each other in time of disputes with men and equipment. The corporations are getting closer and closer together, while the employees are getting further and further apart.

By this means many organizations have lost strikes, because they have not been united thoroughly. As a rule I am opposed to strikes, and believe them the height of folly, but strikes are the only weapon that the laboring man has. The surest way to win a strike is to be prepared, and that we have not been prepared is shown by the many failures. Whenever a railway company permits its employees to strike, the company is sure of success. The outcome of strikes has always been disastrous. The army of the unorganized is more powerful than the organized workmen, and it is not possible for one of the present organizations to stand out successfully against any railroad.

The proper course for the railroad men is to organize in one body and do away with the aristocracy in their ranks. The American Railway Union is founded on the principle that the best paid man in the service is nothing more than an employee and the lowest paid man is also an em-

ployee of equal standing in the eyes of the company. There should be no aristocracy in labor's ranks. Just after the association of general managers was formed, a reduction of wages on the Louisville & Nashville road was commenced. Track men were cut as low as 67-1/2 cents per day. These reductions in wages are what produces the anarchists. The same reductions were made on a number of other systems, and the end is not yet, and reductions will become universal unless something is done.

The switchmen's strike at Buffalo was righteous and acknowledged so by all the brotherhoods, but they were unable to assist them. The militia lost the strike for the men, as it had done in a number of cases before. The strike on the Ann Arbor was defeated by the law in the hands of Judge [Augustus J.] Ricks. That was the most successful way yet tried. The latest was on the Union Pacific, where the receiver was appointed who secured injunctions against the employees' right to strike with his organization. There is no equality or justice in that. Courts are organized not to assist railway men, but to depress them. The only help is to unify and solidify our forces and in cases like this to strike and invite them to put us in prison together. If railway affairs are honestly administered there would be no reduction or strikes. On the Northern Pacific and a number of other roads men do not make enough to pay board. Organizations are growing weaker and weaker day by day. At least 5,000 engineers and firemen are at present out of work. The policy of railway corporations for years has been to create a surplus in the ranks of labor.

The American Railway Union does not propose to mix up men indiscriminately, but to have branches composed of firemen, engineers, shopmen, etc. Each branch transacts its own business, and when properly organized their demands will be more readily acceded to, and [will thus] do away with strikes. The only thing for railway men to do is get together. For 30 years we have been organized, and every strike has added to the great army of scabs, and cost the organization millions in money. Capital has profited by its disasters but labor has had the reverse. We must unite the train service with the track, shop, and clerical forces, and until we do that we must expect defeat. We have arrived at the point where we must go forward or backward. We must keep step with progress. The railway companies have consolidated, but no consolidation has so far taken place among the railway brotherhoods. Let labor everywhere take a hopeful view of the situation. No matter how gloomy conditions are I feel and know in a very short time there shall be an awakening, but until that time comes things will grow worse. I do not claim that the American Railway Union is perfect, but it is vastly better than the

present organizations of brotherhoods. There is no secrecy, no oath or expensive initiation, dues, or insurance to keep up.

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