
“A Railway Party in Politics”

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 7 (July 1893), pp. 525-528.

The caption of this article is reproduced from the May number of the *North American Review*, it being the caption of an article written by Harry P. Robinson, President of the *Railway Age and Northwestern Railroader*. Mr. Robinson seeks to show that in several states the organization of railway employees' clubs constitute nucleuses of a railway party in politics — as, for instance, in Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, and Texas. Mr. Robinson places the number of railway employees in the United States at 800,000, and estimates in the states named there are from 15,000 to 30,000 railway employees, or an average of 22,500 in each, which would give a total, for the five states named, of 112,500 employees.

Mr. Robinson is evidently in favor of the organization of a railway party in politics, as will readily be seen by the following rosy outlook. He says:

It is easy to see how much strength each a party, if formed, would possess. According to the reports of the Interstate Commerce Commission, there were in the immediate employ of the railways of the United States, a year and a half ago, 749,301 men, all, or nearly all, voters — which number has now, it may be assumed, been increased to about 800,000. There are, in addition, about one million and a quarter share holders in the railway properties of the country; and in other trades and industries immediately dependent upon the railways for their support, there are estimated to be engaged, as principals or employees, over one million voters more. These three classes, united, would give at once a massed voting strength of some three millions of voters. There are also, in the smaller towns especially, and at points where railway shops are located, all over the country, a number of persons, small tradesmen, boardinghouse keepers, etc., who are dependent for their livelihood on the patronage of railway employees, and whose rote could unquestionably be cast in

harmony with any concerted employees' movement. Moreover, unlike most new parties, this party would be at no loss for the sinews of war or for the means of organization. The men whom it would include form even now almost a disciplined army. With them cooperation is already a habit, while the financial backing and the commercial and political strength of which the party would find itself possessed from its birth would be practically unlimited.

We do not remember to have seen anywhere in print such a glowing description of a vagary, unless, perhaps, a parallel could be found in some narrative of the Keely motor,¹ or of some "salted" diamond mine. The writer, to put it mildly, does not understand the intellectual status of the great body of railway employees, the army of 800,000. The intimation that they can, to any considerable percentage, be sufficiently degraded to be marshaled under a political flag to promote stock and bond watering by railroad corporations is calculated to excite universal laughter, a succession of ha has and guffaws in comparison with which a fusillade of champagne corks at a Vanderbilt dinner would be as the chirp of a cricket compared with a discharge of the great Krupp gun.

It is not to be denied that some employees of railways, as well as some editors, and some shopmen and boardinghouse keepers, would join "A Railway Party in Politics." Bread and butter has its votaries in this degenerate age, and the worshipers of the railway-pass god could be easily induced to join the party. Numerous lawyers and divines could be roped in — creatures in human form who have an exhaustless supply of apostasy for every dollar or dime dropped into their itching palms, the hinges of whose knees are always lubricated and ready to crook at the nod of the fellow who has got the dollar.

Notwithstanding the extraordinary elements of strength the new party would possess at its birth, the "practically unlimited financial backing," the writer is of the opinion that there exists no "immediate probability" of the formation of such a party. A "corporation" party in

¹ **John Worrell Keely** (1837-1898) was a Philadelphia-born inventor and confidence man who claimed to have discovered a new mechanical principle that made possible the construction of a revolutionary "vibratory generator" that would yield massive power outputs from a minimal energy input of water. He established a firm called the Keely Motor Co. in New York in 1872 and began to take thousands of dollars from investors to put his alleged invention into commercial production. Aided by falsified public demonstrations, the company's fraudulent fund-raising continued into the decade of the 1890s.

politics would be just a little too heavy to swim; it would sink with all on board — employees, stockholders, bondholders, boardinghouse keepers, captain and cook, would all go down together.

The reasons set forth for the organization of “A Railway Party in Politics” are almost as clear as mud. The people, it is intimated, particularly the farmers, are robbing the railroads to an extent that bankruptcy has already come to many roads, and is forever confronting the remainder; all are to be engulfed in disaster by the farmers, who simply demand such rates of transportation as will leave them a little corn bread and pork upon which to subsist. The writer, to whom we are directing attention, says: “But it is possible that all of the capital stock of these lines — one-third of the railway mileage of the country — is water.” Yes, more than one-third of the \$10 or \$11 billion is water — not a cent less than \$4 billion, and the figures are conservative — and upon this vast sum of fraud, the mention of which startles the civilized world, the railroads of the country are trying to collect dividends — a fact about which there is no controversy, and because farmers protest and are unwilling to be robbed, the suggestion is made by Mr. Robinson that “A Railway Party in Politics,” made up chiefly of railway employees, would be just the thing to enable the railroads to collect dividends on water, because, by so doing, the roads could pay better wages. But would it not be more in consonance with good government and good politics, of right and justice, to cease collecting dividends on at least \$4 billion of water, and with the sum thus saved pay the employees better wages?

In discussing railways in politics, it is eminently proper to indicate why laws have been enacted touching directly or remotely railroad affairs. Such meddling of law makers could not have occurred unless there had been a loud and a long demand for it. And who has a right to speak out upon the subject? The answer might be, and very properly, too, any citizen who feels himself aggrieved. It so happens that a very distinguished US Senator, Mr. Cullom, of Illinois,² is conspicuous in giving the country to understand why Congress passed the interstate commerce law, in a communication to the *Railway Age*, April 14th. The act in question was passed by Congress in 1887, and it required 11 years of ceaseless battling to place it upon the statute books of the nation. Referring to the fact, Mr. Cullom says:

² **Shelby Moore Cullom** (1829-1914) was a Republican Congressman from Illinois elected to the US Senate in November 1882. He served for three decades in that body.

All fair-minded men will agree that the condition of affairs in this country in connection with the operation of railroads as common carriers prior to the passage of the interstate commerce act necessitated the exercise by Congress of constitutional power by enacting legislation for the "regulation of commerce among the several states."

The passage of the act of 1887 encountered stubborn opposition, and its enforcement has been exceedingly difficult. The greed for money and the determination to secure it, impel men operating railroads and those dealing with them to seek an advantage over others in competition with them to the extent even of violating the plain letter of the law and taking the chances of a fine and imprisonment.

Here the declaration is made that the railroads forced the legislation upon the country by discreditable conduct and dishonest dealings with the people. And he adds:

The world soon forgets past conditions. Doubtless few now remember the utter disregard by the common carriers of the country (I speak especially of railroads) of the common rules of fair dealing with those engaged in shipping, or with localities, prior to the passage of the interstate commerce act. Extortion was practiced at non-competing points; unjust discriminations were practiced by all manner of devices — special rates, rebates, drawbacks; and concessions were given which enriched favored shippers and bankrupted their neighbors. Men engaged as presidents, managers, and superintendents of railroads used their positions to amass fortunes for themselves in utter disregard of the public interest. Many of them seemed to know no law; they were a law unto themselves. A patient people finally determined to endure no longer such a condition. State legislatures and finally Congress, as a result, adopted the policy of regulation.

The arraignment is simply terrible, and what Senator Cullom says, relating to the necessity for passing the interstate commerce law, is equally true, as a reason why states have interfered to protect their citizens.

With these facts in full view, why should railway employees organize a political party in the interest of railway corporations? What

wisdom is there in such a movement any more than there would be in a trust party in politics, or a monopoly party in politics?

The American people, and none more so than railway employees, want honesty in politics and in business. They suffer much and suffer long, but when fully aroused they enter the domain of rascaldom and cleanse it. The people are honest. As for the corporations, let Senator Cullom be heard.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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First Edition