
A Grand Beginning: Speech at the Formation of the ARU Local at Terre Haute, Jan. 10, 1894

[excerpt]

by Eugene V. Debs

Published as "Started Grandly" in *The Railway Times*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Jan. 15, 1894), pg. 1.
Republishes account from the *Terre Haute Express*, unspecified date.

Two hundred charter members in the headquarters city of one of the old brotherhoods is not half bad. Such success must have been very gratifying to Messrs. Debs and Howard, who instituted the local union at Terre Haute on the evening of January 10 [1894]. In giving an abbreviated account of the meeting the Terre Haute Express speaks as follows:

President Debs and Vice-President Howard of the American Railway Union addressed a large and enthusiastic audience of railroad men at Hirzel's Hall on North 9th Street last night.

Seven hundred chairs had been placed in the hall, most of which were filled. A handsome crayon portrait of President Debs hung on the wall at the west end of the room. It was the largest gathering of railroad men ever assembled in Terre Haute, and beyond all doubt the most enthusiastic. The meeting was indeed a big success, as the charter list contains the names of 201 railroad men, and more will be added from day to day.

Mr. George W. Howard was introduced to the audience, and he talked very entertainingly, everybody being much pleased with his speech. After speaking of the old orders, their grand chiefs, the way the conventions were conducted, he said that he knew everybody wanted to hear their fellow-townsmen speak, and he would give way to Mr. Debs. In an introduction speech, Mr. Howard spoke of the

career of the President of the [American] Railway Union in glowing terms, going back 25 years ago.

Mr. Debs then came forward, and in the smooth, easy tone everybody loves to hear, spoke of the American Railway Union, its purposes and benefits. In substance the President said in part:

There is no desire or intention on my part to say anything of the old organizations to belittle or injure them. All have been organized for a purpose, which has been the benefiting of their members. This they have tried hard to do. But from the time they were first organized there has been no material change in their manner of seeking to benefit their members.

The conditions of the railway service have materially changed in the past 10 years. No further back than 10 years [ago] there were hundreds of small railroads from 100 to 300 miles in length, which were operated independently of any corporation or system of roads. With a few exceptions, no such state of affairs now exists. The big lines are branching out, absorbing the smaller lines until they are now in a position to successfully cope with the united strength of the six federated railroad orders. The brotherhoods remain the same as when first organized, having taken no steps to meet the onslaughts a united capital can wage. If I may refer to the past history of the orders now organized in the railway service, when engaged in strikes, I can recall nothing but a succession of defeats.

The strike on the Ann Arbor was a failure; the strike on the CB&Q¹ was a failure; the Lehigh Valley strike was a failure; in fact, every strike which has been declared by the grand chiefs of the old brotherhoods has been a failure. And why? Simply because there has been a lack of unity — a feeling of enmity and jealousy, a desire to build up one organization at the expense of another. This hatred and jealousy has existed in the brotherhoods for years. The opinion has prevailed that the man who makes \$5 a day has nothing in common with the man making \$1.10 a day; there has been a kind of aristocracy, the \$5 man holding himself aloof from the \$1 man. There is a contention between the switchmen and the trainmen, and so long as the present system of organization exists there always will be. History of strikes has shown that trainmen have taken the positions of switchmen at critical moments in time of trouble. There is that lack of confidence and unity which can exist only when all

¹ The Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad, commonly known as the “Burlington” or colloquially as “the Q.”

branches of the service are united under one banner, each striving to uphold and help along the other.

It requires a good deal of money to maintain membership in the old organizations; their laws require members to take out insurance, and other minor expenses foot up quite a small sum. These fees must be paid, and any member failing to do so is summarily expelled from the order. There are times when these sums cannot be had by the member, and no matter how industriously he may seek work in an effort to secure the necessary amount, the failure to do so brings the dreaded result. This state of affairs happens not only occasionally, but may just such happen daily. The result can plainly be seen. With the stigma of being a scab upon him, he is exiled from his former associates and brothers, jeered at and the epithet of "scab" constantly flung at him. There are thousands upon thousands of these men in the country, and the united strength of organized railroad employees embraces but 20 percent of the service.

A strike is declared. The organized men quit work, but the road officials have no trouble in filling their places. They know where to [look to find men to] fill the strikers' places. They have but to look around the to find the man who was jeered at, called a scab — an ex-brotherhood man. He is seeking revenge and gets it.

I might refer to dozens of strikes, all of which have been failures. On the Lehigh Valley alone, where five organizations went out at once, they were whipped, and today out of the 1,800 men who went out but 600 agains secured places at its termination. The CB&Q had to spend \$10 million to defeat organized labor, but they did it. And why were the men defeated? Simply because there was a lack of harmony, no thorough organization.

The railroads have constantly prepared and fortified themselves to fight organized labor. At Chicago an association of managers was organized, the purpose of which, as published, is to assist each other in combating organized labor; to listen to no protests of their employees. They are bound, should one of the roads in their organization get into trouble, to help them out of it. With such an existing state of affairs, how can railway labor, organized into different branches, all of which are more or less antagonistic to each other, expect to successfully cope with them? The situation requires that a closer union be effected, less jealousy, no antagonism, an organization where stands the \$5 a day man and the \$1 man both on equal footing, one not striving to be aristocratic over the other, but with friendship existing so that the poorly paid member may say to his more fortunate brother: "Your cause is my cause, your grievance mine; what is beneficial to you

is likewise beneficial to me.” When this is brought about, when the \$5 man can look upon the \$1 man as a brother who has interests in common with his own, then will strikes cease — or if one is declared, it will win, and win quick.

There is hardly one in this audience but remembers the E&TH strike.² Captain [G.J.] Grammar ordered a 10 percent reduction in wages. The engineers were willing to accept it, but the trainmen, switchmen, trackmen, in fact every branch of the service said, “No,” and when it was known that the protest came from both organized and unorganized [workers] the President of the E&TH the next day sent out notices that no reduction would be made. Aristocracy in this case was banished from the ranks of labor, where it did not belong. The engineers were possibly able to stand a 10 percent cut, but the man earning but \$1.10 was not, and by making the cause of one the cause of all the road officials wisely withdrew the order.

Within 5 years, I firmly believe, at least within 10 years, there will be just two railroad corporations east of the Mississippi River. These two systems will be those of the Vanderbilts and the Pennsylvania Company. I would say a few words to those of you that are employed on the Vandalia Line. It is only a matter of a short time, I believe, when it will pass entirely to the Pennsylvania. Before the recent change you had every assurance you would always receive a fair and impartial hearing on all subjects and otherwise be fairly dealt with. Both Mr. [William Riley] McKeen, the President, and also its general manager, I think, are two of the “whitest” and “squarest” men in the railroad business today. You will e’er long, however, be in the employ of the great Pennsylvania Company with its insurance attachment, which, whether you desire it or not, you must take out. You who have heretofore had your interests looked after will be called upon to help yourself and you should be prepared.

For years organized and unorganized labor has been blinded. It has allowed others to think and act for it. The American Railway Union will endeavor to bring its members to a fuller realization of this fact, and will impress upon their minds the importance of studying and thinking for themselves. The union is founded on broad lines. It proposes to, so far as possible, bring about a kind of reform in legislative matters — not as Republicans or Democrats, but as a united body of railroad employees, comprising every branch — as will insure them the same justice as that accorded the corporation.

² The Evansville & Terre Haute Railroad.

Corporations have [in the past] and are today scanning the field of railway labor. They know just when to attack. They know the weak spots. The courts are becoming a great feature in settling and preventing strikes. Numerous plans have been practiced by railroad corporations to gain in a contest with organized labor. In many instances they provoke the strike purposely to gain their ends. The Northern Pacific has introduced the latest scheme. Before ordering a reduction which would be sure to end in a strike, the corporation very cunningly places the road in the hands of receivers who act subject to the order of the court. The reduction was then ordered, and at the same time the road asked for an order restraining the men from striking, restraining the engineers from refusing to handle their cars. Is there any justice in a court that restrains men from quitting? Should the same men ask the court to restrain the corporation from discharging a man or from cutting their wages, they would be laughed at.

The Union Pacific has been pretty thoroughly organized, and the American Railway Union is in a flourishing condition. Nearly every other western road has made deep cuts in wages, but on the Union Pacific none has been asked. And why? Simply because there was an organization on the system that was a perfect one, and it was not antagonized.

During the speeches of both Mr. Howard and Mr. Debs reference was frequently made to little incidents in the life of every railroader that were much enjoyed. Mr. Debs' story about the switchmen, who were always the loyal friends of every railroad man, and who are generally a little too anxious to engage in trouble, was very true and not a little amusing. Both speakers were frequently interrupted by applause.

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Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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First Edition.