
Proclamation to Members of the ARU and to All Labor Organizations Respecting the Duties of the Hour

by Eugene V. Debs

Published as "Proclamation: By the President of the American Railway Union" in The Railway Times, vol. 2, no. 12 (June 15, 1895), pg. 1.

Reprinted as "Proclamation to the ARU" in *Debs: His Life, Writings, and Speeches*. Girard, KS: Appeal to Reason, 1908; pp. 291-295. Poetry checked to original.

Terre Haute, Ind., June 1, 1895.

Sirs and Brothers:—

A cruel wrong against our great order, perpetrated by William A. Woods, United States Circuit Judge, has been approved by the United States Supreme Court, and from under its shadow I address this communication to you; but though prison walls frown upon myself and others whom you chose as officials, I assure you that neither dependency nor despair has taken the place of the courage which has characterized our order since the storms of persecution first began to beat upon us. Hope has not deserted us. Our faith in the future of our great order is as strong as when our banners waved triumphantly over the Great Northern from St. Paul to the coast. Our order is still the undaunted friend of the toiling masses and our battle-cry now, as ever, is the emancipation of labor from degrading, starving, and enslaving conditions. We have not lost faith in the ultimate triumph of truth over perjury, of justice over wrong, however exalted may be the stations of those who perpetrate the outrages.

The Storm and the Battle.

I need not remind you, comrades of the American Railway Union, that our order in the pursuit of the right was confronted with a storm of opposition such as never beat upon a labor organization in all time. Its brilliant victory on the Great Northern and its gallant championship of the unorganized employees of the Union Pacific had aroused the opposition of every railroad corporation in the land.

To crush the American Railway Union was the one tie that united them all in the bonds of vengeance; it solidified the enemies of labor into one great association, one organization which, by its fabulous wealth, enabled it to bring into action resources aggregating billions of money and every appliance that money could purchase. But in this supreme hour the American Railway Union, undaunted, put forth its efforts to rescue Pullman's famine-cursed wage slaves from the grasp of an employer as heartless as a stone, as remorseless as a savage and as un pitying as an incarnate fiend. The battle fought in the interest of starving men, women and children stands forth in the history of Labor's struggles as the great "Pullman Strike." It was a battle on the part of the American Railway Union fought for a cause as holy as ever aroused the courage of brave men; it was a battle in which upon one side were men thrice armed because their cause was just, but they fought against the combined power of corporations which by the use of money could debauch justice, and, by playing the part of incendiary, bring to their aid the military power of the government, and this solidified mass of venality, venom, and vengeance constituted the foe against which the American Railway Union fought labor's greatest battle for humanity.

Rewards and Penalties.

What has been your reward for your splendid courage and manifold sacrifices? Our enemies say they are summed up in the one word: "defeat." They point to the battlefield and say: "Here is where the host of the American Railway Union went down before the confederated enemy of labor." They point to the spot where Miles' serried soldiery stood with drawn swords, tramping steeds and shotted guns to

kill innocent men whose only crime was devotion to wretched men and women, the victims of Pullman's greed. They designate the places where the minions of a despotic judge, the thieves and thugs, taken from Chicago slums, transformed into deputy marshals and armed with clubs and pistols, went forth to murder indiscriminately and to arouse the vengeance of the people by incendiary fires, and they point to the General Managers' Association, the Nero of the occasion, whose pitiless enmity of labor would have glorified in widespread conflagration rather than permitted a strike in the interest of famishing men, women and children, to have succeeded; and such disasters, say the enemies of labor, are the rewards of the courage of the ARU men, a courage as invincible as was ever displayed by Spartans, and which makes Pullman's Labor Thermopylæ to live in history as long as the right has a defender in the ranks of American workingmen.

Brothers of the American Railway Union, even in defeat our rewards are grand beyond expression, rewards which come only to brave men, the consciousness of noble deeds performed in the holy cause of labor's emancipation. Cowards, the fawning, sycophantic poltroons of power, never knew the thrills of joy that reward the heroes of battles fought in the interest of the oppressed.

Once to ev'ry man and nation comes a moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth and Falsehood, for the good or evil side.¹

The American Railway Union did decide. It espoused the cause of justice. It furrowed the land deeper with its plows of Truth and Courage than had fallen to the lot of any other labor organization since time began, and the seeds of emancipation which it sowed broadcast are germinating and a new era is destined to dawn upon labor.

Sons of Brutish Force and Darkness.

True it is that the "Sons of brutish Force and Darkness," who have "drenched the earth with blood," chuckle over their victories. They point to the blacklisted heroes of the American Railway Union,

¹ Couplet from "The Ever Present Crisis" (1844) by **James Russell Lowell** (1819-1891).

idle and poor, and count upon their surrender. Their hope is that our order will disband; that persecution, poverty and prison will do the work. These gory-handed enemies of our order expect to put out our lodge fires, silence our battle cries, disrobe ourselves of courage and manhood, permit them to place their iron-shod hoofs on our neck and sink us to fathomless depths of degradation and make the American Railway Union the synonym of all things the most detestable.

Can They Do It?

In the presence of prison doors and prison bars and weary months of incarceration, I answer a thousand times, NO! In the grasp of despotic power, as infamous and as cruel as ever blackened the records of Russia, I treat with ineffable scorn the power that without trial sends me and my official associates of the American Railway Union to prison. I do not believe, nor will I believe, that my brothers, beloved of our great order, will throw their courage away and join the ranks of the enemy, while their comrades, the victims of worse than Russian vengeance, are suffering in prison.

In Russia.

In Russia, the land of the autocrat, liberty is unknown. In that thrice damned country liberty and justice, free speech and free press, and trial by jury are banished, and a trail of blood and tears from the palace of the despot to prison and to death, made by men and women whose only crime is a desire for freedom, tell their doom; and yet in Russia imprisonment, torture, and death only increase the ranks of men and women who cry, "Give me liberty or give me death."

In Russia, the victim of autocratic displeasure is denied a trial by a jury of his peers. William A. Woods carries out the Russian practice. In Russia the doomed man or woman is arraigned before the supreme despot or one of his numerous satraps. Truth, justice, mercy are forever exiled, hope disappears and only words of satanic cruelty are uttered. Age, sex, character, innocence, name, and condition count for nothing. It is enough to know that the brave soul yearned for freedom, and the penalty of exile, imprisonment, torture or death is in-

flicted, and it has come to this at last in the United States of America, that the law of injunction is the will of a despot, and by the exercise of this Russian power American Railway Union officials go to prison and the hope is that by the exercising of this power the American Railway Union will be crushed.

Stand by Your Order.

In this supreme juncture I call upon the members of the American Railway Union to stand by their order. In God's own good time we will make the despot's prisons, where innocent men suffer, monumental. We will link them with the legends and lore of labor's struggles to be read by our children and our children's children when Bartholdi's goddess of liberty with her torch enlightening the world has succumbed to the ravages of time.

Count me o'er earth's chosen heroes — they were souls that stood
alone,

While the men they agonized for hurled the contumelious stone,
Stood serene, and down the future saw the golden beam incline
To the side of perfect justice, mastered by their faith divine,
By one man's plain truth to manhood and to God's supreme design.²

Yours fraternally,

Eugene V. Debs,
President.

Edited by Tim Davenport. Transcription by John Metz and David Walters.

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.

Fourth Edition (First Edition was 2007).

² Additional lines from "The Present Crisis," by Lowell.