
Statement to the Associated Press on the Great Northern Situation

[Nov. 4, 1895]

by Eugene V. Debs

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The policy of the Great Northern Company in relation to its employees is totally dishonest and disreputable. For several months a scheme has been in operation to disrupt the American Railway Union, notwithstanding the solemn pledge of President [James J.] Hill that no employee should be interfered with on account of his connection with the organization. The strike of April 1894 resulted in an agreement between the company and the union, which was affected May 1, under the auspices of a local board of arbitration composed wholly of merchants and manufacturers, and of which Charles A. Pillsbury was chairman. Tremendous reductions, ranging from 10 to 40 percent, had been made by the company and these were restored by the board. From that day to this the company has not lived up to its agreement one hour. Competent and trustworthy employees have been discharged again and again for no other reason than that they belonged to the union.

President Hill chafed under the verdict of the board. He smarted under defeat. His imperious will brooks neither restraint nor opposition. That he secretly resolved to exterminate the union there is not the slightest doubt. A few months ago I went over the entire system and I know whereof I speak. There have been so-called readjustments which have invariably resulted in reductions of wages. I can prove to the satisfaction of any honest man that the company has broken faith with its employees in the most flagrant and shameless manner. President Hill gave his word of honor that he would always hear any griev-

ance his employees might have either through themselves or anyone they might select to represent them. He made this declaration in the presence of the board of arbitration, and Mr. Pillsbury will bear testimony to the fact; not only this, but I have it in writing over his own signature. Yet, notwithstanding this, he refused in a cold-blooded manner to give audience to a duly constituted committee appointed by his employees to simply ask him to carry out the company's agreement which the men had accepted in good faith.

This is how much value James J. Hill places on his honor. He makes the excuse that some of the committee are not now in the service of the company. As a matter of fact the intimidating policy of the company has overawed the employees so that they fear to serve on a committee. They know that service on a committee means certain discharge. Hence they have submitted until their condition is one of slavish fear and subjection. Whether the employees strike or not will be determined by themselves. I am unable to foretell their decision. Directors [Sylvester] Keliher and [Roy] Goodwin, in conjunction with the Board of Mediation, are on the ground, and I have faith in their judgment and will approve their course whatever that may be. According to my advices the Great Northern Company has already begun the hiring of thugs and ex-convicts at various points.

Let me say that unless the feeling among the people along the Great Northern system has changed since last spring something more than a strike may develop if James J. Hill's policy of duplicity, dishonesty, and subjection forces the me to abandon their employment. I know that the farmers and shippers and the people generally in that section are thoroughly aroused. They comprehend the situation perfectly and are wholly in sympathy with the wronged employees.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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