
Interview with the *Cleveland Leader*, Jan. 18, 1896 by Eugene V. Debs

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Within twelve months the American Railway Union may be called upon to elect a new official leader. Eugene V. Debs, the President of the order, stated to a reporter yesterday afternoon [Jan. 18, 1896] that he hoped to have the organization in such shape by that time that somebody else could assume the leadership, and he would sever his official connection with the union, but he would still be interested in the labor movement and would be able to do much more for the cause than at present.

Mr. Debs also stated that the object of the unification of all railway employees, as advocated by him, was to create a power sufficient to gain the respect of corporations, so that there would be no necessity for a strike in order to right what might appear to be the wrongs of the employees of the railroad companies, and the men thus banded together would be able to dictate, by the ballot, legislation for the relief of the workingman. This, he said, was what was meant by the statement of one of the American Railway Union organizers, who said to a *Leader* reporter last week that "Debs would push the button and the American Railway Union would do the rest."

All day yesterday there was a constant stream of callers upon the American Railway Union leader at his room at the Forest City House.¹ Mr. Debs spent the entire day shaking hands and conversing with his callers. He is possessed of personal magnetism, and several of those who called remarked to the *Leader* reporter that they could

¹ The Forest City House was a venerable hotel located at the southwest corner of the public square on Superior Avenue in Downtown Cleveland.

readily understand how he became so popular with the labor union men. His manner is free and easy, yet courteous. In conversation he is hopeful and jovial, and carefully avoids the calamity drawl that is affected by some labor orators and leaders.

When the reporter entered his room Mr. Debs was talking to several callers, but excused himself, saying: "There is a newspaper man, gentlemen, and he wants to talk to me. The newspapers are the best friends we have, and we should extend to them every courtesy." The first question asked Debs was the ultimate object of the perfection of the organization known as the American Railway Union. "Educational purposes," he replied:

We want to get all railway employees together under one great organization and if we succeed we will control such a great power that the corporations will respect our strength, and we'll never have any trouble with our employers. A parallel case is that of two great nations. They never fight one another, and for that reason America and Great Britain will not go to war. They respect the strength of the other. If we can get an organization of all the employees of railroads, there never will be another strike, because we will be able to effect our end without resorting to force. Then we will have an opportunity of cultivating our minds and gaining knowledge.

Now about strikes. I want to say that I don't go much on strikes, and I don't want to see another railroad strike if it can possibly be avoided. At present it would not be advisable for railroad men to strike, for the corporations would have the advantage of them; they would ask the courts and the United States soldiers to interfere. Again, a strike is a barbarous warfare, and we want some better and more civilized way of settling differences. The way to do that is to vote at the ballot box, and that is the button that must be pushed by the laboring men. If they were thoroughly organized and would recognize the fact that their interests are identical, they would control the politics of the country, and the legislation that they need to place themselves on an equality with the capitalist would result.

So far as my own connection with the labor movement is concerned, I think I can wind up my work with the ARU in a year, and then I will sever my connection with the organization. By that I mean that I will be for labor's cause as long as I live, however, and I only relinquish my desire to be at the head of such a powerful organization because I think I will be able to do more good for the cause in general if I am not identified with any particular class or sect.

The suggestion was made that Debs, like other labor leaders of national reputation, was suspected by many people of having enlisted in the cause for the sake of money. Isaac Cowen was in the room, and to him Mr. Debs put a question:

“Cowen,” said he, “did you ever know of a labor agitator making anything out of the labor movement?”

“Well, I’m an agitator,” replied Mr. Cowen, “and I know if I had kept out of the labor movement during the past 20 years I would today be \$3,000 better off.”

“Well, that pretty thoroughly answers the question for me,” resumed Mr. Debs, as he smiled and turned to the newspaper man.

But I may as well admit that it is through selfishness that I am in the movement. In fact, selfishness is all that keeps me at work. You know an old German writer said that some men think they have ideas, while the ideas really have the men. That’s about my situation. The labor idea possesses me, and I only gratify a desire by continuing the work. It suits my taste. That’s all there is to it. So far as my making money is concerned I have had several chances to better my condition, but I did not accept them, and still remain a poor man. I was offered the managership of the American Press Association, and some stock in the concern, two year ago, and had I accepted I would today have been worth \$150,000. At Pittsburgh, some years ago, I was offered charge of a large grocery store in which I was employed, but I did not take it because my mind was not on massing a fortune. I do want to be comfortable, however. Since my release from jail there has been a great deal said about me in the newspapers, and the manager of the lyceum theater of Boston offered me a lecture engagement, but I won’t lecture for money, because I am in earnest and want to talk to the people who will be benefited by what I have to say.

“What is the present condition of the American Railway Union?” asked the reporter.

Very good; in fact it exceeds my expectations. Our trials and imprisonment covered a period of almost a year and a half, and during this time we were compelled to be in Chicago, as we were under bond, and the interests of the order suffered greatly by enforced neglect. Many of our unions died out entirely, but as our organizers are again in the field most of these have been re-

vived, and if anything, the interest in the order is greater than before. We are building up rapidly and our membership is increasing at a very satisfactory rate.

There is a tendency toward unification among all classes of railway employees, and in my opinion it is only a question of time when they will be united and act together in all matters affecting their interests. By unification I do not mean consolidation or amalgamation, but all the organizations would retain their autonomy, and work together when questions of interest to all would come up for solution. So far as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers is concerned, with reference to the unification, I don't know. We are getting a large number of them into our order, but there are still many who favor the brotherhood idea. Without them, however, the American Railway Union would be a great organization, as there are 6,000,000 railway employees exclusive of those in the train service.²

“Is it true that the hoodlums caused the greater part of the rioting during the great Chicago strike?”

The best answer to that question is a statement by John Brennan, who was chief of police of the city in 1894. He said that 4,200 deadbeats and thugs were sworn in as deputy United States marshals at the [insistence] of the corporations, and here is a clipping in which he said that they fired on unoffending and innocent people and several persons were killed, when there was no cause for the shooting. The real fact is that the corporations knew that if there was any rioting it would injure our cause, and these thugs were sworn in with the expectation that they would make trouble. Not one American Railway Union man was arrested during the entire strike for a crime, but some of them were lodged in jail on the allegation that they had violated an injunction. One peculiar thing about the railroads in Chicago is the fact that all the property of the railroads centering in Cook County is listed for taxation at \$1.25 million, while it really is worth in the neighborhood of \$3 million.

In speaking of the talk of nominating him for President, Mr. Debs said he had discouraged it as much as he could.

² This is almost certainly a misquotation or a typographical error as the number seems to be off by a factor of 10 or more.

I don't desire, nor can I conceive of any conditions under which I could agree to accept any such a nomination. I'm a labor organizer and not a politician, and I don't mix, and if a man who is identified with the labor movement as I have been would accept a nomination, he would be under suspicion of seeking political office. To make it still stronger, I will say that I would not accept a nomination if I knew I could get the office, because a successful politician is nothing more nor less than a bundle of compromises. Ex-Governor Waite,³ of Colorado, and Mr. Allen,⁴ of Nebraska, are prominent populists, and I would not be surprised to see either of them nominated. For my part I am a Waite man.

In Memorial Hall last night [Jan. 18, 1896] Debs told 500 workmen to think for themselves, and enter politics and study economic questions of the day. He said that only through the ballot would they be able to better their condition permanently, and they would be better qualified to cast a ballot only after they had studied the questions of the day, and had taught themselves to think.

C. Clark presided and introduced Thomas Fitzsimons, David Rankin, and George M. Groot, who entertained the audience for almost an hour. When Debs entered the room he was loudly cheered by the audience, and as he arose to address the men he stepped down from the platform amidst tremendous cheering and manifestations of great enthusiasm. After thanking the audience for the expression of their goodwill, he said that if any body of workingmen needed organization it was the railroad employees. He said they were in a good condition of servitude in many parts of the country. He explained a new system which had been just inaugurated at the works of the Illinois Steel Company at Chicago, much to the amusement of the audience. "The men are tagged and numbered," said he:

They no longer have the privilege of bearing a name, but must wear a number. Just think of one child asking another, "Who is your father?" and receiving the reply, "No. 406." The next move will be to "round up" the men and introduce them to the branding iron.

On many of the railroads of the country the men are prohibited from talking to one another and the men have become sus-

³ **Davis Hanson Waite** (1825-1903) was elected to a single two-year term as Governor of Colorado in November 1892.

⁴ **William V. Allen** (1847-1924) was elected as a United States Senator from Nebraska in November 1892.

picious of themselves. In San Francisco 3,000 men were told that if they attended my meetings or talked with me on the street or called on me at my boarding house they would be discharged. In other words, if they talked to a man who wanted to rob them of their chains they would be deprived the privilege of earning any money.

There have been railroad unions in existence for the last 30 years, and they have done much good for the employees, but the time has come for a new organization — one that will be able to compete with those who would grind labor down. The only way to do that is to adopt the same system that is used by the railroad corporations, and that is unification. Every year from 65 to 70 railroad companies disappear. They are merged into one great corporation, so that now there are only about 15 large railroad corporations in the country. In reality, they are governed by one body during time of strike, the General Managers' Association. We must do the same.

The speaker said that the Pullman strike caused a cessation of reduction in wages, if it accomplished nothing else. He characterized the blacklist as the worst crime in the calendar. He said it was worse than murder, as it was a slow process of starvation. "I know about the blacklist," said he, "and that is the reason the General Managers' Association wanted to get rid of me. I know what it is to be followed by serpents in human form, and I would not be surprised if there were some of them in this house tonight, but I want to serve notice on them and their masters, through them, that they cannot keep me from doing what I think is my duty. Jail me if you will, hang me if you can, but I propose to stand by my convictions."

Debs then made an earnest appeal to the workingmen to study economic questions and think for themselves. "You have not been doing that for the past 30 years," he said.

Think, and then enter politics. There is no reason why workingmen should not study political questions in their unions. Politics is simply a science of government, and unless a man understands that science he should not be permitted to have a hand in molding the policy of the government. you have been allowing the other fellows, the professional politicians, to do all the schem-

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ing for 30 years, so that under the present system, that is due to your own inactivity, the longer you work the less money you get, and the longer you work, the harder you must work to live.

If you will only get into the habit of thinking and not depend on somebody else to mold your opinions, your condition will be bettered. It will be better someday, but it will get worse first. It will not be any worse than you will allow it to get. When you make up your minds that a change is necessary, it will be made.

All this talk about war with England over the Venezuelan affair is humbug.⁵ It's done to arouse your patriotism and make you forget other affairs. If the workingmen of the country were more than half fed and more than half clothed it wouldn't be necessary to prop up their patriotism with statutory enactments, as they have done in Illinois, where a law has been passed providing that the stars and stripes shall float over every schoolhouse. I have seen able-bodied men working in a Michigan furniture factory for 50 cents a day; women sewing carpets at Pullman for 30 cents a day; poor, miserable creatures working in sweatshops for from 18 to 25 cents a day, and they crouched as their masters approached for fear they would lose that miserable pittance. And all this under the American flag which they say we must revere. I believe in the application of the Monroe Doctrine, but I want to see a little of it applied at our homes and our firesides. There is room for it right in this country without causing a war with a foreign power.

Now, I want to say in conclusion that the way to accomplish what all of us desire is to think, organize, unify, and harmonize. Then all the workingmen of the country will be able to meet on common grounds, pull together, and be masters of the situation.

As Debs concluded there was a crush to get near him to shake hands. After a few minutes the chairman announced that a meeting would be called to order especially for railroad men, and all others were requested to retire. Debs made a speech to the railroaders, in which he explained the objects and benefits of the American Railway Union, and an invitation was extended for members. At the conclusion of the meeting a special meeting of the American Railway Union was held for the purpose of initiating the applicants. Debs also made

⁵ The Venezuelan Crisis of 1895 involved disputed border territories between Venezuela and the colony of British Guiana, a disagreement into which the United States inserted itself on behalf of Venezuela under the so-called Monroe Doctrine's claim of regional hegemony. An international tribunal was eventually held in Paris, which in 1899 drew a new boundary unanimously awarding the British empire about 90% of the disputed territory.

an address at that meeting. It was stated before the session that a large number of railroaders had made application, which insured a strong organization in this city.

Mr. Debs stated last night that he would leave the city at 10:40 o'clock today to go to Toledo, where he speaks tonight. From there he goes to Lima, Ohio; Evansville, Indiana; Washington, Indiana; East St. Louis, Illinois, and Terre Haute, Indiana, arriving at the last named place on January 30. Next month he will go to Georgia, and in April he will go to New York and Boston and begin the work of organizing in the east.

The American Railway Union organizers, who have been in the city the last two weeks, said yesterday that they would leave the city today, and would call on the railroaders of the smaller towns of the state.