

REVOLT OF THE RAILROAD WORKERS

By Eugene V. Debs

There is a distinct trend towards industrial unionism in the ranks of railroad employees, and some interesting developments may be expected along that line in the near future. The unions representing the various branches in the train service are seething with discontent and ripening rapidly for revolt against craft union policy and craft union reaction. They have played the game to the limit and the rank and file are beginning to realize that there is nothing in it for them, even when they win.

The arbitration of the recent wage disputes between the employees and the companies has brought little comfort to the employees and their condition is substantially the same as it was before. The enormous assessments they have been required to pay to maintain these wage movements, which have proved next to fruitless, have provoked widespread comment and bitter resentment. These monthly assessments upon the rank and file to maintain their craft unions amounts in many instances to almost as much as house rent, and the burden falls upon many thousands who are unable to bear it without serious deprivation to themselves and families.

It has been estimated that the cost of these wage movements has been over half a million dollars to the unions of the train service alone. The men are being taxed to death for protection which they do not get, and they are beginning to ripen for revolt. Were it not for their insurance features, disintegration would have set in long ago. That is mainly what holds these unions together today.

The strike of the engineman and trainmen of the Monongahela division of the Pennsylvania Railroad was an illuminating instance of the trend toward industrialism, and the stand taken by their national leaders has left a bitter taste in the mouths of the rank and file.

There had been intense dissatisfaction among the trainmen of the Pennsylvania (Railroad) ever since their grand officers sided with the company in crushing the strike of the shop employees at Pittsburgh, Altoona, and other points. The trainmen sympathized with the striking shopman and some of them went on strike in support of them but were promptly ordered back by their grand officers under threat of being discharged by the company, expelled by the brotherhood, and having their places filled from the ranks of their own union. From that time to this, trouble has been brewing among the Pennsylvania trainmen, and when they struck on the Monongahela division they went out in a body - conductors, brakeman, engineers, fireman, telegraphers, and others - and in defiance of their national officers and the ironclad restrictions of their craft unions.

In this connection it is interesting to note that in these antiquated unions the "Grand Chief", or by whatever other title he may be known, still exercises the despotic power over the rank and file which made PM Arthur of the locomotive engineers such a prime favorite with the railroad companies to the day of his death. There can be no strike or cessation of work without the "sanction" Of the grand mogul. the rank and file may vote on a strike and make it unanimous, but it must still have official "sanction" Before the men can go out. For a union to tolerate such czarism and for its members to empower one of their own servants to tie them hand and foot when a crisis is upon them is almost beyond understanding.

Referring again to the strike on the Monongahela division of the Pennsylvania, the sentiment was practically unanimous in favor of industrial unionism, and they at once affected and organization which they called the industrial railway union. It so happened that the miners in the Monongahela valley were out at the same time and at the demonstration they held at California, which I had the privilege of addressing, fully ten thousand mine workers and railroad employees were assembled and made common cause, and to see the rank and file of these two great industrial bodies intermingle, fraternize and clasp each other by the hand, was a sight as prophetic of future industrialism as it was a source of present inspiration. As an indication of the industrial union sentiment which prevailed there, the miners, although themselves idle and facing a long strike, took up a collection which amounted to several hundred dollars for the benefit of the striking railroad men, and while the miners who were in no way connected with them by the ties of organization were thus helping them to win their strike, the members of their own craft unions were taking their jobs by order of their own leaders.

About this one lesson in industrial unionism alone a volume might be written. It turns a flashlight upon both industrial unionism and craft unionism and reveals in vivid contrast the power and majesty of the one and the weakness and servility of the other. The traffic of the line was completely paralyzed, and trains had to be abandoned, but not a word had the capitalist press to say about it. Everything was done to suppress the revolt and to prevent any report of it from going out to the country. At the time I was there the tie-up was practically complete and this notwithstanding, trainmen were coming in there with union cards in their pockets under orders from their leaders to take the places of the members of their own unions who were out on strike. Of course, the striking trainmen were at a white heat of indignation but perhaps just this kind of an object lesson was necessary to show railroad men who have kept themselves tied up in craft unions and held aloof from their class all these years how that kind of unionism works in a strike and how admirably it is adapted to the interests of the railroads by keeping the employees divided and virtually forcing them to scab on one another.

The craft union leaders may flatter themselves that in alliance with the railroad officials they have suppressed this strike by filling the vacant places with members of the same unions as those that were out on strike, but they will find before many days that

what they actually did was to kindle a fire of industrial unionism among their craft unions which will spread in all directions and which will never be extinguished until the railroad workers are industrially united in harmonious co-operation with all other industrial workers.

When the train crews of the Colorado Southern, three of them in rapid succession, refused to haul the uniformed mankillers and strike-breakers, called the state militia, to the mining camps of that state a few days ago to murder the striking miners, it was in obedience to their class instinct and expressive of the spirit of industrial unionism even though it was in violation of their craft union obligations and subjected them to the penalty of expulsion from their unions.

The railroad men of Colorado, the loyal unionists among them, are heart and soul with the striking miners, and if it was not for the craft union fetters which bind them to their tasks they would be out with the miners and not a crew would there be to haul the soldiers to shoot the strikers and protect the scabs, or to handle the scab product of the mines. As it is, these railroad men feel, as they have admitted to me, that they are indirectly scabbing on the miners and helping Rockefeller and his butchers to slaughter and roast their wives and babies, and these men are in revolt against the craft unions which force them into an attitude against which their better nature rebels, and they will eagerly welcome the opportunity to throw off the fetters which bind them and unite with their fellow workers in the bonds of industrial unionism.

I have already made reference to the dismal failure of arbitration so far as any substantial results to the employees are concerned. The eyes of many, especially the younger element, are being opened to the hollowness of the claims put forth by the unions as to their power to protect the rights and safeguard the interests of their members. The recent arbitration fiasco has been of great service in helping the rank and file to see the light.

The railroads clamored for an amendment to the Erdman Act, claiming that under its provisions they could not get a square deal, and they flim-flammed the chiefs of the unions into joining with them in asking for an amendment to the law. Notwithstanding the fact that under the Erdman Act the employees got the long end of the settlement the chiefs were inveigled into "cooperating" with the railroad managers in demanding an amendment which was written by the managers. It turned out just as anyone of sense must have known it would, namely, the railroads are now getting the long end and the employees the short end of the arbitration.

As a matter of fact it was the late Edward Moseley, Secretary of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and a friend to the railroad employees, who wrote the Erdman Act and had it passed through congress before the railroads realized what there was in it, and it was probably as good an arbitration law for the employees as it would be possible to get under a capitalist government. It was far too good to suit the railroads and as soon as they found themselves up against its provisions they began to clamor for its amendment and promptly, to demonstrate their loyalty to the men who paid their salaries, the civic federation leaders of the craft unions helped the railroad managers to gain their point, and the rank and file are now reaping the legitimate fruit of the perfidy or the crass stupidity of their own leaders.

The railroad workers as well as the mine workers are having their eyes opened to the class war and to the imperative necessity for industrial organization. The heavy assessments and light benefits of the craft unions are driving their members toward industrial unionism and they are ripening rapidly for the change.

The two miners' unions are ready for consolidation. Colorado, Michigan and West Virginia all hear the same testimony and the slaughter and sacrifice in those states cry aloud for it.

The industrial mine workers and the industrial railroad workers in harmonious cooperation should in the near future become a realized fact.

What a gigantic power there is in the very suggestion of such an industrial combination! In the days of long ago when I still shoveled coal into the fire-box of a locomotive, the thought already occurred to me that railroad men and miners, being so near and so necessary to each other, should be in close union alliance and I often wondered why there was such an aloofness between them, why they persisted in remaining strangers notwithstanding they were so closely related, and why they struck and lost separately instead of striking and winning together.

The railroad and mine workers combined can of themselves halt every wheel and close down every industry. Why then, in the face of the threatening conditions that confront them upon every hand, do they not unify their forces and fight together under the banner of industrial unionism?

If the United Mine Workers and the Western Federation of Miners will consolidate, as they undoubtedly should, and that without the unnecessary loss of a day, then pull out of the Civic-American Federation of Labor and issue a call to all bona fide labor unions for a convention for the purpose of effecting the industrial organization of the American workers, it will mean the greatest working class convention ever held and will be rapidly followed by the most powerful consolidation of labor's forces ever known in the United States. In that direction lies the triumphant industrial organization of the American workers and the road to industrial emancipation.