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# The Situation

by Eugene V. Debs

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We are still required to write of the great strike on the CB&Q. It is not a pleasant task. We had hoped ere this date to have had the satisfaction of recording the triumph of justice over flagrant, long continued injustice. We know that it is written that

Truth crushed to earth shall rise again;  
The eternal years of God are hers;<sup>1</sup>

But it seems that eternal years will be required to enthrone Truth and dethrone and crush error. But, thank God,

Hope springs eternal In the human breast,<sup>2</sup>

And it is a matter for ceaseless felicitation that the brotherhoods of engineers, firemen, and switchmen contain men who know their rights, and knowing dare maintain them, dare contend for them, and are equal to all the sacrifices which a contest to secure them demands.

We are well aware that the present is a practical age, money making and a money getting age. An age of greed and grab, an age of monopolies, trusts, syndicates, and combinations, in which the opulent few, by processes of chicane and legerdemain, seek to make the toiling many pay them tribute money. This fact was conspicuously and notoriously true of the CB&Q corporation. Rich rascality was constantly devising schemes to defraud honest labor. It was successful. The device was an amalgamation of fraud and falsehood, cash and cussedness, deceit and depravity, vulgarity and venality. Every element of baseness was injected into the plot to defraud working men of a portion of their honest earnings. For years the plot was successful — suc-

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<sup>1</sup> From "The Battlefield" (1839), by **William Cullen Bryant** (1794-1878).

<sup>2</sup> From "An Essay on Man" (1734), by **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744).

cessful to an extent that staggers credulity. Not less than \$200,000 a year was the sum total of the steal taken from the pockets of the engineers and firemen. Every five years a million of dollars pocketed by pirates as heartless as any freebooter that ever sailed the seas, floating a black flag at the masthead. It was robbing not only men, but wives and children. It was a piracy that attacked every employee's home. It filched bread from the mouths of women and children. It clothed them in rags. It denied them books and schools. It compelled them to take the pauper's bench in the sanctuary or never near the glad tidings of salvation, and this was done by the CB&Q that its stockholders might roll in luxuries, dress in purple and dine linen and strut through the world as millionaires. The infamous policy was endured until patience and forbearance were no longer virtues, and resistance became a duty as binding as ever challenged men to do and dare, fight and pray for the right. To have longer suffered under the stinging degradation was to have willingly accepted the condition of helots and pariahs, the degradation of serfs. It involved the sacrifices of citizenship — American citizenship with all its prerogatives, the abdication of American sovereignty with all its inviting possibilities and the acceptance of humiliations which defy exaggeration.

The *Magazine*, in previous issues has given its readers a faithful record of the strike on the CB&Q, from its inception, up to the time when the engineers, firemen and switchmen looking forward to the meeting of the stockholders in May, hoping these men would see the justice of their cause and afford them relief. They were doomed to disappointment. The stockholders, like their creatures, the officers, favored the bloodhound pursuit of the employees. It is said of man-eating lions and tigers, that once having a taste of human flesh, they never cease hankering for it, and the CB&Q stockholders, having pocketed \$200,000 a year from the earnings of their engineers and firemen, determined not to let go of the delicious morsel, and they voted unanimously to continue the robbery.

The action of the stockholders of the CB&Q created an emergency which the strikers were required to face. The Brotherhoods had exhausted all the power conferred by their constitutions — and now, for the action of the men in their individual capacity. The joint committee consulted with the men and found them immovable as mountains. The question was: Will you continue the strike? A vote was taken and almost to a man the response was, we will stand by our colors — the strike is still on. United, appealing to the world, appeal-

ing to all labor organizations for the rectitude of their conduct from the beginning, these men — engineers, firemen, and switchmen, declare the strike will be continued.

In writing of the chivalric courage of these striking engineers, firemen, and switchmen, we confess to an inability to do the subject justice. With limited resources; idle, with a frowning future in full view, these men, without fear and without reproach, trustful and defiant, willing to work if they can be men, but preferring obloquy to serfsh conditions, realizing that they are American citizens, with all the responsibilities resting upon them that the condition imposes — fathers, who love their wives and children; sons who love their mothers and sisters; men whose manhood revolts at injustice and degradation, have resolved to maintain their attitude of defiance and independence, rather than yield to the dictation of men who have robbed them, and would rob them again and continually, were it in their power.

We invite workingmen everywhere to note the attitude of the men, engineers, firemen, and switchmen, late employees of the CB&Q corporation. It may be asked why should these men immolate themselves? Why should they seek martyrdom? Why not yield and accept such terms as their oppressors may see fit to give?

Those who propound such questions have been in all time the camp followers of the armies of progress and independence; the Esaus, selling their birthrights for pottage;<sup>3</sup> the scavengers and scabs, who have no higher ideal, of life than is embodied in rations; who live without knowing or caring what life is worth. If only such men had lived in the ranks of labor, every working man would today be wearing an iron collar, with his master's name engraved upon it.

The men who are maintaining the strike on the CB&Q with unyielding tenacity, are confronted by statutes which from the first have been embarrassing. Statutes made in the interest of corporations, and under which they have been and are still enabled to play the role of oppressors.

It matters not under what outrages employees of corporations may labor, no officer, chairman, or leader of any labor organization, can so much as advise resistance, without being held liable to prosecution, for conspiracy, the penalty being fine and imprisonment. Shielded by such a law, the oppressors and robbers of labor take courage and give the screws as many turns as they may deem advisable,

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<sup>3</sup> *Genesis*, chapter 25, verses 29-34.

and if resistance follows, an army of detectives, human hounds, are put on the track for the purpose of arrest and intimidation. And yet, notwithstanding such things, the striking engineers, firemen, and switchmen, present a bold front to the enemy, and fearlessly await developments.

Such is the situation as we write for the July *Magazine*. Before we go to press, before this article meets the eyes of the thousands of readers of the *Magazine*, there may be new developments, but now, the engineers, firemen, and switchmen, standing together as one man, are presenting the old-time attitude of defiance and are hopeful of results which will demonstrate that courage and endurance are still forces and factors in securing justice, when truth confronts error.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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