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# **Railroad Federation:**

## **The Question Considered by the Firemen's General Secretary**

### **by Eugene V. Debs**

Published in *Commoner and Glass Worker* [Pittsburgh], Sept. 28, 1889.  
Preserved in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm collection, reel 9, pp. 37-38.

What is the significance of Federation? What is the necessity of Federation? What is proposed to be accomplished by Federation?

Let it be understood that Federation is not amalgamation. In Federation the federating orders do not surrender their autonomy, they give up no right which relates to their absolute independence in the management of their affairs, which does not involve the interests and welfare of the other orders included in the alliance.

Federation signifies unity and strength. It is "many in one." If it were required to demonstrate the axiomatic truth that "in unity there is strength," the history of the United States would supply every needed argument. Within the entire realm of illustration, nothing more convincing could be found.

Labor, a term I use in the place of workingmen, wage earners, breadwinners, etc., is weak, as compared with the power that has ceaselessly antagonized it; so weak as to be compelled to accept such terms as has been offered by those who controlled it. This being incontrovertibly true, the necessity for organization on the part of labor is universally admitted by those of its friends in any sense capable of forming a rational opinion, or of arriving at an honest conclusion. Organization is opposed, not only by the enemies of labor, but by those who have controlled it in the past, and who are determined to exercise their autocratic power to debase and degrade it in the future; but also by a class of men who, having no purpose in life but to make money, would have business go forward undisturbed, totally regardless of the wrongs and injustice inflicted upon men who do the work of the world, and make progress and civilization possible. Unfortu-

nately, there is another class opposed to the organization of workingmen, and forever in alliance with those who oppose and oppress labor interests. They are workingmen who, whatever they say to the contrary, are the slaves of the creatures who claim and assert the right to rule them and to reign over them. They are found everywhere; they have the form of men but they are not men; to use a term, they are "scabs," forever watching for opportunities to step in and accept degrading wages and conditions, when a manly workingman revolts. It is because of such things that labor finds it necessary to organize for its protection.

History demonstrates very conclusively that during the past 80 years, labor organizations have accomplished much in the way of resisting and overcoming the tyranny of employers. By organization, the working day has been reduced from 14 hours to 10 hours without reducing wages. By organization, in many instances, wages have been advanced, in others maintained, and in every case prevented from going to the lowest level desired. On such points volumes could be written. But the organizations, acting separately and alone, have often been overcome and disastrously defeated; and these calamities have suggested the need of federation.

This brings the question, what is proposed by Federation?

In discussing the question I shall confine myself chiefly to the consideration of the Federation of organizations of railroad employees.

In this discussion little need be said about the antagonistic attitudes of labor and capital. From the first, every sentence uttered in that direction has been a trick of the demagogue — mountebank fusillades in the interest of disorder. Capital is the creation of labor, and to talk of war between capital and labor finds its parallel in the assumption that the hand wars against the eyes, or vice versa.

The trouble in the past has been between *capitalists* and *workingmen*; the former seeking to crush the latter, and this proceeding necessarily results in unrest, grievances, and often in open revolt.

I am not required to say that all capitalists seek to reduce wages, or to inflict upon workingmen degrading conditions. Fortunately, such is not the case. There are many men controlling capital who recognized in workingmen their best friends. They pay liberally and promptly, and as a general proposition, they are successful in business. There are others, not animated by the American idea, who would in the briefest time possible reduce labor in the United States to the

Chinese level. They would inaugurate a system of peon slavery, in many regards more odious and degrading than that of African slavery in the South, before the Sumter gun was fired that aroused a nation to arms.

To prove that there are men controlling railroad enterprises who are animated by a purpose to degrade workingmen, it is only required to mention the name of Austin Corbin. He may be said to represent the entire breed of pestilential railroad magnates, and the army of subordinate officials, who, clothed in a "little brief authority," use it to exile peace and create pandemonium. They would introduce into the United States the caste curse of India. They employ spotters<sup>1</sup> and Pinkertons; they are advocates of "blacklist" infamy; they are the implacable foes of labor organizations; they would crush out a workingman's manhood, his independence, his self-respect, all things that distinguish him from a serf, all things that make a man boastful of American citizenship, and this is done, it is claimed, in the interest of railroads, to enable them to achieve success.

Workingmen take an opposite view of the situation. They organize for the purpose of overcoming degrading conditions, to maintain their rights and prerogatives; to maintain the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But organization alone does not in every case, and scarcely in any case, meet the exigencies. Working men favor Federation, which is the climax of organization, all the organizations acting as one organization when the interests of all are involved.

It should be understood, and in the near future is likely to be comprehended, that all railroad employees have mutual interests; and particularly is this true in the transportation service. Is it worthwhile to discuss the proposition? Is it not so self-evident that argument and illustration weaken, rather than strengthen the declaration?

Suppose a wrong is done switchmen, a wrong so grievous as to be unendurable, and, as a result, switchmen strike. Does it not follow that the interests of brakemen, firemen, conductors, and engineers are involved? He who does not see that the interests of all trainmen are included, is incapable of distinguishing between an axiom and an axe handle. It is because of this mutual interest that Federation is demanded, and it is eventually to be permanently established, and include all the organizations of railroad employees. So far, three great

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<sup>1</sup> Undercover surveillance operatives charged with reporting employee malfeasance, particularly among railroad conductors.

orders of railroad employees — firemen, brakemen, and switchmen — have federated. A Supreme Council has been established. I shall not attempt to outline the method of procedure, in cases where the Supreme Council acts, further than to say that in case of trouble, a strike cannot occur without the approval of the Supreme Council, nor until every means known to a peaceful solution of the difficulties involved have been exhausted, first by the order complaining, and then by the Supreme Council. There is to be no hot-headed work. Impetuous proceedings are tabooed. The demand is, reason, circumspection, and patience. If a strike is to take place, it will occur only when every expedient known to honest diplomacy is exhausted. If then a strike is authorized, every man will abandon his employment.

It will be seen by this, I think, that Federation proposes peaceful measures; that its power will be exerted to prevent extreme measures, and that it does not favor violence and turbulence; and this, I believe, will eventually be the conclusion of all railroad officials.

In the discussion of Federation, there is a broader field which invites the writer, and those who are giving the labor question intelligent consideration. If time permitted, I should gladly enter it to indicate, as best I might, the drift of opinion in the ranks of labor. There is going forward a mighty mustering of the mind forces of the times; and workingmen are neither supine nor silent. The labor question, in all its phases is up for debate, and the labor press of the country will forever keep it in its advanced position until right, truth, and justice, one and indivisible, prevail. The labor question is in Congress, in the legislature, in the bank, and in the counting room. It is in the school and in the college. It is in the lawyer's office and the clergyman's study... It is everywhere a topic. And last, but not least, the labor question is being discussed wherever a plow turns a furrow, wherever an anvil rings, wherever a shuttle clicks, a spindle whirls, or an engine exerts its mighty power. It is discussed in cab and roundhouse and it will not down.

In this majestic debate, those who can read the signs of the times must, we feel satisfied, conclude that the Federation of the hosts of labor will secure blessings as redeeming and exalting as were ever vouchsafed to man, since the morning stars sang together.

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