
Debs Tried Out One Big Union of Railroads: Plan Weakened Craft Bodies, Says Foster.

by William Z. Foster

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CHICAGO (Federated Press). — Faced by the growing power and limitless greed of the railroad companies, railroad workers have for many years sensed more and more clearly the need for a greater solidarity among themselves. In the main they may be said to have responded to this need in two general ways:

First, the radical minorities, consciously weighing the factors at hand and looking a long way ahead, have adopted the founding of an industrial union to take in all railroad men. And, with characteristic impatience, they have asserted that this could best be done by discarding the old trade unions altogether and starting afresh with a new, theoretically perfect organization.

Grope Toward Industrial Form.

Second, the conservative masses, more or less blindly and without plan, have reacted to the pressure of the companies by jointing together their many old unions, thus gradually forming them into ever more extensive combinations as fast as the need for such becomes apparent. They are working unconsciously toward industrial unionism, but by an entirely different route than that of the radical minorities.

The greatest of all dual railroad unions was the American Railway Union, launched by Eugene V. Debs and others in Chicago in 1893. It

was opposed by the craft unions, but as they were still weak, they could offer no effective resistance and it spread rapidly over the systems. By the spring of 1894 it was said to have 465 local lodges and about 150,000 members. It included all classes of railroad workers.

Debs Beats Jim Hill.

Its struggle with the employers came in April 1894 on the Great Northern. That system was tied up from end to end by a general strike. The autocratic Jim Hill capitulated after 18 days, coming to terms with the organization.

But this brilliant victory bred an overconfidence among the men that soon brought about the destruction of their union. In an effort to force a settlement of the then pending Pullman strike, the militant railroad men placed a boycott against all Pullman cars, which action produced a general strike, June 26, 1894, on 24 roads centering in Chicago.

The tie-up was highly effective and the companies were on the way to defeat, when the government and courts took a hand. Troops were rushed to Chicago; injunctions were issued against the strikers; their leaders were jailed, and such a general reign of terror set up that the conservative mass became terrified and dragged back to work. Before 3 weeks had passed the strike was lost.

Harms Craft Unions.

The ARU lingered along until 1897, when it turned itself into a cooperative political organization — the Social Democratic Party, forerunner of the present Socialist Party.

The advent of the American Railway Union, as is always the case with dual organizations, did great harm to the railroad craft unions. All of them were weakened and some nearly destroyed. Thousands of their best members quit them to take part in the ARU, only to find themselves blacklisted out of the railroad service later because of the lost strike.

The case of Debs himself is a striking example of the damage done. When he resigned his position as General Secretary-Treasurer and editor of the official journal of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in order to form the ARU, he was a great force for progress in the old unions.

Debs Was Great Loss.

Had Debs stayed with them he would have been a big factor in their future development. But he was lost to them, and that they have suffered much in consequence no unbiased observer will deny.

This constant sucking of the best blood out of the craft unions is one of the very worst features of dual unionism.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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