
Legislation, Law, and Free Transportation on Railroads

by Eugene V. Debs

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The *Indianapolis Evening News*, a paper avowedly independent, in its issue of Dec. 12, 1886, published the following interview with "a railroad man of authority":

"I once supposed that the company owned this road," said a railroad man of authority, "but I now know that the legislators and the judges have the first mortgage on it."

"Legislators and judges?"

"Certainly. The custom of giving free transportation to these people has been so firmly established and is so generally indulged in that we are slave to it. If we decline to issue passes we put ourselves almost at the mercy of persons who at times are in a position to do us damage."

"Why did you ever begin to extend these favors from which it is so hard to break away?"

"Because that was the cheapest way to buy up mercenary fellows."

"You confess, then, that these favors are extended in the hope of substantial return, just as the newspapers have charged for years?"

"What is the use of denying it? I can show you some requests for passes that will cause you to lose faith in office-holders, if you have any. I have received today a request for an annual pass from a justice of the peace, who says that he has 'decided in our favor in a suit for damages in a 'hog case,' where it was claimed that we 'ran over, killed and mutilated two shoats.' In another case a man offered to settle in full with us if we would give him a free pass for a year for killing 'one billy goat.' It is usual for new county officers in coming into office, to ask for enough passes to go round. There are only a few judges living along our line of road that do not ride on free passes. I have

known an instance where a judge, in coming from a distant point to try a case against our road at some county seat, wrote us for a pass for himself and family, and intimated that the favor might bear interest many fold. One county judge some months ago brazenly declared that 'if the road expected fair decisions from the court it must be liberal with its passes.' Justices of the peace are our toughest customers. The cow and hog cases generally come before them, and, as a rule, they want to act as attorney for the road. One recently asked for a pass because he closed the fence bars and kept cattle off the track. I think that the railroads are responsible for this rotten state of judiciary, for they have from the first offered these favors as bribes, and have educated people to think that anything that can be taken out of the hide of a railroad corporation is legitimate."

"To what officials do the railroads voluntarily grant passes?"

"We never dream of refusing legislators and members of town councils, and when we want anything from them we never fail to ask for it! We give passes to county clerks and recorders in return for favors they render in attending to our records, etc. We have an attorney in each county seat, who frequently is content to serve us for an annual pass, unless we have specially important cases. If we think a pass to a judge will do any good, we issue it without waiting to be asked. Not infrequently passes offered are refused. There are judges who remember that they are people's servants. There is one in this city who in time of court goes to and from Danville every day, and who will not take a pass under any consideration."

"How many passes does a railroad grant in a year?"

"About 3,000 annually, and not less than 6,000 trip passes, some of which ticket two and more persons."

The *News* is a journal of established character, which does not publish canards when dealing with subjects of importance to its readers.

The interview, which we have reproduced in full, as it touches some of the most vital questions of the times, can not fail of attracting attention, though we doubt if it receives the consideration which its significance merits.

We are not required to enter upon a lengthy investigation to find indisputable proof that every statement made by "a railroad man of authority," is true. The public accepts each declaration as in all regards conformable to fact, and it is this truthfulness, this candor, frankness, this unquestionable honesty that reveals an amount of cor-

ruption, rottenness, criminality, and debauchery which amazes and alarms all thoughtful men. No man, we care not what may be his mental resources, or his conscientiousness, can fathom the dangers to society which lurk in every statement made by “a railroad man in authority” to the *Indianapolis News*.

It is the universal boast of Americans, that of the railroad mileage of the world, the United States have about one-half, making the grand sum total in 1886 of more than 126,000 miles. But in view of the fact that these roads are able to debauch courts and legislatures by giving free transportation passes, the question arises: are the railroads of the United States a blessing or a calamity? If the statement is to be accepted as true, that officers of the state — men clothed with high responsibilities — can be severed from the path of integrity and justice by a railroad pass, from what other infamy is there a hope of escape, and to what lower degradation can officials ascend? It will be observed that the “railroad man of authority” includes justices of the peace as well as the “ermined judges” — and so degenerate have judges been found to be, that they have intimated, in asking for a pass, when about to try a case, in which the interests of railroads were involved, that a compliance with the request “might bear interest manyfold.” But we ask special attention to the declaration, “that the railroads are responsible for this rotten state of the judiciary, for they have from the first offered these favors as bribes. We submit that more infamous disclosures were never made public. They signify that the government is rotten at the core, that the stream is poisoned at the fountainhead, that where there should be probity there is corruption, the most abominable, and the conclusion must be, that if a judge can be “bribed” by a railroad pass, how long would his integrity resist “spot cash?”

But, says the railroad man of authority, “*we never dream of refusing legislators and members of town councils, and when we want anything from them we never fail to get it.*” We place such declarations in italics, that their damnably corrupting significance may not escape the reader.

With legislatures, congresses, and courts and town councils corrupted by bribes, what show is there for honest government? Who does not see at a glance the absolute necessity for radical remedies? Who wonders that from the center to the circumference of the land courts are distrusted and that legislatures are said to be venal to detestation? We indulge in no words of senseless croaking, but in comment

upon language said to be that of “a railroad man in authority,” and published in an eminently respectable and conservative newspaper. It is not demanded that we should attempt to add coloring to the language, for it is black with the evidences of rottenness in high places. It will be a day of universal rejoicing if an honest party should ever obtain control of the legislation and the judiciary of the country, and the hope is that the labor element may at no distant day exert such a counteracting force as will rescue the government from the men who, if “a railroad man in authority” speaks truly, are bent upon its destruction.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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