
The Progress of Federation

by Eugene V. Debs

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This *Magazine* make no apology for advocating with such ability as it can command, the policy of federation. We have no wish to disguise or dwarf any of the obstacles in the way of progress and of ultimate triumph. We are not disheartened because here and there some subsidized organ declaims in opposition to the movement. Such things are to be expected. There is not a movement on record designed to liberalize the mind, to crush the wrong, to enthrone, dignify and glorify the right, that has not been required to fight for every inch of advancement. Viewing matters from such a standpoint, we arrive at the conclusion that opposition helps on a good cause. It invites discussion. It keeps alive agitation. It sets men to thinking. It brings the truth to the front. The danger lies in listlessness, not in alertness. The demand for labor organizations is conceded. The strength of unity is not doubted. Federation carries organization to its extreme limit of usefulness. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen is unanimous in favor of Federation. At the Atlanta Convention it placed itself on record. Circumstances enabled it to be the first labor organization to make the declaration. For this, the Brotherhood takes only so much credit as attaches to doing its duty fearlessly. It had the courage of conviction. It would emancipate labor from degrading conditions. It is not shackled by aristocratic exclusiveness. It believes that an "honest man is the noblest work of God,"¹ that

His words are bonds, his oaths are oracles;
His love sincere, his thoughts immaculate;
His tears, pure messengers sent from his heart;
His heart as far from fraud as heaven from earth.²

¹ Line from *An Essay on Man, Epistle III* (1733) by **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744).

² From *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1589), act 2, scene 7, by **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616).

Believing such things, the B of LF is in a situation to federate with other labor organizations engaged in the railway service. And here, let it be said, if honest men are to be found anywhere it will be among the membership of organized labor. This is not panegyric, not fulsome eulogy. It is simple truth, known and read of all men who are not blinded by bigotry. The B of LF, in advocating federation, does not stop to inquire the amount of pay a man receives, or whether he handles switch, brake, punch, throttle or scoop, but rather, is he an honorable member of an honorable organization, struggling against adverse surroundings to secure honest pay for honest work that he may have the necessities of life and some of its luxuries, and that he may live as becomes an American citizen; clothe, educate, and train his children to act well their part in a God-favored land, where the government is of, for and by the people. Laboring men know that they are denied such wages and hence they organize that if possible they may improve their condition. Federation of labor organization contemplates aid, mutual assistance in such an honorable endeavor.

The idea of federation is not modern, but its application to organizations of working men, engaged in the railway service, is of recent date. What progress has been made? We reply that it is eminently creditable and encouraging. Immediately following the action of the B of LF at Atlanta, the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, unanimously declared for federation. Switchmen are courageous men. A coward can't be a switchman. Only clear-headed, steady-nerved and keen-eyed men can be switchmen. Their vocation is perilous in the extreme, and of all the orders of men engaged in the railway service, not one has given more attention to the rights and wrongs of railroad employees. Here, then, we have two organizations in line at the earliest practicable period. In October, when the great Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen assembled in convention at Columbus, the question of federation was up for debate. This Brotherhood, coming third, had ample opportunity to investigate the subject. It had as large interests at stake as any other brotherhood engaged in the railway service. The delegates to the convention were competent men. They knew what they wanted, and they decided unanimously to federate with the firemen and the switchmen. As a result, we find that in two months, three brotherhoods of railway employees, decide to federate. We regard the record as eminently satisfactory. And now comes the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. At the annual convention of the

order held in Richmond, Virginia, in November, the engineers decided not to federate. The reason for this action, or rather non-action, we shall not attempt to explain except upon a hypothesis warranted by circumstances.

We do the engineers no injustice by saying that up to the time of the CB&Q strike, they regarded their brotherhood invincible, and not in a condition to need the assistance of any other labor organization. The CB&Q strike, in its inception, was an affair of the engineers. It is a well-known fact that the firemen on the CB&Q could have run the engines which the engineers abandoned. They were competent. The officers of the road recognized the fact. But in this supreme moment, the firemen made the cause of the engineers their own, and sacrificed everything to a spirit of loyalty, of federation.

Nor was this all of their service to the engineers. That Brotherhood, by its previous course, had engendered many animosities in the minds of Knights of Labor, the justice of such hostility we are not required to discuss, we simply state the fact, but the firemen discarded all such considerations and placed themselves between the engineers and those who sought to antagonize their interests. In attempting to explain the hostility of other organizations towards the B of LE, it may be said, we think, that it grew out of the policy of exclusiveness which had characterized it. It had been wanting in sympathy for all other labor organizations when in trouble. Towards the B of LF this spirit of exclusiveness had been decided to the last degree of endurance, but the firemen on the CB&Q did not enact the role of neutrality, they promptly took sides. They resolved to share the fate of the engineers. Now what of all this! It is told in a few words. The engineers refuse to federate with the switchmen and brakemen, but declare in favor of cooperation with the firemen. Towards all other brotherhoods in the railway service, a "strict neutrality is to be maintained." What is neutrality? Is it not a total disregard of the rights and the wrongs involved in any controversy? Is it not a mental and moral condition, in which all the finer perceptions of right and justice are blunted or kept in abeyance, not permitted to act? It simply amounts to this, that no matter what grievance a switchman or brakeman may have — no matter to what extent their rights may be outraged, no matter how flagrant may be the wrongs to which they are subjected, the engineers propose to maintain a "strict neutrality," strict indifference, totally regardless whether the right or wrong triumphs. But with the firemen, the engineers propose to "cooperate." To cooperate in-

volves the idea of coordinate, coequal, of the same rank. But the B of LE declares that a member of the B of LF, who is a member of the B of LE, shall not represent his Division in a convention of the B of LE. In such a case, what becomes of the coequal, the coordinate idea? Is it not exploded? Does it not vanish?

Notwithstanding such considerations, it may be said that the B.of LE is making some progress toward federation. Three years ago, the B of LF, at its convention held in Philadelphia passed the following resolutions:

Resolved, That it is the sense of this body that we do all in our power to create and maintain a harmonious feeling between the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

Resolved, That we place ourselves on record with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and that the Secretary of the Grand Lodge [Debs] be authorized and directed to make a statement, to the said organization, under seal of the Grand Lodge, to the effect that our order is now a labor organization, made such by the action of this Convention, and that we are desirous of cooperating with them in all their grievances, and that we shall expect the same from them in our troubles; knowing the fact that In union there is strength we are ready to meet them half way.

Resolved, That these resolutions be presented to the Annual Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, at New Orleans, October 21, by a committee of one, who shall endeavor to bring about a proper recognition of this body, in order that we may be enabled to carry out the purposes of these resolutions by a friendly understanding during times of trouble.

A delegate was commissioned to present the foregoing resolutions to the B of LE, in convention assembled, in the city of New Orleans. The resolutions were presented to the Grand Chief of the brotherhood, P.M. Arthur, who stated to the delegate that "the B of LE never had and never would cooperate with any other labor organization; that it was amply able to take care of itself, and that other organizations must do the same." That the convention was heartily in sympathy with Grand Chief Arthur, is evident from the fact that no action was taken upon the resolutions passed by the B of LF and presented

by its appointed delegate to the Convention of the B of LE. That the resolutions were treated with the utmost indifference, it is only necessary to state that at the New Orleans Convention was enacted the law that no member of the B of LF should be eligible to membership in the B of LE.

This was three years ago. Then the B of LF wanted to cooperate with the B of LE and were ignored. Its resolutions were treated as trivial, unimportant, and evidently excited neither concern nor attention. Now we are informed that the B of LE is willing to cooperate, and we predict that when another period of three years has elapsed, the B of LE will be willing to federate. We recognize the fact that great bodies move slowly, and we congratulate the B of LE that it is willing now to cooperate. We leave it to the conquering logic of events and of progress.

It is safe to say that every engineer on the CB&Q was, and is, in favor of federation. These men understood the situation, they were in a position to appreciate the unwavering loyalty of firemen, and had the entire membership of the B. of L. E. been similarly situated, there would have been no difficulty about federation in the Richmond Convention.

In conclusion, let it be said that the firemen, the brakemen, and the switchmen have determined to federate, form an alliance, offensive and defensive, for the general welfare. These Brotherhoods are students of the signs of the times. They understand their mission. They are conservatively progressive. If there are those whose pretentiousness, vanity or conceit keeps them to themselves — out of the broad current of human sympathy — their cynical views and practices will not deflect the firemen, brakemen, and switchmen from federating, and as for final results there is neither doubt nor fear.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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