
The Reading

by Eugene V. Debs

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The Labor press of the country, as also the newspapers, regardless of political persuasion, at all inclined to aid workingmen in their struggle to better their condition and obtain fair wages for their work, and all publications, regardless of specialities, whose owners believe that workingmen have a right to organize for social, benevolent, educational, and pecuniary purposes, should advertise the Reading Railroad Company as the enemy of such organizations, and therefore the enemy of workingmen. The Reading Railroad is in the hands of men, who, as the records abundantly show, are as pronounced in their hostility to the interests of workingmen, as the Tsar of Russia is in his hostility to that portion of his subjects, who dare ask for any relaxation of his despotic power. The Reading officials, from Corbin, the president of the road, down to the meanest official flea in the hair of the corporation dog, seek, by every means in their power to degrade workingmen. The Congressional committee, charged with the express duty of investigating the villainies of the Reading corporation did not hesitate to say, that the strike on the Reading, in 1887, was brought about by its officials for the purpose of advancing the price of anthracite coal, and of reducing the wages of its employees. In this, it is seen that the purpose of the officers of the Reading was a double villainy, first, the robbery of the public, by advancing the price of coal, and second, the robbery of its railroad employees and its miners, by a heartless reduction of wages.

The country should be fully able to comprehend the man, Austin Corbin, President of the Reading railroad. He is a man of money, a man of influence in the capitalistic world. He has, by virtue of his position, control of the fortunes of not less than 150,000 of his fellow beings — men, women, and children. His word reduces their wages; his word reduces them to idleness; his word clothes them in rags, wrecks their homes, and makes them wretched beyond description.

When this man, Corbin, perpetrates such crimes as we have enumerated, he seeks to justify his acts by statements sent broadcast to the public. He issued a statement in which he said the company had mined 51 million tons of coal, for mining which the miners were paid \$57,110,000; that the company received for this coal only \$44,840,000, and therefore that the company sustained a loss of \$12,270,000. This statement was put forth to show how the company had lost money by paying wages to its miners. It was made to show that the company was justified in reducing the wages of its employees, in "Russianizing" the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania.

The Congressional committee investigated this statement of Austin Corbin, President of the Reading, who is the enemy of workingmen and the robber of the public, and it was found that Austin Corbin had "blundered," that his statement was not true, that it was a colossal falsehood; that it was gotten up to deceive the public and to cover up the most shameful rascalities. The Congressional committee called before them Mr. John Norris, editor of the *Philadelphia Record*, and this gentleman produced the official figures, showing that the Reading had received for the 51 million tons of coal \$88,024,188.84, instead of \$44,840,000 as Corbin had stated, and which was \$41,184,188 more than was shown in Corbin's statement; and that instead of being loser \$12,270,000 as Corbin had stated, the Reading had made \$28,914,188. When a president of a corporation manipulates figures in that way, for the purpose of deceiving the public, his usefulness as a truth teller is ended, and the verdict of honest men is that he is a bad man. Austin Corbin belongs to that tribe of human monsters who prey upon poor men, who combine the natures of hog and shark, who, being influenced by greed, make war upon the weak, regardless of right, and who are never more pleased than when they are bleeding those who are brought within reach of their "devilfish" grasp.

The Reading Railroad Corporation is now making war upon organized labor, because it sees in such organizations, a power calculated to withstand assaults upon workingmen. It is well known that Corbin and his associates have gained what they call a victory over organized labor. They have wrecked lodges of workingmen, just as English constables have wrecked, with crowbars and battering rams, the homes of Irishmen. But in doing this on the Reading, they have aroused workingmen everywhere to a realization of the dangers that confront them. The Reading has reduced its Railway employees to

serfs. It has made them surrender their rights and prerogatives, has made them get down in the dirt at its bidding, and they wear their collars as uncomplainingly as did the slaves in old plantation days, the days of labor pens, block, lash, and market. It is a pitiful spectacle, a spectacle in the presence of which the starry banner ought always to be trailed in the dirt, for on the Reading when Corbin commands, it no longer symbolizes freedom and independence. In such places, as was said of it, in days gone by, it is a “flaunting lie.”¹

We assume that railroad employees, in view of such facts, will go forward more determined than ever to organize and to federate for the maintenance of their rights, for if this is not done then their enslavement is as certain to come as that water will run down hill. Railroad employees, by organizing and federating, may hope to secure and to maintain fair living wages. With the organizations single handed and alone they will go down, one by one, but with the organizations federated for justice, the right and the truth, there is hope; without it there is in store for them wreck and ruin.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ Allusion to “Hail to the Stars and Stripes,” a controversial abolitionist poem by an anonymous Brooklyn poet. The verses, written in protest of President Franklin Pierce’s order that one Anthony Burns be carried from Boston to Virginia to be enslaved, first appeared on the front page of Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, June 18, 1854.