
**Letter to E.E. Clark,
in Cedar Rapids, Iowa,
from Eugene V. Debs,
in Terre Haute, Indiana,
Jan. 13, 1892**

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Terre Haute, Indiana, Jan. 13th, 1892.

E.E. Clark, Esq.
Grand Chief ORC,
Cedar Rapids, Ia.

Dear Sir and Brother:—

It affords me satisfaction to acknowledge receipt of your favor of the 5th instant. It goes without saying that I have read the communication carefully.

My respect for you, personally, prompts me to find, if possible, a platform, a policy, upon which we could stand together without compromising convictions.

This desire, on my part, is not likely to be realized while you *assume* the innocence of the grand officers of the B of RT.

In your case, the question of their guilt seems to be in abeyance. Your mind is not satisfied, and yet, you do not appear to be persuaded that their plea of innocence is just. You remember the old distich:

Convince a man against his will,
He's of the same opinion still.

I do not particularly apply this aphorism to your reflections upon the subject, and yet, I think I see a purpose on your part, to find an

excuse for the conspiracy, which, had it been practiced against your order, would have made your denunciations so fierce as would have aroused the paving stones of Cedar Rapids to mutiny. Take this for instance:

I have always maintained that I thought the proper course to have been pursued by the officers of the B of RT was to satisfy the officers of the Switchmen, that they proposed to reinstate McNerney, and support him in his position *at any cost*.

I underline “at any cost” because with the B of RT officials “at any cost” meant *conspiracy*.

You must permit me to doubt that you would resort to conspiracy and treason to reinstate anybody — and I submit that the *term* “at any cost,” unless qualified and explained, is seriously unfortunate.

It occurs to my mind that you are unfortunate in saying what I now quote:

To make my position entirely clear to you, I will state that in my opinion the Supreme Council made a great mistake and showed themselves wanting in ability to rise to the occasion when they failed to take this matter up between the Trainmen and the Switchmen and adjust it *before any opportunity was given for a conspiracy to be entered into*.

Here, again, I underline a sentence, the force of which you did not seem to comprehend — analyzed, it makes you say that a “grave mistake” — and “wanting in ability to rise to the occasion” “created an opportunity for a conspiracy.” Would you say that because certain parties adjudged Benedict Arnold guilty of improprieties of conduct, they created an opportunity for his conspiracy and treason? And that because of the “opportunity” Arnold was entitled to *consideration* for having availed himself of the “opportunity?”

Why do you beat about for a peg upon which to hang an apology for the conspirators?

You intimate that at “*any cost*” may involve conspiracy and treason; and you assume that the Supreme Council, by a “grave mistake” created an opportunity for conspiracy and treason; and when you see 400 innocent switchmen set adrift, made homeless wanderers without work, wages, or food; when you know that helpless women and children were made the victims of base machinations in which the offi-

cers of the B of RT were involved; when you see it stated that the authorities of the B of RT did go East and employ men to take the places of the bludgeoned switchmen, you are still unsatisfied that there was a conspiracy and if there was, you assume the Supreme Council created the "opportunity" for the crime.

You must permit me to believe that you did not intend to involve yourself in such a combination of propositions; that neither your head nor your heart is capable of advising or approving of such flagitious proceedings.

For the great Brotherhood of Trainmen I have the profoundest respect and regard, but for the men who sought to *get even* with the Switchmen "at any cost," while they assume that conspiracy and treason, with or without an "opportunity" created by a "grave mistake" or otherwise, ought to be condoned or whitewashed, I have only a righteous aversion.

It is not for me to say that you have seen the testimony in the case, which force the conviction of guilt upon *all* the member of the Supreme Council, except only those who were adjudged guilty. If you have not seen the testimony, I shall hope it may be placed in your hands, because, since the dawn of light, nothing has been clearer or more convincing.

From the first, those who would have the conspirators escape the just penalties of the guilt, it seems to me, are anxious to find an excuse for it rather than affix a penalty for the crime. As a consequence we hear about the wrongs which the Switchmen perpetrated, and as if that was not sufficient, the "mistakes" of the Supreme Council are introduced, as if one or the other, or both combined, constituted an excuse for the outrage.

I think I do not misapprehend the real purpose of our correspondence. There have been , so far, no "cross-purposes."

Let us see. The central idea is federation, a basis of federation — working together for the upbuilding of the interests of railroad employees. This includes the B of RT. But, can there be such a basis which includes men who stand convicted of conspiracy to strike down an organization with which they were once federated?

I hold that such a federation would not only be farcical but infamous. It would be an open avowal that should the Supreme Council of such a federation commit a "grave mistake" it would afford an "opportunity" for conspiracy and that one member of the federated

body would be justifiable in getting even with any other member of the body "at any cost."

The question, therefore, arises, can a federated body be organized that admits to its councils men who, disregarding every obligation, secretly plan the ruin of innocent men who had a right to expect that their rights would be sacredly guarded?

That such an organization can be formed I do not doubt — but that it can be formed and have the respect of honest men I do not believe; nor do I believe that you, when you have conned all the testimony, would approve of such an organization. It would be born with the virus of a deadly disease in its blood which sooner or later would result in its death.

If you learned that the "verdict of guilty" was rendered against the B of RT "before the trial was entered upon" you had information that I was not in possession of. I disclaim any knowledge of an "agreement" alleged to have been "entered into" at Chicago, affixing the penalty of expulsion, or any penalty, either before or after the trial. My connection with the affair, from first to last, is an open book. Up to the time of the conspiracy the grand officers of the B of RT were my warm personal friends and I was theirs. It was anything but a pleasant duty for me to condemn their official conduct and I only did it after mature deliberation. In this I was animated solely by an overwhelming sense of official duty which I could have evaded only at the sacrifice of my manhood and self-respect. Disagreeable as the task has been, I have unflinchingly performed it to the best of my ability, notwithstanding the enmities I incurred, which, were they ten times as great, would not have deflected me from my purpose.

I note your answer to my question in reference to the accusation that the idea of expelling the B of RT from the Supreme Council originated with me. I do not accuse anyone of misrepresentation, but there is certainly a mistake somewhere. At the last meeting of the Council, in the presence of Brother [George W.] Howard and the other members, I made a statement of the facts in the case which completely vindicated me of any purpose, at any time, to expel, or otherwise inflict penalties upon the B of RT, other than those who were proven guilty of the conspiracy.

Let me say further, that in my antagonism to the grand officers of the B of RT I am influenced by no personal feeling, nor am I swayed by any motives of revenge. A sacred principle has been struck down, trampled upon, and every consideration of duty, fidelity, and honor

demands, in terms I can neither disregard nor ignore, that I shall espouse the cause of the men who, whatever may be said to the contrary, were cruelly robbed of employment and remanded to idleness for no other purpose than to gratify a remorseless spirit of revenge upon a handful of their fellowmen.

You gave it as your opinion that “every organization should administer their own affairs.” I agree with you. And still, if reports that seem of unquestioned authority are true, that policy was not carried out at the Galesburg convention, at least so far as certain outside influences could be brought to bear upon certain “affairs.” And if I remember rightly, the official organ of your order, in an issued preceding the convention, found it necessary to make a plea for the reelection of the grand officers, which meant, of course, for it could mean nothing else, the endorsement of the Northwestern conspiracy.

And now, Bro. Clark, permit me to say that we ought calmly and dispassionately to examine the testimony relating to the Northwestern conspiracy.

As an individual, my interests are not involved. The order of which I am a member is not directly concerned; and yet, at no period of my life have I felt a deeper interest than now in the welfare of the men employed in the train service of the country. My loyalty to organization is unabated — and I am glad to say that while I am identified with men who fire locomotives and aspire to more remunerative positions, I feel a lively solicitude for all my fellow-toilers regardless of occupation.

I do not forget that we are still in touch with the holiday season, when friendly greetings are in order. I reciprocate all your fraternal words, and most cordially do I wish you and yours a happy and prosperous “92.”

How’er the winds may blow, I do not doubt that in the near future the skies of labor will be brighter.

I am sincerely and fraternally yours,

Eugene V. Debs.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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