
Old Time Prejudice

by Eugene V. Debs

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When our railroad system was in its infancy, it was exceedingly loose-jointed in many ways. The very best minds in the management were often vexed and bewildered beyond measure. Railroads at first were chiefly built on local subsidies. Extravagant promises were made to counties and individuals to secure stock subscriptions, and when obtained the builders generally finished with money negotiated by trust companies and secured by bonds. Then came default in payment of interest, foreclosure, sale, and purchase by parties who knew little and cared less for local interest. In this way the friendship of the people was changed to bitterest prejudice. The law-making power was evoked to hamper railroad property in every conceivable way. Railroad Commissioners were created and every method of hounding the railroads fully inaugurated. And so railroad investments, especially all local investments, were regarded with suspicion. It brought on a war between capitalists and organized counties, and in some instances whole states became involved. Such were some of the embarrassments in our early railroad development.

In addition to these, the operation of the roads themselves, even after their construction, was but poorly understood. It was a long time before a complete accounting system could be provided. There seemed, at first, to be no way to stop the leaks. The smaller roads, one after another, soon perished, and consolidations followed. This unsettled state of things pervaded every department. The train men, engineers and firemen, among others, did pretty much as they pleased. There was no such thing, in

many instances, as telegraphic orders, so the movement of trains was governed almost entirely by the arbitrary rules furnished in the time tables. Once behind, they must wait for time. There were none to tell them how they could make it up when lost. Accidents were multiplied, and the destruction of property was very great. General Superintendents and their men were constantly at war with each other. The whole system seemed to rest on bad faith, and insubordination took the place of authority.

This state of things held sway for many years. After numerous experiments, and as many failures, the management of the most competent men in the country was brought into requisition. At first these movements were cautious and slow, but always forward. Organization soon began to take the place of anarchy. Comptrollers were put into position and auditing departments organized. This enabled the management every day to see just where they stood. Superintendents took heart, the men began to feel the force of discipline, and railroads generally reared their structures on stable foundations.

Prosperity once inaugurated, the managers began to contrive for larger profits and more extended power. No one of the roads could accomplish this thing alone — competition was in the way of it. Associations were accordingly formed and pools established. The excuse assigned was self-protection. This all seemed well enough. There was no law against it, and being inside its limits the legal justification of their conduct was freely conceded. But some of these managers wanted the thing to stop here. They desired to make a monopoly of self-protection. They entered into the bonds of organized cooperation. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, among others, was instituted. There were many reasons for it. Locomotive firemen are chiefly young men, away from the endearments of home, and need care and sympathy. The courts had held, quite generally, that employees could not recover against corporations for personal injuries. The risk of their work was great, and accidents were certain. The Brotherhood provided for this. Nothing could have been more humane. The organization guarded them against the arbitrary sway of greed. Its members well understood they were a

necessary part of the railroad system, and that the value of their labor should go hand in hand with the prosperity of their employers. That was right, and based upon the soundest principles of political economy.

Strikes have sometimes taken place, and there is still a fossilized class of railroad managers who say they are the certain adjuncts of Brotherhood. Some of them will not employ our members. This is very short-sighted. Our Brotherhood prevents strikes. It inculcates sobriety and obedience. No railroad management can stand on any other foundation. A sober, just man is not likely to strike, if justice is meted out to him. All strikes are easily explained, and just as easily adjusted. Let common justice be done all along the line and strikes will be unknown.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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