
Speech to the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen: Columbus, OH — Oct. 16, 1888

by Eugene V. Debs

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Mr. Chairman and Ladies and Gentlemen:—

If it were the right thing to do I would bow my acknowledgment of the honor of being called upon to address this splendid audience and give way to others. I would rather listen than speak. Spread out before me there is a banquet for the eye, and the ear. If attuned to the melody of truth, has been thrilled by the matchless words that have fallen from the lips of the speakers who have preceded me on this occasion. (*Cheers.*)

I can at best but simply talk; only plain words befitting a locomotive fireman are mine to give. (*Applause.*) But, my friends. If every word were a double eagle,¹ coined in the mint, I would be no less lavish of them on this occasion. (*Renewed Applause.*)

I have referred to the Brotherhood of Brakemen as my friends. Outside of home's charmed circle where there are those sacred relations that dwell only in the inner temples of our affections, what is better than "friend"? (*Great cheering.*) What more sacred than the ties of friendship?

From the great Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen I come to the great Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, the bearer of friendship's greeting. (*Applause.*) Yours is an organization of high ambition, noble purpose and superior courage. Courage? Why it requires a courageous man to be a brakeman. (*Renewed applause.*) You could no more make a brakeman out of a coward than you could transform a Colorado grasshopper into the proportions of a giraffe. (*Great laugh-*

¹ A \$20 gold piece, the largest denomination coin of the realm.

ter and applause.) Your Brotherhood is only live years old. Just think of It! Your Grand Master [S.E.Wilkinson] has stated that five years ago you began with eight men, and now there is a grand army of 15,000 noble men, with as high ambition as ever prompted a man to action, keeping step to the music of your prosperity. (*More cheering.*) We are living in a wonderfully progressive age. It seems but yesterday since all of Jay Gould's ambition centered in the success of a patent mouse trap. (*Laughter.*) Now, just think of the devices he has got to catch men and things. (*Renewed laughter and applause.*) It used to be said of Davy Crockett that when he went out coon hunting, and the coon spied him, he came right down to him and would never wait to be shot at. (*Continued laughter.*) And it seems that when Jay Gould goes out hunting, the ties of the railroads are transformed into so many legs and walk right Into his trap. (More laughter and applause.) But there have been other developments, and I have only mentioned these things to illustrate the wonderful spirit and progress of the age. Upon all hands and in all directions laboring men are organizing. Organizing what for? Organizing for mutual protection; organizing in order that may demand and receive an honest day's wages for an honest day's work. (*Applause.*)

I am aware that in a sense labor organizations are in bad repute. There are a great many people who will say, "You are going to inaugurate strikes; you are going to create trouble; foment strikes and discords and keep up the irrepressible conflict between labor and capital." Now, my friends, as an original proposition, and in making the statement I believe I voice the sentiment of every railroad brakeman in the land, as an original proposition I am opposed to strikes. I believe in concession, arbitration and compromise always. (*Applause.*) But when these fail—when these fail, and we come in contact with a narrow-minded, bigoted, and infamous railroad official, who will not accord us our common rights, then I am in favor of strikes. (*Renewed Applause.*)

Why, my friends, there is not a star or a stripe in our national flag that does not tell of a strike; not one. From Lexington, from Concord, all along the track of gloom and of glory clear down to Yorktown is one continuous succession of strikes for liberty and independence. (*Great applause.*)

We start out with the proposition that we are going to supply the railroad companies of this land with capable, competent, reliable men — men who will till the bill In every particular. (*Cheering.*) And all

we ask in return is simply a proper recognition of their services; that is all. (*More applause.*) There is nothing wrong about that. It must be understood that when a man toils faithfully in some honest occupation, no matter how humble it may be, he is entitled to enough wages to keep himself and his family as an American laboring man and family ought to be kept. (*Applause.*) An intelligent American workingman can not live like a Chinaman who comes to this country with a five-cent god in his pocket. (*Laughter and applause.*)

While the laboring man has the prerogatives, he has all the duties and assumes all of the responsibilities of an American citizen. He wants to get wages enough so that he can dress himself respectably; clothe and educate properly his children; live in a cottage and not in a hovel; have all the comforts and a few of the luxuries of life. (*Continued applause.*) And if he does not get that in return for his labor there is something wrong somewhere and somebody is drawing at least a portion of his pay. (*Applause.*)

Now we propose to level up and level down. I do not suppose there is a member of your organization that wants a dollar more than he earns by his toil. (*Applause.*) All that is asked is simply a fair and equitable distribution of the wealth that labor creates. (*Continued cheering.*) Not a dollar more; not a dollar less.

These are some of the purposes of organized labor. Organized labor has another purpose in view. If I asked this audience whether there are upon the statute books of the country laws that are vicious, that are demoralizing, that are fruitful of great wrong, the verdict would be in the affirmative unanimously. We start out by saying that in some of the states of this country they have laws, under the operation of which, when laboring men get together to deliberate for their welfare, they are charged with conspiracy and put behind the prison bars. The Goulds and the Vanderbilts and the great monopolists of the country can meet and deliberate to rob you of the proceeds of your toil just as often as they want to, but there is no law that would charge them with conspiracy, no law that would interfere with their action. Now, we propose that the laboring men of this country in time shall have the same right to protect their capital and to deliberate on their own account that the capitalists of the country have to devise ways and means by which to protect their capital. (*Continued cheering.*)

There is another law on the statute books of some of the states of this country, under the provisions of which laboring men, if they

choose to strike as a last expedient to protect their rights, are hunted as pickpockets, thieves, liars, and perjurers, are hunted, and shot down at the word of command and their naked souls sent to the bar of judgment for simply trying to protect their rights as workingmen. There are other laws that permit, and even encourage, the cornering of the food products of the country, thus reducing the purchasing power of a laboring man's dollar, and under which monopolies thrive and colossal fortunes are reared at the expense of the sweat and toil of the laboring men of this country. It is proposed that these laws shall be wiped from the statute books, and they are going to be before the organized labor of this country has accomplished its mission. (*More applause.*) Laboring men do not ask Congress or the state legislature to enact laws that shall help them directly, but they do ask that they shall repeal those laws that operate to their detriment and injury. (*Cheers.*)

Labor organizations have always been conservative. It is true that perhaps there has been at times haste when moderation was required. There have been mistakes on both sides, and yet a great work has been accomplished. And day by day your brotherhood, with the other organizations whose purposes are similar to your own, are going forward, quietly carrying out the purposes they have in view. The good work accomplished by your organization alone during its short career cannot be estimated. In hundreds of homes where there would have been want and destitution and hunger pangs, your brotherhood has gone forward and given aid and comfort to the bereaved ones. You have fulfilled every obligation. You have, when the brakeman has fallen at his post of duty, gone to the bereaved ones and hushed the lamentations of sorrow. (*Applause.*) More than that, you have given substantial aid when it was required. By the protective feature of your brotherhood you have been enabled to pay large sums of money to the widows and orphans of those of your members who have fallen by the wayside. Besides all of this you have exerted a noble and a splendid influence upon your members. Why, a brakeman the country over is a 100 percent better man today than he was five years ago. (*Great applause.*) A simple membership in the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen is recognized as a certificate of good character the country over. (*Continued cheering.*) And this statement, I will venture to say, will be endorsed by the good people of the city of Columbus before you close your deliberations in their midst. (*Renewed cheering.*) There are a hundred reasons why your noble brotherhood should live

and thrive; why it should have the encouragement, the sympathy and support of the people everywhere, and there is not one reason that can be assigned why it should not exist; why it should not have the encouragement and hearty approval of the public. (*Great applause.*)

I hope that your deliberations in this city will be harmonious. Let there be but one object, but one purpose on the part of the delegates and representatives, and that is, to advance the best interests of the brotherhood. Let there be no discord; let harmony be the watchword all along the line. Your Brotherhood now is respected wherever the locomotive proclaims the triumphs of civilization. You stand today the equal of any of the labor organizations upon this continent, and I not care which one it is. (*Great cheering.*)

Now, my friends, there is just one other step that I nope to see these organizations take, and that is federation for mutual benefit. (*Great applause.*) Not for the purpose of fostering or encouraging strikes, but to avert them. (More applause.) I believe when these brotherhoods all wheel into line under the banner of federation that the epitaph of labor strikes may be written. There is no railroad official, however arrogant, however oppressive, however unscrupulous, that will dare antagonize the federated brotherhoods of railroad employees. (*Continued cheering.*) Under the banner of federation we will have a power for good that can scarcely be estimated. True it must be prudently wielded. There must be cool and conservative men at the head; wise counsels must prevail, but this done, I am satisfied that the representatives of capital, and the representatives of these combined interests will meet together in a true spirit of humanity, side by side, and that strife and strikes will never come. (*Great applause.*) And if a strike should come, then I believe that out from the camp of the federated brotherhoods Perry's message will be sent. "We have meet the enemy and they are ours." (*Great cheering.*)

For the courtesy that has made It possible for me to address you, I thank you most heartily tonight, as I do the people of this goodly city, who have treated me with the utmost kindness since my arrival here this morning. And now, wishing the Brotherhood of Railroad Brake-men, in behalf of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the largest possible measure of prosperity and success. I bid you good night. (*Great applause.*)

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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