
An Open Letter to P.M. Arthur of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Dec. 20, 1889

by Eugene V. Debs

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*P.M. Arthur, Esq.,
Grand Chief, B of LE,
Cleveland, Ohio:*

Dear Sir:—

I address you this open letter from considerations which will appear as I proceed.

It is not my nature to be boastful, but in justice to myself it is becoming to say that I reverence age when it sits with becoming grace upon a man's visage, and its fruit is a generous recognition of proprieties and an experience which will not tolerate bigotry and egotism.

I make no apologies for my youth as compared with your years, since I am no more responsible for it than you are for your age, but I should hasten to apologize should I so far forget what is due under the code which regulates the conduct of gentlemen, as to attack a man, young or old, a real or supposed enemy, behind his back, or make any charge affecting his standing, in a deliberative body when he was absent, and therefore unable to meet his assailant on the spot.

If my readings are correct, if I have any comprehension whatever of the principles which govern the conduct of gentlemen in such matters, they scorn to attack a man from behind, or to assail him, call in

question acts or motives when they know his absence affords them protection and immunity from merited rebuke and exposure.

Cowardice has no defenders in the ranks of honorable men, and in the case of denouncing a man in a public meeting, knowing him to be absent and beyond call, is an offense so a war with all things directly or remotely honorable, that the world will not permit the plea of old age to condone it unless it be in such instances where the infirmities of years are productive of mental feebleness and decay.

At the convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, held in the city of Denver, on or about the 26th of October last [1889], I am credibly informed by a gentleman present that Grand Chief P.M. Arthur took the floor, and following complimentary reference to my colleagues, Brothers [Frank] Sargent and [J.J.] Hannahan, and all the members of the Firemen's brotherhood, continuing, said that "until Mr. Debs retracted statements made in the Firemen's official organ against him and the men he represented, he (Arthur) could not be his friend."

I am not informed in general nor in particular what statements have been made "in the Firemen's official organ," against which Grand Chief Arthur, the penalty for which is the loss of his friendship and the gain of his enmity.

In declaring that you are no friend of mine, and as a corollary, my enemy, you vastly magnified the real or supposed offense, which you must have had in your mind, in the opinion of those who heard you.

Now, I assure you, that I am not your enemy; on the contrary, I have been your friend: when after years of obstinate arrogance toward all other labor organizations, in an extremity brought about by your ideas of "exclusiveness" and "entangling alliances," you were compelled to abandon your lofty position and recognize other organizations of laboring men, the grand officers of the firemen's order (I was no exception then), too magnanimous to humiliate you, gave you full credit for your change of heart and paid you a tribute of personal friendship in the hope of enlisting your cooperation for the good of all, and the *Firemen's Magazine* (April number, 1888, page 248) complimented you in terms that left no doubt as to its fealty to you and your interests.

In this, I have the advantage of you. My friendship for you has been of that type, which, while crediting you with all the virtues you possess, has, as it seemed proper, pointed out your mistakes, for your own welfare, mistakes that often aroused my compassion, but which

never made me your enemy, however much applause, on certain occasions, in your absence, I might have won by declaring myself your foe until you humbly retracted any statements you might have made. I do not nurse nor cherish enmities. I do not vault into any arena, to designate persons by name, to tell the audience I am not their friend, or lay down a rule which they must follow to secure my friendship — my recognition and my fellowship. In this, you will observe, I differ widely from you. But what are the statements to which you refer, that prompted you at a great meeting in Denver, to make me a victim of your ill will? What is it that you want me to retract? Why does the Grand Chief wave his autocratic scepter and declare that “Mr. Debs” shall “retract” certain statements, and that until the decree is obeyed, his friendship will be withheld? Again, I ask, what statements?

Does the Grand Chief, who is the chief editor of the *Engineers’ Journal*, desire that the *Firemen’s Magazine* shall pursue a course of cowardly silence, when the brotherhood of which it is the organ is insulted and assaulted? Does the Grand Chief propose to run both publications, the *Engineers’ Journal* and the *Firemen’s Magazine*, in the same rut? Does the Grand Chief propose that when he takes snuff, I shall sneeze? that when he prays, I shall say amen? and, that when his self-abasement is declined on the part of “Mr. Debs,” the Grand Chief will forthwith inflict the penalty of withdrawing his friendship, and secure sympathy and applause, by removing bandages and plasters, and exhibiting his sore toes in public meetings, and proclaiming that until “Mr. Debs” “retracts, these sores shall never heal?”

Had “Mr. Debs” been present, and permitted to reply, the Grand Chief would have been as silent as is the *Journal*, of which he is the chief editor, upon all vital questions relating to the welfare of working men. Had “Mr. Debs” been present, he would have demanded of Grand Chief P.M. Arthur to name his grievances against the *Firemen’s Magazine* and its editor. What statements had appeared against Grand Chief Arthur which must be retracted, that “Mr. Debs” might bask in the sunshine of his friendship? I say, had I been present at the Denver meeting when you assailed me, and had been permitted to reply to your attack upon me, I would have made you then and there tell the meeting what statements you desired retracted. I did not have that privilege, and hence I address you this open letter.

The *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* is always careful to be right, when, for the honor, dignity, and independence of the order of which it is the official organ, it arraigns anyone who is openly or covertly its

enemy, whether it be Austin Corbin, John Livingstone, or P.M. Arthur. The *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* has boundless contempt for hypocrisy in any and all of its guises. Pharisaism, with its entire brood of artifices, deceits, tricks, and double-dealings, finds no resting place in the *Firemen's Magazine*, and I do not hesitate to avow that in the past it has called to account P.M. Arthur, Grand Chief, and chief editor of the *Engineers' Journal*. The indictments of P.M. Arthur which have appeared in the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* were not made in the dark; not made in a meeting where P.M. Arthur could not be heard, but in a publication widely circulated, and regularly placed where P.M. Arthur could read and ponder every word, and if the allegations were not true, if they were false, why did the chief editor of the *Engineers' Journal* remain silent? Why did he wait for an opportunity when he knew he was protected from exposure to assault his man? The explanation is easy. It was because he was wanting in those essentials that scorn the semblance of foul play.

And now, let us get down to particulars. I aver that P.M. Arthur has declared that he never had, and that while he was Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, he never would cooperate with any other labor organization.

Is that one of the statements which you, in your Denver harangue, demanded that I should retract? Would it not be better for you to first deny the averment? Will you do it?

I aver that you favored the law prohibiting a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, who was a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, from representing his Division in a convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers until he ceased to be a member of the firemen's order. Do you deny the charge? Is that one of the statements which you, in your Denver address, demanded that I should retract to gain your friendship?

You favored the enactment of the law of your order compelling engineers, members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, to abandon their order, that they might become members of the Brotherhood of Engineers. Is that one of the statements which, in your Denver speech, you demanded I should retract if I ever expected to realize your recognition as a friend? Do you deny the statement? Is it not true? Was it not such things as I have stated that produced the "ill feelings" about which so much has been said and written, and for which you, more than any other man, more than all other men, are responsible?

You have been the uncompromising foe of federation, and as such you have done more to embarrass and postpone the federation of railroad employees than any other man — possibly more than all other men combined. Do you deny the charge? Do you plead not guilty? No, you do not. The great brotherhood of which you are the Grand Chief, were you to deny the charge, would render a verdict against you in one minute. You are the recognized, implacable foe of federation. There is not a railroad corporation in the country that does not know you to be unalterably hostile to federation.

Are such statements included in the number which you demanded I should retract when you assailed me and announced the withdrawal of your friendship?

Was it my criticism upon your appointment to a committee to settle the CB&Q strike which offended you? In that matter you totally ignored the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and I excoriated you for your deliberate insult to that organization. If that is the grievance for which you demand an apology, say so.

In my absence, out of danger from a reply, your courage was equal to the occasion. You could attack with impunity. Locked in and guarded, applauded to the echo, you could cut and thrust, knock down and drag out, and everlastingly annihilate an opponent a thousand miles away. A man of such courage ought to be equal to a demand in all regards fair. Engineers and firemen like fair play — all honorable men like fair play. And now, I challenge you to debate with me, anywhere you may choose, and grievance you may have against me. I prefer the meeting should be open — free to all. you shall have an opportunity to *state* your grievances and *designate* what I have written, the penalty for which you branded me as a slanderer before the convention of the Engineers' Brotherhood.

And when the discussion is ended, if you should be possessed of more magnanimity and less bigotry than now, if you should have a fuller comprehension of the rights of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and other labor organizations, their courage and independence, and power to resist degradation, no matter by whom suggested, you will be largely benefitted, and you may be assured that in your enlightenment and expansion no one will rejoice more heartily than myself.

I assure you that any eulogy that may at any time suit you to pass upon any of my fellow Grand Officers, even though it is done to give point to your malice towards me, will meet my hearty approval, but

when you were assuring Brother John J. Hannahan of your distinguished respect and consideration for him, it was well for you that at least two witnesses were not present, for in that event your words might have blistered your tongue.

While I , with such ability as I could command, have supported every measure designed to advance the interests of organized labor, you have opposed every measure of reform that has been proposed — so far as I am informed — and what advance has been made by workingmen, aside from such success as may have attended their own order, has been achieved in spite of your protests and opposition. Would you have me retract such statements, that I may receive your pardon? First, deny the statements. Do it in any way your pleasure may dictate, in a secret meeting, on the housetop or in the *Engineers' Journal*, all I ask is that you put your denials in proper form and permit me to see the

In closing this somewhat extended communication, permit me to urge upon your attention the propriety of pointing out the “statements” you wish me to retract to secure the boon of your friendship. After making the schedule you should deny each allegation. In doing this you create an issue. As the case now stands, I do not know what “statements” you refer to, or whether you admit or deny their truthfulness, and in the meantime permit me to congratulate the great brotherhood over which you preside for having performed an act of justice at Denver which meets with my unqualified approval, and which I accept as an assurance that in spite of your influence other acts will follow until the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers shall be as renowned for the justice of its legislation and its sympathy with other labor organizations of workingmen, particularly railroad employees, as it is for its wealth in numbers and skill, and its importance in carrying forward the great enterprises of the age in which we live.

Respectfully yours,

Eugene V. Debs.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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