
Message to the Federated Orders of Railway Employees

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Every consideration of fealty to right and justice demands that the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* should now, as it has done in the past, advise its readers, especially the members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, of such facts as may come to its knowledge, derived from unquestionable sources, calculated in any wise to promote the interests of the federated orders of railway employees, and, as certainly, and if possible, with more distinctness, lay bare such other facts as the editor believes have a tendency to detract from the prosperity and power of such organizations and eventually disrupt federation.

Profoundly impressed with the fact that a crisis has come in the affairs of the federated orders imperatively demanding plain speech, and with unqualified friendship for each of the federated orders, I shall write of recent incidents, which, under the most favorable presentation are well calculated to arouse feelings of despondency in the ranks of the most hopeful.

No one, I assume, has entertained the idea that any organization of men, however guarded by declarations of principles and the enactment of wise laws, could fully overcome man's fallibilities. No such claim by any sane man was ever advanced, but it has been assumed, based upon self-evident truths, that in "unity there is strength," and, therefore, that organizations of workingmen, having interests in common — mutual interests — could promote the welfare of their members by federation; that in federation the largest possible power of human effort could be exerted; that by federation the wrong could be cloven down, and the right enthroned; that by federation, principles of justice could be established and maintained; and that not only

the welfare of workingmen would thereby be promoted but the prosperity and happiness of society as well.

Such propositions have never been denied. The opponents of federation have simply made objections, but have offered no arguments, because there were none at their command. The principles upon which federation is based are as eternal as any axiom in mathematics. In every arraignment they can stand any test that enmity or ignorance can devise. If, in a contest, victory comes — as come it has in the past, and is destined to come in the future to men who are capable of comprehending the power of federation — its advocates and defenders may of right be jubilant; and when defeat comes — as come it has in the past when the right has been overpowered and crushed, the eternal truth that “in unity there is strength,” and that in federation that strength can be secured in the largest measure, has never lost a fraction of its claim to recognition. On the contrary, it stands as the rallying point of workingmen, and will remain as immovable as the eternal hills as long as heartless plutocrats devise methods of cruelty and injustice to labor.

Notwithstanding such things, there is serious trouble existing in the Supreme Council of the Federated Orders of Railway Employees; troubles which had their origin in matters as foreign to federation as it is possible to conceive, but the parties involved, being related to the Supreme Council by virtue of the membership of the orders, a *few* of whose members disagreeing upon a comparatively trivial matter were permitted to generate irritations and animosities until the Supreme Council was, by call, convened for the purpose of restoring amicable relations.

In laying such matters before the members of the brotherhood, I am compelled to indulge in details to enable the reader to comprehend the situation.

In the yards of the C&NW Railway at Chicago there was a yardmaster by the name of McInerney, and a switchman by the name of Crow.

McInerney was a member of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, and Crowe was a member of the Switchmen’s Mutual Aid Association.

Between these two men feelings quite the opposite of amicable existed, and as a result, McInerney discharged Crow.

It is not surprising that the switchmen in the yard, at once rallied to the aid of their fellow member and championed his cause. They

appointed a committee to visit the railroad official who had authority to reinstate Crowe, and an hour was set by that official to meet the committee and hear the grievance. When the hour arrived Superintendent Miller, the official in question, failed to show up, notwithstanding it was his own appointment.

This treatment of the switchmen on the part of Superintendent Miller, had the effect to temporarily demoralize them, and the result was a strike of short duration, continuing only a few hours, and causing little embarrassment to the road, and though brought about by the neglect and improper treatment of Superintendent Miller, was not justifiable under the laws of the switchmen's organization nor the laws of the Supreme Council.

The switchmen, though Crowe had been reinstated, smarting under the action of McInerney towards Crowe, demanded and secured his discharge as yardmaster.

These incidents, naturally involved the two orders — the B of RT and the SMAA, both members of the Supreme Council of the federated orders — and as a consequence, a call was made for convening that body to investigate the situation, and it convened for that purpose in the city of Chicago on April 13 [1891].

When the Supreme Council had convened, it was found that there was really no business to be brought before it of a character demanding anything more than the friendly advice of its members, to heal any wounds that a mere personal conflict between two members of the body had inflicted.

The good offices of the members of the Supreme Council were promptly tendered and amicable relations it was believed had been established. At any rate the surface indications were satisfactory and the outlook promised harmony.

On May 16th another demand was made for convening the Supreme Council, and on that date it did convene again in the city of Chicago, the call growing out of the following order issued by the authorities of the Chicago & Northwestern Railway:

The switching service of the Chicago & Northwestern Railway Company, as at present performed, is not satisfactory to the public nor to the management of the company, therefore, all yardmasters and switchmen now in the employ of this company are discharged from its service on and after 7 am, May 14, 1891.

In reorganizing the switching service of this company's lines preference will be given to such men previously in its employ as are, in the judgment of the company, capable and worthy.

S. Sanborn, General Superintendent.
Approved: **J. M. Whitman**, General Manager.

The foregoing is probably the most extraordinary order ever issued by a railroad corporation in the world. It should be understood that on the part of the switchmen there was neither a strike nor a contemplated strike; that the men were at their posts performing all of their duties. No note of warning had been given, and yet like a thunderbolt from a clear sky came the order which in an instant remanded about 400 workmen into idleness and shrouding hundreds of homes in gloom.

I confess that I cannot contemplate such an exhibition of corporation power for an instant without a shudder. It is an exhibition of autocratic power that ought to excite universal alarm, an exhibition of vengeance that startles like a midnight alarm bell. I do not believe that workmen can contemplate it without realizing that it portends calamities for them in the near future of a character that defies exaggeration.

It is said that the three highest prerogatives of law are to take a man's life, to deprive him of his liberty, and confiscate his property. In view of such powers what must be the sensations of a workingman, or the friend of a workingman, when he reads the *order* I have introduced, driving 400 or more men into idleness? An order, which in depriving a man of work and wages, invites penury followed by hunger and rags, and all too often deprives the wretched victim of shelter. Nor is this all — nor the worst. Such orders recruit the ranks of criminals, people jails and penitentiaries, and provoke suicide. Nor is that all, or the worst of all. Such orders break up homes, scatter families, degrade women, make them the prey of lustful scoundrels, and cover the body social with cancerous blotches that cry ceaselessly for redress.

My readers have read the order and the order was the immediate cause of convening the Supreme Council of the Federated Orders of Railway Employees in Chicago, May 16th, 1891.

What could the Supreme Council do to mitigate the woes of the crushed switchmen? There was no strike. What then? This:

The Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, one of the members of the Supreme Council, arraigned the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, another member of the Supreme Council, for having entered into a conspiracy with the officers of the Chicago & Northwestern Railway Company to deprive the members of the SMAA of employment, and that the order of the officers of the C&NW Railway was the *direct* outgrowth of that conspiracy.

The officers of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association boldly made the charge of conspiracy, and it was the *grievance* which they presented to the Supreme Council for its action.

The officers of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen *did not deny* the charge. They virtually confessed that they had formed such an alliance, and that but for such a league the switchmen would not have been dismissed.

The reader has the case as succinctly as it is in my power to state it.

From the first day that I heard of a purpose to organize a Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen I have been the earnest friend of the order, now the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. I have sought on all occasions in its youth and in its maturer years to aid its progress. This is said without any attempt at self-laudation, and could be said by me only under such extraordinary circumstances as make it necessary for me to recite a record which that order has made, and which I deplore.

Here let me say that the charge of conspiracy made against the B of RT by the grand officers of the SMAA was fully sustained, in fact, was not denied.

It requires an effort to comprehend the depth and sweep of the enmity that could have prompted such a betrayal of trust, of confidence and of obligation. It is probably without a parallel. I know of nothing approximating it in the affairs of brotherhoods of workingmen. To illustrate it, darker records than labor organizations furnish must be sought, and how and where to find them will readily be suggested.

I write of these transactions, because I heard the testimony as it came on the heated breath of the officers of the SMAA, because I heard the admissions, the equivocations, explanations and extenuations of the defense — each one of which made the case more wretched and added to the enormity of the wrong complained of.

I desire to have my readers fully aware of the explanations of the officers of the B of RT. This is due them. With these explanations they must go before the great brotherhood of trainmen. With these explanations and extenuations they must stand before all organized railway employees, before organized workingmen in every department of labor, and with these explanations and extenuations they must stand at the bar of public opinion.

I have, as I write, before me the utterances of the Chicago press pro and con, but I prefer to place matters on record as I saw and heard them myself.

In the first place, the officials of the B of RT charged the switchmen generally, and particularly on the C&NW Railway, as being insubordinate, fomenters of trouble, and as disregarding of the laws of their own organization and of the laws of the Supreme Council.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, I admit the truth of such allegations; in what possible way does such an admission justify, on the part of the B of RT officials to enter into a conspiracy with the officers of a corporation to inflict penalties upon the adjudged delinquents?

Again, I inquire, if the charges formulated by the officers of the B of RT have not been brought by corporations against members of every order represented by the Supreme Council of the Federated Orders of Railway Employees, as also against other orders not represented in that body?

It is well known, that in all organizations, there have been restless men, chafing under restraint, and ready to take the law into their own hands for the purpose of redressing grievances, and would it not be the height of presumption on the part of the officers of the B of RT so much as to intimate exemption for their order?

But such explanations, in the case under consideration, serve only to aggravate the charge the officers of the SMAA brought against the officers of the B of RT, since, though it might be true that certain members of the SMAA had been premature in seeking to right certain grievances in the past, at the time the conspiracy was formed between the officers of the C&NW Railway and the officers of the B of RT, the switchmen on the system were attending to their duties with as much loyalty to the interests of the road as were the members of the B of RT, and these switchmen would now be at work instead of being idle except for a conspiracy to strike them down unwarned entered into by the B of RT.

What is offered by the officers of the B of RT as extenuating the character of the plot to *down* the switchmen on the C&NW Railway?

In this connection, I refer to the order of the railway officials. It will be noticed that *every* switchman and yardmaster in the employ of the company was at once and at the same time discharged. Look at it, probe it, analyze it, and then hunt through all the tomes of fact and fiction, and nothing like it can be found in human edicts against workingmen. Union men and non-union men alike felt the crushing blow, not one escaped. When the Creator in His wrath decreed to send a storm of fire and brimstone upon Sodom, the old patriarch, Abraham, interceded for the doomed city. He pleaded with God, and put the question, "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" and Jehovah said he would spare the city if there were "fifty righteous" in it. Abraham then proposed "forty-five." Then "forty" was proposed, then "thirty," then "twenty" was named as the number, and finally God said He would not destroy the city, as decreed, if "ten" righteous could be found in it. Sodom was the wickedest city at that time in the world, and yet, ten good men could have saved it from the storm of Jehovah's wrath.¹

Who pleaded for the switchmen on the C&NW Railway system? What Abraham went before President Hughitt and asked if there are fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, or even ten good switchmen on your roads will you withhold your cruel decree? or "will you so modify it as to retain the good men, whether union or non-union men?" In all the wide world no such sympathetic man could be found. President Hughitt kept his plans secret, except to his own officials, and the officials and committee of B of RT. Did the grand officers of the B of RT interpose in behalf of the doomed switchmen? Was there among them an Abraham whose heart could be touched by a knowledge of the impending disaster that was soon to overwhelm them? The testimony in the case supplies no fact glowing with such fraternal light. On the contrary, it was desired to have the official decree, like a Kansas cyclone in a village of hay stacks, strike down all, because it could then be pleaded that the officials of the corporation and the B of RT had not *discriminated* against members of the SMAA, that the decree, like the heavenly rain, had fallen upon the just and the unjust alike.

In all the long history of duplicity, was there ever anything quite so thin as such a deception?

¹ Reference to *Genesis*, chapter 18, verses 16-33.

But the conspiracy disclosed another feature, which was designed — heaven save the mark — to enable the Trainmen to remain true to the laws of their order and to the laws of the Supreme Council.

I have said that the conspiracy, like all such schemes, was concocted in secret. Had the switchmen been apprised of it, they would have struck, and would have been justifiable in so doing. If they had struck, no trainmen could have taken their places except as *scabs*, but it was held by the officials of the B of RT if the switchmen's places were vacated by a discharge, then they, the trainmen, could take their places without violating any law.

I ask the reader to ponder this phase of the conspiracy. I ask every large-hearted member of the B of RT to give it his unprejudiced consideration. I invite every member of the B of LF and of B of RC to bestow upon this phase of the conspiracy special attention.

The testimony is, that the grand officers of an order, a member of the Supreme Council, deliberately enters into a plot to drive certain members of another organization, a member of the Supreme Council, out of employment.

The plotting officials keep the doom of hundreds of switchmen a profound secret, because, upon this secrecy depends the success of the conspiracy. If known, the switchmen would strike; if they struck, though their positions would be vacated, the trainmen could not take them without violating laws, *but it they were all discharged, in accordance with the terms of the plot, then, in that case, the trainmen could take their places with impunity.* In that case, they would be *law-proof scabs* — *legal scabs*, recognized by the laws of their own organization and the laws of the Supreme Council, and any grievance growing out of such acts of perfidy, could not be dealt with by the Supreme Council.

I assert that every member of all of the organizations of railway employees should give this technical excuse for treason careful consideration.

Regardless of the objections to repetition, I desire to present to the reader the theory of the conspiracy entered into between the officials of the C&NW Railway and the B of RT.

Independent of any federated compact, each labor organization, standing by itself, it has been held, by all honorable workingmen, that for one organization to plot and scheme to down another organization was an act, in all regards flagitious, and deserving of condemnation, the accepted theory being that one labor organization should

seek to promote the welfare of others, for, although marching under different banners, the purpose of all is the same -all seeking to lighten the burdens of labor and increase the happiness and prosperity of toilers.

Just here comes into full view the still higher obligations imposed by federation. The theory of friendship and good will supposed to animate all labor organizations in their intercourse with each other, becomes, in federation, a matter of plighted faith and of obligation, under the sanction of law — a solemn compact, a union of hearts, and a union of hands — a compact having for its supreme purpose, help in time of need; a compact glowing with a double share of the fraternal spirit, and pledged to every reasonable sacrifice to maintain the right when any party to the compact was attacked by the common enemy.

In this federation of organizations of railway employees the SMAA and the B of RT held honorable membership. If either of them was in trouble it behooved the other to lend every possible assistance to secure relief — to remove embarrassments and make its way smooth.

Now, then, the SMAA had had some trouble with the officials of the C&NW Railway. These troubles, so far as the switchmen were concerned, had been adjusted. But the railroad officials were anxious to discharge them. Although a great and powerful corporation, in view of the power believed to exist in federation, it hesitated. It dared not strike down its switchmen. Here and there one or more could be removed, but to remove them all, when they were peacefully at work doing their duty faithfully was a contract the C&NW Railway did not care to take.

In this dire dilemma the B of RT, a member of the federation, came to the rescue of the railroad officials, and a conspiracy was hatched. Then Benedict Arnoldism crept in, but, unfortunately for the switchmen and for federation, no Major Andre, with the documents in his boots, was captured, and on May 1 4th the conspiracy triumphed — the switchmen felt its crushing power — the trainmen took the places of their *federated brothers*, and the grand officers of B of RT shook hands with the officials of the C&NW Railway, while the overpowered switchmen, powerless and moneyless, are permitted to stare the future in the face and accept with such stoicism as they can command, whatever fate, conspiracy and treason have in store for them.

The Supreme Council, convened May 16, found itself powerless either to approve or rebuke the B of RT. But a vote was taken on the merits of the grievance submitted by the SMAA against the B of RT, upon which *nine* votes were cast — *six* sustaining the grievance and *three* in the negative. The B of LF was deprived of its vote on account of the inability of the Vice Grand Master [J.J. Hannahan], who was in Georgia, to reach Chicago in time for the meeting, the laws of the Council requiring a full representation. How the B of LF would have voted, is not known, but how I would have voted is sufficiently indicated in the foregoing.

I do not hesitate to believe that the enemies of federation will greatly rejoice over what they will designate a collapse of federation. They will meet each other with smiles, and as they clasp hands, say, "I told you so." Corporations will chuckle over the victory. But I surmise that their greatest satisfaction will be derived from the belief that they have succeeded in arraying two great orders of railway employees in open hostility to each other, and in practically wrecking the Supreme Council of the federated orders.

As was to have been expected, the *Railway Age*, the acknowledged friend of the corporation and the implacable foe of labor organizations, heartily approves the course pursued by the B of RT, and in a leading editorial glorifies the *loyalty* to the corporation displayed by that organization.

Just here the questions arise, are the two great organizations, the SMAA and the B of RT opposed to each other? Is it to be believed that the Brotherhood of Trainmen is committed to the relentless policy of exterminating the SMAA? Has the unfortunate episode I have related, wrecked the Supreme Council? I do not hesitate to answer in the negative.

I do not underestimate the gravity of the situation — nor do I underestimate the broad common sense of the rank and file of the men who constitute the membership of the federated orders. They are men who comprehend right, justice, and fair play. There is in their ranks an abiding faith in fraternity, fellowship, good will, in the blessings of organization and in the strength of federation.

That our good ship, federation, is in a storm, I have shown; that it is beating fiercely upon her, is readily inferred; that there have been hidden reefs and treacherous currents in her pathway is now known, but she is not wrecked. Above the howlings of the storm is heard the

clear voice of Frank Sweeney, pledging that the order of which he is Grand Master will never scab.²

In this supreme hour the requirement is to find the wrong and extirpate it, crush it.

I believe that passion will subside, that those who have thirsted for revenge are satiated. I believe that wrong has accomplished the largest measure of damage in its power and that now the champions of the right in the federated orders will demand, in no uncertain tones, that the fullest reparation shall be made by those who have been or may be adjudged in the wrong and that the mandate will De obeyed.

The Supreme Council meets in annual session June 15th, 1891. It will be a full meeting, and its action will doubtless be decisive.

In the meantime the friends of federation, of justice, of right, of fair play, and the enemies of conspiracy, treason, and duplicity, should manfully discuss the questions growing out of the record I herewith submit.

It was a dark day for federation, for liberty and independence, when Washington, with his ragged, half starved and half frozen veterans suffered at Valley Forge. It was a gloomy time, when Gen. Greene, in the Carolinas, was required to uphold the flag of independence with soldiers, many of whom were as naked as when they were born, and wore upon their shoulders tufts of moss, upon which to carry their muskets, but the cause these immortal men fought and suffered for, supported by federation, finally won.

The federated orders of railway employees are pledged to principles which grow in importance as the months go by. To read the order of the railroad officials, issued May 14, by which 400 or more honest men were banished from work tells in letters as vivid as the lightning's flash, what there is in store for organized labor. If the holts of corporation vengeance can be stayed, federation alone is equal to the requirement. I believe federation has come to stay, and believing that means will be devised to strengthen and perpetuate this bulwark of workingmen's rights, I close this communication.

Eugene V. Debs.

² Sweeney was head of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association.