
The End of the Switchmen's Strike

by Eugene V. Debs

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On the morning of August 25th [1892] the wires flashed the tidings that the switchmen's strike at Buffalo had been declared "off" — and that the "515" switchmen "called out" could seek work, and if possible secure the positions they had abandoned.

The strike had a duration of about two weeks, from start to finish. It is a mistake to say that it resulted from the fact that the switchmen demanded an advance of wages — not only is it a mistake to say that, but it is false and vicious.

There is not even a remote probability that a strike would have occurred in arranging a schedule of wages. There would have been pros and cons, but out of it all would have come a peaceful settlement, but for one thing, and that was that the railroad officials, in a spirit of autocratic meanness, refused to recognize the order of switchmen and treat with its officials. Under such conditions a strike was inevitable. There is not an organization of railroad employees that would not have struck under such circumstances. It was an unavoidable outcome of the matter. And here it should be said that the railroad officials were absolutely responsible for the strike. Their hostility to organized labor provoked and brought about the strike. Had they conferred with Grand Master [Frank] Sweeney, the chief executive officer of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, there is not a remote probability that a strike would have occurred.

These railroad officials reasoned logically. Evidently they said, "no other organization will come to the rescue of the switchmen; acting alone we can *whip* them." How well they reasoned the sequel shows. Other organizations gave the switchmen oceans of sympathy, carloads of taffy, but not so much as an ounce of substantial aid. In that regard

the switchmen were left to paddle their own canoe through the rapids, the Hell Gate of the strike, alone and unaided.

Let it be distinctly understood that the *Magazine* does not excuse the destruction of property by strikers. It has no word of condonement for such crimes. They not only do no good, but they are fruitful of incalculable wrongs to organized labor. In saying this we do but speak the sentiments of the great body of switchmen, members of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association. They are not anarchists, but men who stand as high in the ranks of organized labor as do the men of any other organization. They are hard working, honorable, self-respecting men, whose duties are perilous, and who, as a general proposition, are never justly paid. That in the organization of turbulent men, who are not guided by honorable methods to secure justice, need not be denied, but in this regard the order of switchmen constitutes no exception. Such men are in all organizations, as the records fully demonstrate, and the order ought not to be, and in the estimation of honest men will not be, held responsible for the acts of those who, at Buffalo, disregarded law and order. We dismiss such incidents for the consideration of more important questions.

The Buffalo strike becomes notable because of the small number of men, say "515," who were engaged in it. The number was so small as to create national surprise, when considering the force required to stay its progress and conquer the little band of strikers. The civil authorities of Buffalo and of Erie County immediately became utterly demoralized — cowards to the backbone — provided they had any spinal column. Their chicken hearts suddenly went down into their boots, and they yelled frantically for troops, and from Brooklyn to Lake Erie, the "Empire state" resounded with drumbeats and the tramp of soldiers. Writers of flapdoodle exhausted their descriptive powers of the pomp and circumstance of glorious war, as multiplied thousands of soldiers, with guns and batteries, moved on to the seat of war to conquer "515" switchmen, who had dared to demand an advance in wages, and who were loath to see degenerate scabs from all the slums of cities take their places. Then the American eagle screamed in response to the military brass band and the beating of the war drums. Generals located their "headquarters" and their "hindquarters," and the game of war was played with the "joker." Pickets were "thrown out," bayonets were "fixed," guns loaded, officers drew their lusty blades, and the campaign was inaugurated.

The enemy, "515" strikers, spread out over about as many square miles, were mighty thin. Some mounted trestles and grinned as the troops marched and countermarched, while occasionally, some fool switchman threw a rock or a coupling pin to break the monotony of the campaign and enable reporters and Associated Press agents to write their hair-breadth escapes of platoons, and magnify the battles in which generals and colonels participated, and won the gratitude of railroad officials and their scabs, and possibly will apply for pensions.

While such things were going on, the great majority of the "515" switchmen were quietly minding their own business, firing neither coupling pins nor rocks at the grand army of the "Empire state," leaving perhaps 50 switchmen to dare the army to win such renown as they could, by capturing, killing, or wounding them. Were it our mission to write burlesques of the military, Pennsylvania and New York at Homestead and Buffalo would supply raw material sufficient to last a lifetime. But with all the ludicrous and disgusting features of the military pomp and parade, the army at Buffalo was there to kill if an opportunity offered, and if real estate in boneyards was not in demand at advanced figures, the fact is not to be set down to the credit of the military machine.

Away from the military, Grand Master Sweeney was trying to solve the strike problem. He saw defeat close at hand, if he was required to continue the struggle alone, and he therefore appealed, like a drowning man, to "sister (?) organizations." He wanted to meet all the "grand officers," having an idea that somehow the "grand officers" could save him — turn the tide of battle and place the switchmen "on top." Some of the "grand officers" responded. They came at his call like homing doves, each with the message under his wing that they "had no grievance and couldn't fight." Their souls were profoundly stirred with sympathy, compassion, condolence, tenderness, and fellow-feeling, but no kick — no strike — no declaration of war; with them all was serene, and while their bowels of compassion were greatly perturbed, there was nothing in their craw indicating help to the switchmen.

This conclusion fully aroused Grand Master Sweeney to the seriousness of the situation. There was no help for him, the last hope had fled, gone glimmering like a schoolboy's tale. Hope had whispered in his willing ears, and the story she told inspired his faith that a wrong had been done in the switchmen's order, which all would realize was equally an indignity offered every other order of railroad employees.

He believed it, but like dead sea fruit, when it touched his lips, turned to ashes.

Grand Master Sweeney, like Lee at Appomattox, deemed it unwise to sacrifice more men, yielded to the inevitable, and declared the strike off. The action was dictated by wisdom and prudence of the highest order. To have continued the strike would have been madness, to have sacrificed another man would have been in the nature of an unpardonable blunder.

Of all the incidents of the strike the brutal beating inflicted upon Grand Master Sweeney defines fitting characterization, and to couple Mr. Sweeney's name with dishonorable transactions in any matter connected with the strike we regard as the acme of perfidy on the part of those who make the intimation. The switchmen were defeated, and here, we ask, which one of the orders of railroad employees under similar circumstances would have won a victory? Not one. The switchmen made a gallant fight — all honor to them. Their honor was not wrecked. The order is intact. We wish it in the future a career of prosperity.

We have not forgotten the CB&Q struggle. Defeat crushed the engineers and firemen on that system, but not elsewhere, and the switchmen will survive the Buffalo battle. There are other battles in store for railroad employees. It requires neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet to foretell their coming, and when they do come we hope that having outgrown the indifference which marked their policy when Sweeney pleaded for help, they will unify and win victories, in spite of corporations, scabs, and the military.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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