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# Separate Organizations Will Never Succeed:

## Speech to the 17th Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Harrisburg, PA — Sept. 13, 1894

### by Eugene V. Debs

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**Fourth Day.**

*Afternoon Session.*

*Harrisburg, Pa., September 13, 1894.*

*The convention met in regular session and was called to order by Grand Master Sargent at 2:30 pm.*

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*At this juncture Brother E. V. Debs was announced as being in the ante room, and by direction of Grand Master Sargent was admitted to the floor of the convention and escorted to the platform, when he delivered the following address:*

Worthy Grand Master and Brothers:—

I address this body from a point of right and justice; I never go where I am not wanted and I will leave it to a majority here to decide if I am to be heard. I understand that an effort has been made to bar the door against me, and if this effort is sustained by this body I will

retire. I have heard that I was to be deposed as editor of the *Magazine*, that my resignation has been accepted. I also hear that my character has been attacked. I came here to respond to all charges and innuendoes affecting my character. I leave it to you whether I shall be heard in my own defense or not.



I thank you all for this courtesy. I realize there are those who are opposed to me. There are those who are opposed to giving me an opportunity to be heard in my own behalf.

Two years ago we met in Cincinnati. After 12 years in the service of the Brotherhood, I went there to resign and not to accept anything. My resignation was unanimously refused. I told those delegates that I did not agree in policy with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen; I told them that I did not want the *Magazine*, but the delegates insisted.

They told me "let us have your name in connection with the *Magazine*, for it will be helpful." If I made a mistake in accepting this position the responsibility is shared by you. I accepted the position as editor of the *Magazine* on three stipulations: First, that I should not be a grand officer; second, that I should not be the manager of the business connected with the *Magazine*, and third that my salary should not exceed the sum of \$900 per year. The committee insisted on paying me \$3,000 per year and I accepted \$1,000.

At that time I had concluded that the Brotherhood was a failure as a protective organization and I have not changed that opinion. I believe that every one should have a right to his opinion and a right to express it. I believe that the protective features of the Brotherhood are not a success, but I have been accused of saying more.

In all my life I have never directly, or indirectly, injured the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. I have never said to a member that he should leave the Brotherhood. I have never said it here or anywhere else. I have always advised firemen to stay with the Brotherhood. That's what I said, and I defy any one to contradict it. The dream of my life has been to unify the railroad men of this country. Under existing conditions all railway organizations of the country cannot cope with the railway corporations. The Great Northern made a reduction of from 10 to 60 percent. This reduction was made by James Hill because he knew that he could make this reduction on ac-

count of the condition of organized labor. All the organizations submitted to it because they knew that they could not possibly win a strike. But the American Railway Union resisted it; the men united and stood together. They struck and stayed out 18 days and had their wages restored. I claim that this was a positive vindication of my position and shows that railway men ought to cooperate, it has been charged that the sympathetic strike is absolutely criminal, but I claim that it is not.

You can never succeed with the men divided in separate organizations. If engineers have a grievance the firemen will have none. An injury to one should be an injury to all. It is wrong to be separate. The corporations do not take this view of it; when a road becomes involved in a strike the other roads, the newspapers, the banks and all the rest come to the rescue. I only wish that labor might follow the example set by capital. That is the only way you will ever protect yourselves. I do not believe that a strike to be successful must be supported by public sentiment. I care nothing about public sentiment. Public sentiment hanged John Brown. I haven't forgotten that public sentiment supported slavery for years. If organized labor has a mission it is to make war on public sentiment that makes these conditions possible. What are brotherhoods going to do to relieve this calamity? What are any of these organizations going to do to relieve this calamity? I do not believe that this Brotherhood will move the country upward in one hundred years.

They accuse me of saying many things against you. Here is what I have said; I regard the average lodge meeting of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen a farce. They go and remain until twelve and one o'clock at night engaged in some foolish initiation. What do they do? The lodge room should be a school room. When they go home they should read books on the subject of finance, land, and rights of labor. Intelligence is what is required, ceremonies give no returns.

It is said that I have attacked the beneficiary features of your organization. I say to you, no man should be compelled to carry insurance whether he can or not. You say that you must protect your widows and orphans. You have expelled thousands of widows and orphans; you have expelled three or four thousand members per year. I said so at San Francisco. When their last dollar is gone they are expelled. Who provides for their widows and orphans?

You claim that you practice charity. There is no charity in it. A member pays for everything he gets, and he can get just as good investments in any insurance company.

I have said that I do not believe in your federation. One man has the power to paralyze all organizations. Suppose you have federated the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the Conductors, the Brakemen, and Switchmen on the Santa Fe. Suppose you have a grievance and all vote to strike. The Grand Officers meet and if a single one objects there will be no strike. His voice outweighs all. No man should be vested with such autocratic authority. A ten percent reduction means millions of dollars a year and thousands of dollars per month and a railway company can afford to buy one. I am accused of being in bad company; my associates may not be right but I think they will compare very favorably with Wilkinson and Arthur. Mr. Wilkinson had 425 switchmen discharged and furnished men to take their places. I do not wish to say anything against Arthur here. He is the worst enemy of labor today. He is the owner of a paper that fights labor, he is the director of a bank and the railways endorse him; and they say that I am the opposite. No man can be a friend of a corporation and a friend of labor. A railway official may be friendly with you personally but he is subservient to those above him. I am one of those who believe that no railroad man gets too much wages, there are many not getting enough.

In May 1893, 27 General Managers formed a protective association. I have a report of that meeting. They have banded themselves together to fight labor. In cases of trouble all are to go together, all assessments prorated; the corporation is supplied with men, money and machinery. They declared at their meeting that if they acted in concert they could reduce wages. They began on the L&N,<sup>1</sup> they took in the ETV&G<sup>2</sup> and then the "Big Four."<sup>3</sup> One after another they reduced wages, a few at a time. Then the Union Pacific and Northern Pacific and then the Great Northern. That's where we stopped it. The Chicago & Great Western was ready to reduce wages but stopped then and there. Their purpose was not to arouse all at the same time. The General Managers' Association had books printed

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<sup>1</sup> The Louisville & Nashville Railroad, first chartered in Kentucky in 1850.

<sup>2</sup> The East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia Railway, constructed during the 1850s.

<sup>3</sup> Nickname of the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago & St. Louis Railway, formed by merger in June 1889.

giving uniform wages so that they could say that they could pay no more than other lines. Then they would make more reductions until they had their men down to the level of slaves.

If class organizations had been equal to requirements they should have resisted these reductions. The others do not act in good faith with you in your plan. The “Big Four” had no cause to reduce wages and if all had been organized no reduction would have taken place. On the Union Pacific it was Judge Caldwell and not the organizations, that saved the reductions. He said that while the road was in the hands of the court the road must pay the old wages if no dividend was paid. If it had not been for Judge Caldwell, wages would have been reduced. The millionaires must have their dividends, must have their share even though you starve. If the men on the Great Northern had depended on your class organizations that money saved to the employes would have been pouring into the coffers of the stockholders. Some men say times are hard. I admit that. I admit there are hard times — but there are fewer trains and they limit their expenses to their revenue, yet they reduce wages.

Not long since there was a railway official in Chicago spoke to me. He said, “Debs, now is the time to make the master stroke of your life. If you will recommend that the men accept these reductions now, you will put the companies in a position to restore wages when business improves.”

I said to him, “Your road has been doing an overwhelming business in the last 60 days, why do you not increase wages? Did you ever voluntarily increase the wages of your employes on account of increased business?” He did not remember that he ever had. When times are hard they reduce your wages, yet when prosperity comes they are not willing to increase wages. Within recent years conditions have changed. Railroad companies are getting close together, but when the men get in trouble others take their places. They have you quarrel over religion and politics. The officials endorse the APA,<sup>4</sup> and that is evidence to my mind that it is destruction to you. During the late trouble I had a talk with a private detective who was once a brotherhood man and had sympathy for their cause. He told me of something that occurred in one of the General Managers’ meetings. Mr. St. John, a general manager, got up and said, “You can’t handle that man Debs, you can’t handle the ARU. We must crush him and

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<sup>4</sup> The American Protective Association, an anti-Catholic secret society established in 1887 and meeting its demise in the mid-1890s.

the ARU. He did not say anything about crushing the other organizations.”

You talk about class organizations. You have no class organizations. Wilkinson told me that he had 500 firemen in the Trainmen’s. You have no class organization. Poll this convention and you will find a very large number here who are engaged in other departments. There is no strictly class organizations. I have seen wipers<sup>5</sup> that belonged to the B of LE. Why not have an organization to represent all? There are 12,000 engineers I believe, in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. I believe you have 26,000 members; this would leave 14,000, and you must take into consideration the 5,000 more who are hostlers, in other branches of the service or out of business entirely. There are 40,000 firemen in Canada, the United States and Mexico. If, after 21 years, you have succeeded in organizing 10,000, at that rate you will have the firemen organized in 60 years. You are spilling them out as fast as you are taking them in. You have expelled 3,000 per year; this, with the withdrawals, is simply suicide.

I have said that no brotherhood ever won a strike. Recall and name the strikes of the brotherhoods. You were defeated on the CB&Q,<sup>6</sup> on the Ann Arbor, the Lehigh Vally and on the Elevated road. You have never won a strike. The companies are opposed to your coming together. The companies know you would be better off. The companies make little concessions to you so” as to bind you up in contracts so that you stand idly by while they crush others.

You talk about your insurance. The protective features of your organizations are the main thing. That is what put money in your pockets, and with money in your pockets you can buy insurance. Without protection your brotherhood is a failure. Will you tell me if there is a road in the country where the Brotherhood could protect you from a ten percent reduction of your wages? Conditions have changed; centralization is the order of the age and because I have tried to centralize labor I have been condemned. I admit I have ambition. I have worked for the ARU for \$75.00 per month and have not collected that. I was elected President of the ARU on the 12th day of June [1894]. I wanted to retire from official life, I tendered my resignation, I told them I would help them but as a member. They would not allow me to retire. Has Mr. Arthur ever tendered his resignation?

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<sup>5</sup> An engine maintenance worker who worked under the direction of an Engineer.

<sup>6</sup> The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, a name first utilized in 1856.

The labor organizations would unite today but for the grand officers. I make you this proposition, I and my associates, my colleagues, will resign if the other grand officers will resign. Will Mr. Arthur, Mr. Wilkinson, or Mr. Clark accept this proposition? Yet they say I am selfish. I want you to unify; it doesn't matter how much you unify, you can wipe out the name ARU, but you must unify. When you make contracts for firemen make contracts for all. Give the wiper justice, the engineer, give justice to all.

Railway corporations use one organization to defeat another. You say, "we can't break our contracts," do they break their contracts? Did the Lehigh break its contract with the men? On the Great Northern the ARU strived to obtain justice and the brotherhoods did everything to defeat us but we won. In the late strike of the ARU members of the brotherhood took their places and in many instances took their own brothers' places. Who profited? It was a righteous strike, I can prove that it was a righteous strike. The railway companies relied on the brotherhoods. I make the prediction that Mr. Arthur will never order another strike. He knows that for every man that would strike there are 40 ready to take his job. I do not approve of this but it is a fact. When there is a strike thousands of men will flood in that direction. I am not criticizing you, I am only telling the truth. The officials are independent and would reduce wages but know that for a while yet conditions will be feverish.

I want to ask you this question: why do you strike as a last resort, why a last resort? The courts would enjoin you and your grand officers, no messages could be sent. Grover Cleveland would send soldiers to put bullets into hearts. If you did strike then wouldn't it be suicide? They would have plenty of men to take your places. The corporations have no use for you. They persecute you when you attack wrong. When the officers tell you that the brotherhoods are all right, don't believe it because they say so. I could have the favors of the railway officials if I wanted them. I don't ride on passes; this is the irony of fate, for it was I who first procured an annual pass for a grand officer.

In all probability I will never appear at a firemen's convention again. I joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen at the age of 19 years. I was appointed Grand Secretary and Treasurer by the then Grand Master, Bro F.W. Arnold. When I received this appointment I did not seek the position. I was city clerk of Terre Haute with bright prospects in other channels. Bro. Sam Stevens came to see me three

different times and begged me to accept the position. He said, "You can save the Brotherhood." When I took charge the Brotherhood was bankrupt, the publishers of the *Magazine* were pressing a bill for \$1,800 for the printing of the *Magazine*. I gave a note for this amount. Some said there is no use to build up the Brotherhood, you will be robbed again. There were unpaid beneficiary claims, I secured them all myself. When I tell you this I do not want your sympathy, I tell you this so that you can see if I am as selfish as what has been said against me here. I paid \$1,000 out of my salary of \$1,500 to pay beneficiary claims. At the convention the brotherhood was demoralized. I went from room to room and begged them to remain true but another year and I would guarantee the Brotherhood would be out of debt. At Buffalo I subscribed \$60 out of my own pocket. I worked that year as I never worked before — it was slavery. For six years I knew no Sunday. I used my salary as city clerk; I worked one year for nothing and paid out \$800 for the Brotherhood. The second year I drew \$1,500 and paid out \$1,300 for clerk hire. This left me \$200. The third year I received \$2,000 and still paid clerk hire. In 1884 I received \$2,000 and clerk hire. I had no passes. I packed my grip and went out to work for the Brotherhood, was put off of trains and did the best I could to get over the roads. The first seven years I never drew one cent for expenses. Every dollar I drew went into lodge meetings. When I was appointed Grand Secretary and Treasurer I was also editor of the *Magazine* without compensation until 1880. From 1886 to 1890 I received \$500 per year. At San Francisco I received \$1,000 per year.

The Brotherhood began to grow, to expand at all times. Since I was connected with this organization I defy any man to question my integrity officially. I put up the money for the Brotherhood. When I did this my friends said "no" but I had faith in its future. When the C, B & Q strikers needed money I furnished \$29,000 on my personal name. At the last convention six months' absence and \$2,000 was given me but I did not touch it. Is that evidence of my being selfish?

During the latter years I have been well paid but I could have made more in other callings. The American Press Association offered me the general managership. There are some who find fault because my sister and brother are in the grand lodge office. When I called to my assistance my sister she was teaching school at \$75 per month; my brother first worked for \$10 per month. No one will ever charge that



he has ever defaulted. Of the millions of dollars he has handled he has accounted for every dollar.

From first to last my heart has been with the Brotherhood. I have made mistakes perhaps. I have the courage of my convictions. I say what I think. I have taken different views, different sides. My popularity began to wane at San Francisco<sup>7</sup> because of the position I took against the beneficiary feature of the Brotherhood. But at Cincinnati<sup>8</sup> my popularity reached its zenith. I have served twelve years in an official capacity and have never had a vote cast against me, nor a nomination against me.

Now I want to say a few words about the lodge that I am a member of at Terre Haute. I am told that a member of that lodge is here carrying clippings of newspapers, criticisms of me by the venal press. I did more for that lodge than that man can in a century. When the 1877 strike came that lodge went down in a crash. For two years I went to the hall every meeting night, even though there was no one there. I paid the hall rent.

I held up members when short of funds. For a period of ten years I probably missed six meetings, but I confess I seldom visit them now. I am opposed to such imitations. I saw men walking around with a rope around their necks and other senseless doings and I was opposed to it. I went home and read books.

I have been lied on by the press (*Bro. Debs here read a clipping from the Harrisburg paper*). The *Chicago Herald* and other Chicago papers were hired especially to coin lies about me. Interviews were distorted and when a reporter went before the Commission of Investigation they asked him if he wrote a certain interview. He said yes. They asked him if I had said those things and he said no, here is what Debs said, and he pulled his shorthand notes from his pocket. This reporter was discharged from his paper.

With all of their accusations they have never accused me of being on the side of corporations. I spent eight days in the Cook County jail; I went there as a protest against inhumanity. What the outcome will be I do not know. They have 600 charges against me. I am charged of being guilty of conspiracy.

If it had not been for my wife, my aged father, and mother I would not have made a defense. They could have sent me to prison,

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<sup>7</sup> 15th Convention of the B of LF, September 1890.

<sup>8</sup> 16th Convention of the B of LF, September 1892.

to the scaffold. Would a selfish man do this? If the truth is ever known it will be shown that I tried to prevent that strike. But was the strike a failure or no? What does that greatest authority on labor subjects say? What does John Swinton say? He says the strike was not lost; that the strike has done more for the cause of labor than anything ever before. Read *The Arena*. The strike may be condemned but it was as righteous a strike as ever was.

I want to speak in a hall somewhere, where those who do not want to hear me do not have to come. I will then tell you all about that strike. It was not a strike, it was a spontaneous upheaval. I was not responsible for that strike. There has got to be something done in a short time. If there is nothing done the French revolution will be repeated. Carroll S. Wright says there are 3,000,000 idle people in this country. The country is paralyzed and the idle on the verge of starvation. We say, wait until times get good, get prosperous again. There is not an intelligent man who doesn't know that this panic was premeditated. People this winter will go hungry, they will go shivering through the winter clad in rags. Clothing cheaper than ever but labor in rags. Is it a want of the necessaries of life? Are the labor organizations doing anything?

This panic has been a banker's panic. The poor man's money has been withdrawn, making gold the standard. Are labor organizations doing anything to restore silver to the people? If we could but destroy the money monopoly, land monopoly, and the rest of them, all would be different. You say labor organizations do not discuss politics. I would have labor to unify at the polls and vote for an independent People's Party. Some say politics mean destruction to labor organizations, but the reverse is the fact. There are questions I would like to see labor interest themselves in. Their conditions are like a cancer, you can cover it with a poultice but the cancer continues to spread. You must apply the knife and root it out if you expect relief.

I will not take up any more of your time. I will say to you individually and collectively, I wish you well. I have done my duty as I understood it. If any person attaches any blame for what I have done I will accept it like a man. I hope that I have given some evidence that I did the best I could. If the *Magazine* has not met all requirements, the fault lies elsewhere. I made up my mind that nothing would be said about the ARU in its columns. I said nothing about the Great Northern in the *Magazine*. If I have made mistakes I believe that you will grant justice. I assure you that you will always have my cordial

support, and if you will do what I believe should be done, you will unify the railway labor of the country. Some plan will present itself. I shall always be found on the side of labor. If we differ, let us honestly differ. I wish we had more faith in each other than in the past.

I have this for the men who know me and believe in me, I hope my hand may be paralyzed and my eyes blinded if ever I do aught against labor. About the rest that my enemies have said about me I have nothing to say. I am too busy to spend much time about personal and individual quarrels, but I do not hesitate to meet any living man, and if there is any here who would say aught against me I am here to defend myself. From the depths of my heart I thank you and wish you prosperity.

*Bro. Debs' speech was received with marked attention by the delegates, at the close of which Grand Master Sargent arose and asked the body if there was any one who asked to make any reply to, or take exceptions to, anything which Bro. Debs had said. There being no response, Bro. Debs then retired from the hall.*

*Motion, by Bro. H. Zink of No. 14, that we now adjourn. Carried.*

*The convention then adjourned.*

*Time of adjournment, 5:55 P. M.*

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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