

Railroad Employees and Socialism (October 1908)

Railroad employees in train service are perhaps more thoroughly organized than are the workers in any other department of industry. According to the report of the Interstate Commerce Commission, in 1906, there were in round numbers 285,000 train service employees on the railroads of the United States, the classification including engineers, firemen, conductors, trainmen [brakemen], and switchmen. In the same year the organizations of these respective classes of employees reported a combined membership of 279,000. A small percentage of this membership is no longer employed in railroad service, and another small percentage is employed in Canada and Mexico. Deducting 25,000 from the total membership to cover these items (and this may be taken as a liberal allowance) it will be seen that but 31,000 of the total number of train service employees in the United States are unorganized. It is perfectly safe to say that at least 95 percent of this unorganized body is composed of young and inexperienced men who have not been long enough in the service to become eligible for membership in the organizations of their respective classes. Probably not more than one per cent of the train service employees on the railroads of the United States, who are eligible to membership in the various organizations, remains unorganized.

Notwithstanding this very complete organization it is somewhat paradoxical that railroad employees as a rule are densely ignorant of the real spirit and purpose of the trade union movement. They know very little concerning the traditions and principles of unionism and absolutely nothing of its history. Of economics they are as guiltless of knowledge as babes. It is true they have been taught that the man who takes the job of another who is on strike is a scab, but this teaching has its limitations and qualifications, as it is not considered disgraceful for the members of one organization to take the places of striking members of another organization when they have agreements with their employers establishing rates of wages and conditions of labor for a stated period of time. In other words, it is considered of more importance to maintain the so-called sacredness of contract than to lend assistance and support to fellow wage workers in time of strike.

In line with this policy we find the engineers taking the places of striking firemen on the Southern Pacific, and assuring the managers of the Norfolk & Western during the recent threatened strike of the firemen that if the firemen went out they (the engineers) would guarantee that the trains would be kept moving. We also find the trainmen taking the places of switchmen whenever the latter strike for better wages or more bearable conditions of employment, always pleading the necessity of keeping their agreements with the railroad companies to relieve themselves of the odium of scabbing. The switchmen's union, by the way, is the only one of the railroad brotherhoods that is affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. A proposition to affiliate with the Federation was put to a vote of the members of the firemen's brotherhood a few years ago, and was defeated by a large majority.

With the possible exception of the switchmen's union each of the railroad organizations is run on the theory that the interests of labor and capital are identical. P. M. Arthur, who was for many years before his death chief of the engineers' brotherhood, always sought to keep his organization free from what he denominated "entangling alliances" with other organizations. Mr. Arthur's teaching, which was accepted as the inspired utterance of superhuman intelligence by the members of his organization generally, was that a four dollar a day man has no interest in common with a two dollar a day man. Mr. Stone, the present chief of the engineers, is a worthy pupil of his predecessor in office, and in general it may with truth be said that the spirit of clannishness and isolation which finds expression in Mr. Arthur's teaching is to all intents and purposes the ruling principle of the railroad organizations today.

How little they are in touch with the spirit and purpose of the general labor movement may be inferred from the fact that, in response to public demand for protection against railroad accidents, our capitalist congress recently found it necessary to pass a law establishing a maximum working day of sixteen hours for railroad employees in train service. This law has been commended and hailed as a boon both by the leaders and rank and file of the railroad organizations, notwithstanding that the eight-hour day has been a cardinal principle of the labor movement for a generation past, and some of the greatest battles in labor history have been fought for the recognition of that principle.

It thus becomes apparent that the railroad organizations are not trade unions in any true sense of the term. Their so-called "protective" features

are a huge farce, productive of absolutely no benefit to the members who pay the freight, and useful only to furnish inspiring themes of oratory for the leaders at convention time. Working conditions and wages are in the last analysis always determined by the will of the railroad managers, who are adepts in playing one organization against another, and who "recognize" the right of their employees to organize for their own protection only when it suits them to do so. The organizations have neither connection with nor influence upon the general labor movement, and are in reality merely insurance associations, organized on the assessment plan, whose only useful function is to give protection to their members in the event of total disability or death. In this field they have accomplished much good by providing safe insurance at reasonable rates for a great body of men who are unable to procure regular insurance because of the extra hazardous nature of their employment.

As might naturally be expected of a body of workers so greatly isolated from the general labor movement, filled with a spirit of exclusiveness, and having no proper conception of the common interests of all wage workers, Socialism among railroad employees has been a matter of comparatively slow growth. Here and there in isolated cases the true philosophy of working class economics has taken root in the minds of individuals and given rise to sporadic attempts to bring Socialism to the knowledge of the rank and file, but these attempts have generally been repudiated and condemned by the leaders, and as a result the great mass of railroad labor still continues to parrot the untruth that the interests of labor and capital are identical and seems firm in the belief that what is good for the railroads must be good for their employees.

Notwithstanding this attitude it must not be assumed that railroad employees are lacking in intelligence. On the contrary, taken as a class they are far above the average in intelligence, and it is certain that when they do begin to reason and act for themselves in economic matters they are destined to play an important part in the tragedy of working class emancipation. Their indifference to the class struggle has proceeded mainly from the nature of their organizations and the character of their leadership, coupled with the isolation of their employment from the general field of labor and the fact that their wage schedules, owing to the extra hazardous nature of their employment and the necessity of preliminary training and experience, have been maintained at a rate slightly above the average. They have,

therefore, been measurably removed from the influence of those forces that operate constantly to depress the economic condition of the workers.

But within the past year the smug complacency with which the railroad employee has been taught to regard his position in the scheme of things industrial has received a decided shock. President Yoakum of the Rock Island says that there are 400,000 railroad men in the United States now without employment. This estimate is confirmed by President Shonts of the Clover Leaf,¹ who says that of the 1,675,000 railroad employees who were in active service a year ago fully one-fourth are now idle, at a loss in wages approximating \$1 million for every working day. "A year ago," said Mr. Shonts, "the railroads were spending \$1.25 billion for supplies, now they are spending not more than \$500 million. This means a falling off in railroad expenditures of \$3 million a day."

Two years ago the railroads were at the flood tide of "prosperity" and employees were enjoying to the full the benefit of their "common interest" with their employers. The hours of labor law, which was then before Congress for passage, was strenuously opposed by the railroads on the ground that it was utterly impossible for them to procure the services of the additional men that would be necessary to make the provisions of the law effective, and this argument had such weight with Congress that a provision was inserted in the bill giving the railroads a year in which to prepare for the enforcement of the law. With that concession the bill passed.

At the height of this condition of "prosperity" I addressed an article to railroad men, in which I predicted the present slump, "not as a matter of guess, but of arithmetic." I said "it may not come next month or next year, but it will come, and the longer it is coming the longer will be the backward trip.... Several hundred thousand of you will be left high and dry; no jobs, but plenty of time to tramp and think." My article was published in the *Appeal to Reason* and extensively circulated among railroad employees. It created considerable comment, and several of the "grand" officers of the organizations considered it of sufficient importance to warrant them in pointing out to their followers the utter absurdity of my conclusions and how entirely foolish it would be for railroad men to pay any attention to what I had to say. The "Railway Conductor," the official organ of the Order of Railway Conductors, which was then under the control of a "grand chief" who has since received the reward which comes to those labor leaders who are properly subservient to the interests of capitalism, was particularly caustic in its criticism; pointing out that Debs was simply a

discredited labor leader who had made a failure of everything he undertook, and that it was the part of wisdom for railroad employees to pay no attention to his teachings, and especially to give no weight to his advice to investigate socialism.

Although such arguments (?) from the “grands” and “worthy grands” may have a certain amount of effectiveness in preventing inquiry on the part of their deluded followers during the continuance of “prosperity,” they entirely lose force in a time of financial and industrial stress like the present. With more than 400,000 railroad employees out of work a large amount of time is permitted for independent thinking. The economic argument is as potent with railroad employees as it is with other workers, and when they find themselves bereft of their jobs and lacking the means to save their wives from eviction and their children from starvation it is suddenly brought home to them that the reputed brotherhood of capital and labor is a myth.

Especially is this true when, in answer to their pathetic inquiries of the standard bearer of the “prosperity” party as to what they are to do in such times of crisis when out of work and starving, they only receive the despairing reply, “God knows!”

When they ask for bread they receive a stone!

Since publication of the article above referred to many things have happened to open the eyes of railroad employees, and evidence is not wanting to show that socialism is a force that must be reckoned with in railway labor circles from this time forth. It was in 1892 that I resigned my official position in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. The big strike of 1894 followed, and at its conclusion, defeated by the injunctions of Taft, Woods, et al., and the troops of the federal government, rushed to the assistance of the railroad managers by President Cleveland against the protest of the governor of a sovereign state, I was sent to jail and practically deserted by the railroad employees, my former brothers. This is what the present “grands” stigmatize as “failure.” A million times more is such “failure” to be preferred than such “success” as the “grands” have attained in leading their deluded followers into the mire of capitalism!

As a result of my “failure” the corporations were all violently opposed to me, and so of course their poor slaves had to desert and denounce me. An extremely few remained true and they had to keep it quiet. The corporations thought I was buried forever, and in the effort to crush out the last spark of independence from their employees they resorted to measures

almost inconceivably heartless and inhuman. Men were blacklisted and denied employment at their chosen calling from one end of the country to the other. They were even in many instances dogged out of other vocations and denied the right to work at the most menial employments. They were forced by hundreds into trampdom and outlawry — many into suicide. Their wives and daughters were driven to penury and prostitution, and their tender children into starvation and death. This saturnalia of oppression continued until the tigerish maw of capitalism was fully sated and its agents paused from very weariness, confident in the belief that the spirit of its slaves was fully broken and crushed.

Such a stench did this blacklisting evil become in the nostrils of men that even capitalist legislatures were compelled, from very shame, to take cognizance of it. Laws against it were passed in many of the States, and finally, in 1898, the federal government passed a law forbidding railroad corporations engaged in interstate commerce to blacklist their employees or threaten them with loss of employment because of membership in a labor organization. Violation of the law was made a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of not less than \$100 nor more than \$1,000. By this time the activity of the railroads in wreaking vengeance on the former members of the ARU had accomplished its purpose, and complaints concerning blacklisting had become much less numerous, but the law, which also provided for the arbitration of labor disputes between interstate carriers and their employees, was hailed with glad 'acclaim by the "grands" and their persecuted followers. It was believed that the evil of blacklisting had been virtually scotched and men could once more stand erect and proclaim their manhood and independence. But this reckoning did not take the courts into account.

At the very height of this great wave of Republican "prosperity," namely, on October 15, 1906, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Co., through its agent, William Adair, discharged a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen because of his union membership, in violation of the federal law. Adair was indicted and convicted in the lower federal court, and sentenced to pay a fine of one hundred dollars. But the case was carried to the Supreme Court of the United States, which august body, on January 27, 1908, declared that no offense had been committed in the discharge of the employee because of his membership in a labor organization, and that any attempt of the legislature to interfere with an employer's right to discharge his employees at will, with or without reason, or to blacklist

them if he sees fit, "is an arbitrary interference with the liberty of contract which no government can legally justify in a free land."

Thus were railroad employees stripped of every vestige of protection which the law had granted them, by the very party of "prosperity" which, on the strength of "full dinner pail" argument, they had voted into power in three successive campaigns. And this blow fell on the heels of the demonstrated failure of the "prosperity" regime, at a time when 400,000 railroad employees were looking for work owing to the recurrence of capitalism's periodic breakdown.

Is it any wonder that railroad employees are breaking their leading strings and beginning to think for themselves? Is it any wonder that they remember my prediction of two years ago, and recalling their past experiences, are coming over to socialism by hundreds and thousands? Is it any wonder that they are beginning to say to themselves, "Debs may be a failure as a labor leader, but on this question of socialism he is eternally right?"

The leaders of the dominant parties have sounded a note of alarm at the so-called "apathy" of the voters, and there is reason for their fear. Torchlight processions and unintelligible disquisitions from campaign spellbinders will no longer answer the insistent questionings of the slowly awakening labor giant. The full dinner pail idol has been crushed to earth through failure of the "party of prosperity" to make good its professions, and the workers are refusing to enthuse over the tariff, the currency, injunctions, our foreign policy, and the many other fake issues which were wont to thrill them into paroxysms of enthusiasm in aforesaid campaigns.

All these fake issues dwarf into insignificance before the very practical question of "What are you going to do about the problem of the unemployed?" to which the Republicans answer only, "God knows!" and the Democrats, "We hope for restored confidence as a result of the policies announced in our platform."

The Socialist Party is the only one that gives the worker a practical and logical answer to his elemental question. He is flocking by thousands to its standard, and it is my prediction that the ides of November holds in store a surprise for both Republicans and Democrats that will compel a revision of their political methods, as well as a demonstration that the railroad employees of the United States have at last become conscious of their true position in the scheme of capitalist industrialism, and have resolved upon a master stroke for liberty.

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¹ Theodore P. Shonts (1856-1919) was a railway executive who was promoted from general manager to president of the Indiana, Illinois & Iowa Railroad in 1899. He was later hired in a similar capacity by the Toledo, St. Louis Western Railroad, commonly known as the "Clover Leaf." Shonts achieved his greatest national stature as chairman of the Isthmian Canal Commission, established in 1904 to oversee construction of the Panama Canal. At the time of his death he was head of New York's Interborough Rapid Transit Company.