
Letter to the 7th Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen

by Eugene V. Debs

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The following letter from E. V. Debs was then read:

Worthy Grand Master and Delegates:—

Today the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen of the United States and Canada convenes in its seventh annual session.¹ Regularly for the past seven years these conventions have been held at this season of the year, first at one city and then another, but never in the whole history of our organization did we feel so highly gratified at the work of the past, or look into the future with such sanguine expectations as we do at this very moment. Since our last convention, held in this beautiful and enterprising city, we have made wonderful progress. At that time many of our lodges were only in moderately good condition, while many others were about to totter to their downfall. Only the smaller portion of them were in first class working order. How different things appear today. We are assembled here with a representation of 80 delegates, coming from the four quarters of the globe to tell each other good tidings relating to the Brotherhood. All our lodges are in active operation, and a

¹ The 7th Annual Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was convened in Chicago on September 30, 1880.

spirit of rivalry seems to actuate each to surpass the other in point of good standing. Several new lodges have been organized by Grand Instructor [S.M.] Stevens, while the greater part of them were visited and reconstructed by him. Altogether the closing year has been one of joy and profit to us as an organization. We have seen old prejudices conquered with kindness. Many of those who were once our enemies are now firmly with us in our endeavors to perpetuate the interests of our calling, and we feel like entering upon the coming year with our heads and souls erect, fearlessly battling for the maintenance of an institution that has done so much for us without doing harm to anyone.

If we were only understood, how easy would be our task. The opposition we now have to contend with is precisely the same as it was when we first organized, though I will admit, not quite so formidable.

Let us see for a moment what it is that eternally seeks our overthrow. Let us see who it is that looks upon us with the eyes of suspicion, and with a scorn black as night, forbids our approach.

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In times gone by, laboring men who had been imposed upon, formed themselves into a mob and with a recklessness that makes us shudder, began to burn and plunder the property of the corporations they were working for. These men felt that they were basely mistreated, and being ignorant of the true way of having their grievances adjusted, and being urged on, as they were by their so-called leaders, who had nothing to stake and nothing to lose, and with a spirit of revenge, they sought to burn and kill to their satisfaction.

While we always sympathized with these deluded and miserable wretches, we have always felt that they were wrong in acting so violently. There is a different way of adjusting difficulties between the employer and employee. Our organization believes in arbitration. All differences should be settled in this way, for no

good has ever or can ever come from resorting to violence and bloodshed. This is our true feeling in the matter, but instead of being recognized as men who desire to avoid trouble, we are very often made identical with those whom I have just mentioned. The prejudice against us is very often deep rooted and bitter. While many railroad officials through the land treat us with the utmost kindness and consideration, there are many others who look upon us with feelings of dread and aversion. They seem to think that we are banded together to do them injury. This is the key to all the opposition that has ever confronted us. Many railroad superintendents are so much poisoned against us that they will not permit one of our lodges to be organized on their lines. Others punish with dismissal the unfortunate fireman who is discovered as being one of our members, and in this way we meet with a great deal that prevents our institution from spreading as rapidly as it would under more favorable circumstances. It is a fearful thing to be asked to sign away your manhood under penalty of losing your situation if you refuse.

It has frequently occurred that our members were forced to sever their connection with our Brotherhood and denounce it as an unholy institution in order that they might hold their situation and provide their families with the wants of life.

How unjust and unreasonable this appears to a fair and right thinking man. If we were a band of outlaws I would not wonder that we are ostracized in this way, but as our sole aim and object is to do all the good we can without harming anyone, I feel that we ought not to be treated so harshly.

But all of this will finally be overcome. We do not bear ill-feelings toward those who seek to crush us, for we know that they misapprehend our motives. The time will finally come when they will admit that they were wrong, and then peace and harmony will prevail between us firemen. I only wish that those who oppose us could see the good work we have done since we have been organized. If they could see the afflicted widows and sad and suffering orphans to whom we have administered relief, they would not endeavor to check our career. We know that we

have accomplished but little, for our capacity has been limited, but in years to come we intend that our institution shall become mighty. We want to be established in every available section of the country and have every worthy engineman in the land to be one of us. We want to be able to protect the widows and orphans of all our members. We want to provide for the widow, clothe and educate the little organ, and do all the good we can for men of our calling.

In case of the total disability of one of our members, we want to administer to his wants through life. We want to make better men of locomotive firemen. We want them to be honest and upright, sober and industrious. We want to educate them to a standard so that they spend their leisure time with their families instead of gratifying distasteful pleasures. We want them the, to wear good clothes and be respectable. We want them to treat their families kindly, and with the care of a true husband and father, provide for their every want.

All of this will be accomplished in time to come.

Fraternally yours,

Eugene V. Debs

Terre Haute, Ind.
September 13, 1880.

The convention then adjourned for dinner to meet at 2 o'clock, and go into secret session for the remainder of the week.

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Edited by Tim Davenport

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