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# The Great Strike

by Eugene V. Debs

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In the April *Magazine* we had an article captioned "The CB&Q Strike," which we designated as the "Great Strike."<sup>1</sup> In closing the article we said:

As we write the strike is still on, and no one can predict final results, but we deem it prudent to say that the loyalty of the men to honest conviction, demands the highest praise. Prudent, conservative, and anxious to work they realized that the officials of the CB&Q were studiously and steadfastly denying them honest pay for honest work — belittling them as compared with employees on other roads and denying them consideration when their grievances were set forth in a way demanding prompt and patient consideration. Under such circumstances the men behaved like veterans under fire. Their rights and their manhood were at stake, and they would yield nothing that could, by any possible construction, be regarded as conceding what was justly their due — and whatever may be the final result, the men will have maintained their integrity and will have demonstrated that their courage was equal to their convictions.

More than a month has elapsed since the strike was inaugurated. It is still on, nor are there any indications of its immediate termination. On the contrary, the strike is daily developing new phases and is steadily extending to other roads.

Manifestly, we were not mistaken in referring to the strike as "the great strike;" such is to be its position in the history of the labor troubles of the times, and it is eminently becoming and important that working men shall fully understand the strike from inception to triumph or defeat. And here, let it be said that the locomotive engineers and firemen originally involved in the strike have at no time underes-

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<sup>1</sup> "The CB&Q Strike," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 12, no. 4 (April 1888), pp. 242-246.

timated the gravity of the situation. They knew their grievances were just and upon general principles they had a right to believe that the officials of the CB&Q would deal justly by them. In a manly way they presented their grievances. They had patiently borne the wrongs complained of for years. They were competent and faithful men. They had proven themselves worthy of the confidence of their employer. They believed their grievances well founded in fact, and their demands just. In presenting their grievances, and in demanding remedies, there was no precipitation. Every move was the result of calculating deliberation. Repulse did not dishearten them. They made concessions and exhausted expedients, and struck only, when every consideration of right, justice, honor, and manhood, impelled them to take the step.

Such reflections may be deemed unnecessary, but they are bed-rock facts in the history of the strike and should be vivid in the mind of every engineer and fireman in the country. There must be no question relating to the absolute justice of the strike. If the men who went out, were wrong, if their grievances were unworthy of consideration, equivalent to no grievance at all, no amount of writing can make the strike anything but a stupendous mistake, but, if the grievances were well founded, if the demands of the men were just and equitable, then the strike dignifies the men who are engaged in it, and the more stubborn their resistance of wrong, the more defiant their attitude, and the greater their sacrifices in the cause of right, the more they expand to the full stature of men and citizens, and the more they are entitled to the sympathy and support of the Brotherhoods, whose principles they maintain.

It is a fact worthy of note and reflection that the press, as a general proposition, has antagonized the rights and interests of the engineers and firemen, while it has championed the course pursued by the officials of the CB&Q. This is not a surprise, since, on all occasions the press takes the side of the corporation when labor complains of injustice. There are honorable exceptions, but the rule is as we have stated it, and hence we have heard through the press from the very first that the CB&Q had won the fight, and that business on their system was proceeding smoothly, that trains were running regularly and that the places of the strikers had been filled, and thus on to the end of the chapter of statements totally devoid of truth, sent broadcast over the country to poison the public mind against the men and to aid the corporation to perfect its nefarious policy of injustice to

men, the length and breadth, the height and depth of whose offending was the demand for a fair day's wages for a fair day's work.

But there is a phase of this press championship of the corporation, and this disgraceful antagonism of working men, which defies exaggeration. The position taken by the press is scarcely less than criminal. It would have the public believe that the men who have taken the places of the strikers, on the CB&Q, are competent and trustworthy, when the statement is known to be notoriously false — the CB&Q having been driven to the direst extremity to obtain men at all, and having accepted the services of engineers notoriously unqualified, have placed the traveling public in peril by the employment of such characters.

It is well known that the CB&Q system has paid already a terrible penalty in the loss of business and the wreckage of rolling stock for its flagrant injustice to its former employees. Its interests in every department have suffered. Its stock is without market value, and its earnings are not sufficient to pay expenses. It is today a financial wreck, and its chief officials have been placed upon record in court proceedings, showing them to be capable of business methods characteristic of freebooters.

The arraignment of the CB&Q by the General Manager of the Rock Island road, Mr. E. St. John, has exposed the knavish schemes of its officials, and placed upon record the fact that they favored a strike to obscure a conspiracy, the purpose of which was, not only to injure competing lines, but to oppress and defraud their employees.

Nothing could be more preposterous than to assert the triumph of the CB&Q. It has not been at any time, since the engineers and firemen left its service, more demoralized than at present. It is losing money by the millions. Its officials are losing character and credit. In their frantic efforts to maintain a semblance of business, they are forced to resort to deception and falsehood. Their engines are being wrecked, their traffic has fallen off, their cars are side tracked, and ruin stares them in the face.

To add to the embarrassments of the CB&Q, the switchmen, whose labors, always arduous and dangerous, are made indefinitely more perilous, by incompetent engineers, refused to continue in its employment. They refused to work for a corporation which had less regard for the safety of its men than it exhibited for the security of mules, and they demanded that competent men should be employed, thereby reducing the chances of death and mutilation. The officials of

the CB&Q in refusing the reasonable request of their switchmen, evinced a heartless brutality strictly in consonance with their treatment of engineers and firemen.

As we write the strike is still on. It is as vigorous and as defiant as on the 27th day of February [1888], when it began, notwithstanding the vapping declarations of a subsidized press, that the engineers and firemen have been vanquished.

We are not unmindful of the strength of corporations, nor of the fact that the wrong has all too often triumphed over the right, and it may be that in the struggle with the CB&Q, in alliance with other powerful corporations and aided by the influence of a venal press, working men will be required to retire from the contest, to nurse their misfortunes with such philosophical composure as they can command; but that time has not yet come — nor is it, we conjecture in the near future. In the desperate game the CB&Q has chosen to play, it does not hold all the winning cards. In the battle now being waged it does not command all the strategic positions. The edict has gone forth that CB&Q cars must be isolated. The system is to be hedged about by a power which, when fully exerted, will leave it alone in its moral and financial ruin. Even now, the system so strong and arrogant that was unmindful of the penalties which sooner or later overtake prosperity based upon perfidy, is reading the handwriting of the skeleton finger of fate on the walls of its depots and the dead walls along its lines. It is now, like the boy passing the grave yard, whistling to keep up its courage. Its language is that of bravado, and while a parasitic press proclaims victory for the road, the facts show that decay and demoralization have seized upon its business and property and that death is inevitable if it does not speedily change its policy.

On the other hand, the engineers and firemen, convinced of the righteousness of their cause, were never more confident. From Canada to Mexico, from the Pine Tree state to the Golden Gate, from the inland seas to the gulf, from ocean to ocean, fifty thousand Brotherhood men, are pledged by considerations radiant with love and truth, honor and manhood, to stand by their brethren, comrades of their mystic fraternities, to work for them and to make sacrifices for them, because by so doing they are dignifying labor and magnifying justice.

It may be, indeed it is probable that the strike will spread. Who will be responsible? The engineers and firemen stand before the world saying to an arrogant corporation “pay us fair wages — and to determine what is fair wages, let there be arbitration, and we will abide the

issue.” Such is self-evidently fair, honorable and just to all parties. Heaven could offer nothing more in consonance with uprightness. Why is it that the press does not see the righteousness of such a demand! Why is it that other corporations whose interests are involved, do not say to the CB&Q, “be just.” To do an act of simple justice to men, citizens, not serfs, would settle the trouble in an hour. To withhold this act of justice is replete with peril — and the responsibility, by a decree which will be irrevocable, will rest upon those who prefer ruin to the reign of right.

Other brotherhoods of working men, besides engineers and firemen, are coming to the rescue. They see that the strike involves a principle vital to their own welfare as men and brotherhoods — and in this voluntary federation for the good of all, there is moral grandeur that defies hyperbole.

We profess no powers of prophecy; we are not the student of vagaries, but we have a right to discuss the signs of the times; we have a right to anticipate coming events, and exercising this right, we indulge the conviction that the strikers will win the fight, and at any rate whatever may be the outcome, we realize that the brotherhoods, whatever may be lost or won, will never have cause for reproach that they put forth their strength in a cause which not only involved their own welfare, but the best interests of society.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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