
B of LF Convention Endorses Federation

by Eugene V. Debs

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The readers of this *Magazine* are advised that it has, from time to time in the past, discussed the advantages that would accrue to railway employees in the event that certain organizations of such employees were to federate for mutual protection. In the beginning of the discussion, only general propositions received attention. In the first place it became prudent to enquire if there existed a necessity for such a federation of the various organizations.

In answering such an inquiry, the field for gleaning facts was wide and inviting. It was not required to employ an expert to find them. The crop was large. There were multiplied instances of wrongs inflicted upon railway employees by corporations which from every consideration of justice demanded redress, but which had to be patiently endured, because the victims of the wrongs alone and unaided were powerless to apply a remedy. Under such circumstances nothing could be more natural than for the injured employees to exclaim: "If our fellow-workmen would join us in an appeal for justice, it would be granted." This was a correct view of the matter, because, in union, federation, there is strength. We conclude, therefore, that men familiar with the facts do not question the absolute truth of the declaration that there have existed cogent reasons for federation, and that they still exist and are likely to be as convincing in the future as at present, or as they have been in the past.

The next question that arises, is, Is federation feasible? Is it practicable? and is it the right thing to do? This *Magazine* unhesitatingly answers each interrogation affirmatively. As this *Magazine* predicted, the subject of federation came prominently before the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen at the First Biennial Convention of the order

held in Atlanta in September,¹ and as the *Magazine* further predicted, federation was endorsed, and it may be said unanimously — ours was the first brotherhood of railway employees to speak out upon the subject and the following are the utterances of the convention:

We, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, in convention assembled, believe that labor may receive its just reward, and its rights and dignity, the consideration that it merits, that the guaranteed privileges of citizenship, as laid down in the Constitution of our country, may be ours to enjoy without the abridgment of a conspiracy, whose existence is a menace to the genius and life of our institutions; a conspiracy that is eating into the very vitals of our liberties, and threatens the destruction of the Republic. Its march is like the epidemic of a pestilence, with its one burning eye of avarice, devouring corporations like a Cyclops. Recognizing this danger, we believe that organized labor, to save itself from utter annihilation piecemeal, must admit an injury to one is the concern of all. We only ask the same rights that others claim for themselves. The prosperity and peaceful contentment of any nation rests upon the justice given to labor; honest pay for honest toil. With these convictions, we feel that no better nor more acceptable way can be advanced for our closer alliance to a distinct and comprehensive understanding than by the adoption of methods similar to the magnificent principles upon which our government is founded: Each State stands free and independent, retaining its own identity, having its own laws and Constitution, without infringing or coming into conflict with the laws of any other state, or with the laws of the United States. In the event of any state being unable to quiet a disturbance within itself, or check the aggression or invasion of a foreigner, then the federal government comes to its assistance. No state loses any of its strength, respect or character by the fact of its being one of the Union, but in turbulent times it receives the support of the whole. With these views, we respectfully submit the following for the consideration of the several organizations on the railroads of the continent, keeping in mind these relative positions: that the different organizations shall be to the Board of Federation, as the several states are to the Congress of the United States:

¹ The First Biennial Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was held in Atlanta from Sept. 10-19, 1888. Although the 1888 gathering marked the first time the organization moved from annual to biennial conventions, it was actually the 14th national convention of the organization.

Section 1. Upon each system of railroads, within the confines of North America, there shall be organized a Board of Federation to consist of three members from each organization represented.

Sec. 2. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the Knights of Labor, the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, and the Brotherhood of Telegraphers, who shall also receive and consider the application of any other organization on that system to join the Federation Board to be accepted as a majority see fit, do hereby agree to the following articles of Federation to govern our relations with the management of the system upon which we are employed.

Sec. 3. The members of the Board of Federation shall be representatives of the Executive, Grievance Committee or Boards of Adjustment of their respective organizations.

Sec. 4. In case of the Executive or Grievance Committee of either organization failing to effect a settlement satisfactory to them, they shall comply with the laws of their organization regarding grievances and strikes, and if their action in the matter receive the endorsement of their organization, said grievance shall be submitted to the Federated Board for final action.

Sec. 5. Should the Federated Board agree on the justness of the alleged grievance they shall at once proceed to adjust the same.

Sec. 6. The Federated Board failing to satisfactorily adjust the difficulty, shall notify the organization presenting the grievance of such failure, informing them that if they desire to go beyond these peaceful measures they shall have the entire moral and, if necessary, the financial support of all the organizations represented on the Board.

Sec. 7. Should the organization, where the grievance originated, conclude that in order to obtain the justice demanded a strike is necessary, the Federated Board shall have authority, by two-thirds vote, if in their judgment they deem it advisable to do so, order all the other organizations of that system represented on the Board to join in the struggle to bring about a speedy settlement.

Sec. 8. The organizations represented in this agreement mutually agree to do all in their power to build up and strengthen each other by influencing all persons to become members of the organization representing their trade or calling.

Sec. 9. An expelled member of either organization shall be ineligible to membership in any of the other organizations unless by the consent of the organization from which he was expelled.

It will be understood that the foregoing declarations are intended to simply outline a course of action. They affirm the faith of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in federation as a means of securing justice when corporations, like the CB&Q, determine to persist in a course of flagrant wrong and oppression and that this was the view of the convention it is only required to say. that the convention appointed its Grand Officers, Grand Master F.P. Sargent. Vice Grand Master J.J. Hannahan, and Grand Secretary and Treasurer E. V. Debs as a committee to confer with other organizations of railway employees to perfect an alliance, and empowered them to act in all matters required to bring such organizations into harmonious and efficient action.

It is not required for us to assert there are no obstacles in the way. It would not be prudent, to belittle them nor wise to magnify them. It is enough to say that they are not formidable nor of a character to create either doubt or dismay. Where there is a will there is a way, and where there is sufficient cause for action, action will be had. The time has gone by to question the ultimate triumph of the right over the wrong. Patience, cool deliberation, persistent devotion to practical theories are certain to lead to good results. The brotherhoods are on the right track and in the near future, they are destined, we firmly believe, to reap a rich harvest of benefits from federation.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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