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# The Future of the Order of Railway Conductors

by Eugene V. Debs

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In the January issue of the *ORC Monthly* the question is editorially asked, “What has the future in store for the conductor?” If the future knows, it won’t tell. The future is close mouthed; it don’t blab, don’t “shoot off its mouth.” Still it is gratifying to see it stated that “during this last year” the question has been “thought upon more than ever before in the history of railroads.” Manifestly, it is a momentous question. The railroads having “thought upon” it during the “last year,” have concluded, in numerous instances, to put “spotters” on the track of the conductor, and about 1800 of these trained “ferrets” are following the brass buttoned and nickel punch brigade on thousands of miles of railways in the United States. In that way the railroads are giving conductors a “recognition” of wonderful significance, which, to some extent, answers the query relating to what the future has in store for the conductors. The activity in the “spotter”<sup>1</sup> business is a sort of recognition not well calculated to bring “about a better feeling between employer or employee.” It may be true that employer and employee “have been benefitted” by the spotter. At any rate the “employer” must be benefitted or he would not employ the sharp-nosed and keen-eyed hounds to dog the conductor and place his reputation and character, all that is dear to a man of honor, in the hands of men who have earned the detestation of decent men throughout the world.

The *Monthly* says “the conductor is of a naturally retiring disposition” who “has been, from his first step in railroading, trained to obey

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<sup>1</sup> “Spotters” were undercover railroad company agents employed to spot corrupt practices by conductors, who handled cash, canceled tickets as having been used, and maintained cargo manifests, thereby having multiple opportunities for illicit personal enrichment.

without question the orders given him.” And still, the employer finds that the conductor is not sufficiently *retiring*, and so he puts spotters on his track, and upon the report of the trained hound, *retires* conductors by the score.

The *Monthly* facetiously remarks that the conductors, during the past year, have moved up and are now “a little nearer the throne than they have ever been before.” That is certainly encouraging. To stand near the throne is a great honor. To wear throne toggery, to receive the smiles of the king, and his courtiers, to mingle in the aristocratic throng; gods! that is fine! What next? Gold buttons and a gold punch, an exchange of blue for royal purple. And still, the complaint is, why don't the railroad companies manifest their appreciation of conductors by taking them “into their confidence?” Manifestly the conductors are not sufficiently near “the throne.” Spotters will have to be dismissed, before the conductor will be taken into the “confidence” of the companies. And yet, says the *Monthly*, the future “is full of hope, and the prize, a fair recognition of services and just compensation for labor performed, hangs ready.” But the prize is too “altitudilum” for the conductor, it is the one persimmon that the conductor's pole can't quite reach; when he gets a “little nearer the throne” he may grasp the prize.

Now comes the robust declaration that the article to which we have made reference, was not written for the benefit of “railway managers,” but for conductors. Such a declaration will not push the ORC a “little nearer the throne” and it may result in the employment of more spotters to note the movements of the punch and where the nickels go.

Now comes the climax. “The conductor of the future will be a man of large experience, well versed in all things pertaining to his calling, an honored citizen, a man without reproach, enjoying the confidence of his employer and respected everywhere.” But what of the conductor of the present? Thousands of them are honorable men, who are in alliance with their co-employees on the railways of the country. They will not remain in the ORC under its present policy. The edict has gone forth, the revolution is already inaugurated.

The manifesto recently issued by the new Brotherhood of Railway Conductors, which will be found elsewhere in our columns, vividly foreshadows the future of the ORC. It is a declaration of independence. It is an arraignment of the old ORC upon the charge that it is not in sympathy with other organizations of railway employees, and

that its influence has been exerted to establish and perpetuate wrongs and injustice; that it has been the willing tool of corporations, and has lent itself to the abominable business of scabbing to defeat the just demands of working men, and such facts being established beyond all controversy, its existence ought to terminate.

We have anticipated such a movement. It is in consonance with the logic of events. It is in the right direction. Its influence will be of the very best. The conductors who have gone into the movement are men of moral courage. The *Monthly* says of conductors that they are “trained from their first step in railroading to obey without question the orders given them,” and that this obedience “becomes a second nature,” and that conductors “often suffer in mind, body, and pocket because of this trait of character.” There was never a more humiliating confession made. If it is true, it accounts for the degeneracy of conductors when they obey the orders to scab, to commit a flagrant wrong against their co-employees, and tells in trumpet tones that the new order of O of RC was demanded to rescue railway conductors from further degradation. The *Monthly*, in closing the article to which we have referred, charges that railway officials have treated conductors “as a part of the machinery to carry out certain schemes of their own.” That is doubtless true, indeed it is undeniably true, and the treatment will be continued unless the conductors protest, and cease to obey orders that sink them to the most abject condition of serfs. The new Order of Railway Conductors proposes to inaugurate reforms. to assert their manhood, and to rescue the old ORC, if possible, from being “a part of the machinery” of railroad corporations to perpetuate injustice upon their employees. If this cannot be done, then the new order will include, at no distant day, the conductors who have the courage of manly convictions, and will take its place in the front rank of the labor organizations of the age.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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