
The Switchmen's Strike

by Eugene V. Debs

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On August 13, 1892, the switchmen in the local yards of the Erie and Lehigh Valley railroads, to the number of 350 went out on a strike with the sanction of Grand Master Sweeney, of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association.

The immediate cause of the strike was for an advance in wages, aggravated beyond endurance by the fact that the officials of the roads not only declined to grant the advance, but autocratically refused to confer with committees of switchmen, or recognize the association.

The switchmen demanded that their pay should be "\$65 per month for night switchmen and \$70 per month for night conductors, \$60 per month for day switchmen and \$65 for day conductors, 26 days of ten hours each to constitute a month's work. They also demanded that all time over ten hours be paid for at the same rate per hour of 25 cents for night switchmen and 27 cents for night conductors, and 23 cents for day switchmen and 25 cents for day conductors per hour. It is claimed that the roads against which the strike was ordered were only paying 21 and 22-1/2 and 19 and 21 cents for night and day respectively."

The demand of the switchmen was simply for the same wages paid by other roads for performing the same work, and was eminently just, and should have been granted by the officials.

The Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association is an organization that has never made an unjust demand for wages. The duties of switchmen are not only of the most perilous character known to the train service of railroads, but, as circumstances have shown, in importance to the service are equal to those performed by any other class of trainmen. And to adjust wages upon a basis of simple justice has been the honorable and praiseworthy purpose of the order, and it has been from the first a matter of profound amazement that railroad officials have uniformly disregarded the importance of the services of switchmen and kept their wages at the lowest point they could.

In the case under consideration, railroad officials precipitated the strike by a gross insult to organized labor, and it is this autocratic, overbearing, and relentless hostility to organized labor which all labor organizations are now called upon to contemplate with a seriousness never before exacted.

The crisis has come. It was supreme folly to brush it aside — to pooh, pooh at it. The fate of one organization is to be the fate of all, provided organizations, singlehanded, propose to fight organized capital aided and abetted by the military machine, and the horde of scabs which infest the country like swarms of locusts.

The present is no time to hug delusions. Organized labor demands a living, organized capital proposes degradation. If the Almighty were to write the issue in letters of fire in the heavens above us, they could not be more vividly outlined and presented.

The present is no time for hairsplitting. If workingmen do not now take sides in favor of organized labor, they are scabs at heart, regardless of their flaunting banners and loud professions.

We do not hesitate to say that our sympathies are with the switchmen, with them in their dignified attitude to resent the autocratic humiliations which the policy of organized capital towards organized labor proposes to inflict. This is the crucial test. To be less than this, is to join the enemy. To be less than this, is to applaud scabism. To be less than this, is to glorify Pinkertonism, and the military machine which protects scabs, sheds blood, and drapes the homes of honest men in mourning, and fills the land with funeral dirges.

We do not discuss here and now acts of violence — burning, etc. We are not in sympathy with such proceedings. We go back to the beginning: Railroad officials, by acts of injustice, by acts of unpardonable insolence, by acts intended to humiliate and exasperate, are responsible for the strike in progress as we write, and for all the outrages inflicted. Switchmen deprecate these acts, and organized capital, having aroused the mob element by acts of injustice, finds it convenient to charge all the wrongs to organized labor, when, in fact, the guilt is directly chargeable to the heartless officials who deem such outrages cheap, provided they can use them to crush organized labor.

From the day the strike was inaugurated, Aug. 13, to the day we write, Aug. 20, it has spread until it involves a vast network of railroads, including the Vanderbilt lines, and that infamous concern known as the Reading, and is still spreading.

As we write, the military machine is in full operation. Troops with shotted guns are protecting scabs. The star spangled banner symbolizes the triumph of capital and scabs and the suppression of honest labor. The reeking slums are sending forth their moral and physical deformities to take the places of men who dared demand honest wages, who dared organize for the protection of American homes.

It is not required that we should enter into lengthy details of the progress of the strike. We have not the space, nor yet, the inclination. We prefer to say to the readers of the *Magazine*, that one by one, acting singlehanded and alone, their fate is sealed. They can live a little while by sufferance. With hats in their hands or under their arms, they will be permitted to exist. Capital, the military, and scabs in alliance, they will dictate terms. As in prisons, they may be honored as “trusties,” but the moment they demand, by virtue of independence and the rights of American citizenship, that their wages shall be such as to make their homes something better than dens, they will be in trouble, and singlehanded, they will go down as certainly as lead thrown overboard finds the bottom of the sea.

The outlook is full of peril or of promise to organized labor; of peril if the organizations, seeing one in danger, decline assistance; promise if all, with one accord, make an “injury to one the concern of all.” In the one case disaster and degradation is inevitable; in the other, victory could be secured in an hour.

It is not required to say we devoutly wish for the triumph of the switchmen. They deserve victory. Alone they are passing through the Red Sea, and the hosts of Pharaoh are upon them. We would like to see the pillar of fire that is to guide and guard them,¹ and we would like to hear the shout, “the switchmen have triumphed gloriously, and their enemies have been taught that organized labor has a mission in the world that will never be abandoned.”

Edited by Tim Davenport

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¹ Allusion to *Exodus*, chapter 13, verses 21-22: “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.”