
The Color Line and the American Railway Union: Comments at the Convention, June 18, 1894

by Eugene V. Debs

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The most animated discussion in the convention of the American Railway Union took place yesterday [June 18, 1894] on the question of drawing the color line in the constitution of the order. From 10 o'clock in the morning until 6 last night the debate continued, and at the close it was far more intense than at the beginning and the argument will probably be resumed in the morning. The preamble contained a provision that all railway employees born of white parents shall be entitled to membership. The phrase "born of white parents" met the opposition of several delegates. While the majority of the convention seemed to be in favor of it one delegate moved to strike out the words. His motion was greeted with great uproar, in which many hisses were mingled. The delegate, however, received the recognition of President Debs, and when the tumult had subsided reiterated his motion and took his seat. The motion was seconded, and then the delegates proceeded to debate the question.

President Debs spoke in favor of the motion. He said:

"It is not the colored man's fault that he is black; it is not the fault of six million negroes that they are here. They were brought here by the avarice, cupidity, and inhumanity of the white race. The father of our country was an owner of slaves. Bind down the white race for centuries and their intellects would become stunted, their refinement would disappear. If we do not admit the colored man to membership the fact will be used against us. I am not here to advocate association with the negro, but I am ready to stand side by side with him to take his hand in mine, and help him whenever it is in my power."

Attacks the Colored Men.

Samuel H. Heberling, delegate from Denver, spoke against the motion, and said that the colored men employed on Southern railroads were responsible for low wages on those roads. They had frequently been used to take the place of union men on strike. He asserted that the order would lose 5,000 members in the West if colored men were allowed to become members. W.H. Severing, a delegate from Memphis and a member of the General Board of Directors, also spoke against the admission of the negro.

L.W. Rogers, who had been employed as organizer for the union in the Southern States, said he was in favor of admitting the negro to the general body, but they should be given a separate organization, as was the case in many churches in the South.

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The vote on the proposition to strike out the words “born of white parents” was finally taken, the members voting by raising their hands. To all appearances the proposition carried, but the vote was close and such confusion reigned Chairman [W.E.] Kern was unable to count the votes and render a decision. Twenty-five members demanded a roll-call on the question, but while the Secretary was preparing to call the roll a motion for the committee to arise and report progress was adopted, and immediately another motion to adjourn was made, seconded, and carried.

In this manner the convention adjourned until 9 o'clock this morning with the question still in doubt. The roll-call of delegates will in all probability be called on the question immediately upon the opening of the convention this morning. It is expected the proposition to strike out the words “born of white parents” will be adopted. If this be the result the constitution will remain the same as before the convention on this question, leaving the matter of eligibility to membership wholly in the hands of the various local unions.¹

¹ The proposal to eliminate the offending words failed by a roll call vote on the morning of June 19 by a vote of 112-100.