

As to True Brotherhood: An Open Letter  
to the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees  
(December 5, 1903)

Terre Haute, Ind., Dec. 5th [1903]

To the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees<sup>i</sup>:—

You are having, and will continue to have, for some time, an uphill work, but this is the kind strong men undertake and the kind that develops their best qualities and gives their names to history. The opposition you have will serve a beneficent purpose if your members meet it with an unconquerable determination to overcome it and reach their goal.

The railway corporations are all against you for the same reason that they were opposed to the ARU, and they are not to be blamed for looking out for their own interests. They are *against* any organization that attempts to *unite* their employees. They are *for* every organization that *divides* them. The grand officers of the several special class “brotherhoods” travel on annual passes. The officers of your organization pay their fare. It is such an advantage to belong to the former in the way of securing corporation favors and privileges that an army of men keep up their membership in them, though they have not for years been employed in the railway service. While they declare their hostility toward your brotherhood because of what they call its “mixed” membership, every one of them have every branch of the service represented in their own membership, from a conductor to a wiper, and beyond that, from a preacher to a policeman.

For many years I have seen and felt the necessity of a united organization of railway employees. The reason for this, in this day of capitalist concentration, is so obvious as to be self-evident. The railroad corporations are, of course, against it. A large number of salaried labor leaders are also against it, notwithstanding their organizations fail every time they are subjected to the supreme test. They failed in 1873,<sup>ii</sup> they failed in 1877,<sup>iii</sup> in 1888,<sup>iv</sup> and 1894.<sup>v</sup> They will fail again when the crucial test comes in the next twelvemonth, more or less.

During the “boom” times of the last three or four years the railroads have been “making” an army of new railroad men. The signs of depression

are already beginning to appear. The letdown is inevitable, and among the first things that will happen will be sweeping reductions of wages. The army of surplus men will be available in case of a strike, and the leaders will doubtless advise their followers, as they have in the past, that "half a loaf is better than no bread." If under such conditions they strike, they will be beaten, and if they don't strike, their wages will go down and the fruit of their boasted victories will turn to ashes. This has happened over and over again. Must it continue to happen for another century before the eyes of the working victims are opened to the fact that they must unite from end to end of the service and present a solid front to protect their interests?

In their present form the railroads can and do use the brotherhoods against each other, and as for any actual federation, it will never be accomplished, for at that point the railroads will fight them, and that is not in harmony with their policy of "identical interests."

The simple, effective way — and only way — to unite railway employees is within a single organization, each class within its own sub-jurisdiction and in control of its own affairs, subject only to the supervision of the general organization. The United Brotherhood recognizes and acts upon this fundamental principle. Sooner or later the railway employees will have to come to it. It is simply a question as to how long they prefer division to unity, defeat to victory. Your organization is in the critical period of its development, and it remains to be seen if your leaders and rank and file are of the fiber that defies failure and which the coming organization must have to fulfill its mission. Judging from those I have met and know, your membership will stand firm, however severe the tempest may rage, until victory is assured.

The next few months will bring you your great opportunity, and I shall hope that, being familiar with the lessons of the past, you will profit by them. When the "panic" comes and thousands are thrown out of work and wages begin to sink, the need of unity will be felt far more than you can teach it and preach it in peaceable times.

The time demands a united brotherhood with a class-conscious political program. Without the latter it is not much more than a plaything of corporate capital. Teach your members the necessity of working class political action, so that while striking against the encroachments of the corporation they will at the same time be lining up to abolish capitalism and make the workers, instead of the parasites, the masters of the earth.

Yours fraternally,

***Eugene V. Debs.***

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<sup>i</sup> The United Brotherhood of Railway Employees (UBRE) was launched in San Francisco in the spring of 1901 in an effort to pick up the banner of the American Railway Union. President of the organization was George Estes, of Roseburg, Oregon. Headquarters of the organization, which had membership almost exclusively in the West, was moved to Chicago in 1902. Wire reports detailing the organization's launch in May 1901 moved reporters to track down Debs for his comment. Debs declared: "I have decided to hold aloof from the organization for the present, because I have other matters to attend to. Probably when the railway men of the entire country are ready to enter into such a movement I shall assist them." The UBRE conducted a strike against the Canadian Pacific Railroad in March 1903 and survived at least through 1905.

<sup>ii</sup> Year of financial panic resulting from the collapse of Jay Cooke & Co., a firm heavily invested in railroad construction.

<sup>iii</sup> Year of the "Great Strike."

<sup>iv</sup> Year of start of the Burlington Strike.

<sup>v</sup> Year of the American Railway Union's strike against the Pullman Parlor Car Company.