
Speech to the 12th Annual Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen

[excerpt]

Philadelphia — Sept. 21, 1885

by Eugene V. Debs

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Following [State] Senator [B.F.] Hughes came Eugene V. Debs, the Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the Brotherhood. Mr. Debs' speech was a magnificent panegyric to the dignity of labor and the worth of the honest workingman. He is a young man, with a smooth face, about six feet tall, and as he stood before the crowded theater and uttered his words in a strong, manly voice the audience remained in silent admiration of the eloquent exponent of honest toil.

His first reference was to the founding of the Brotherhood:

"Twelve years ago," he said, "our Brotherhood was in its swaddling clothes. There are some here who nursed it in its cradle and attended to it with heart and soul during its hours of infancy. Others have gone to the silent majority — some of them through sickness, but others by more violent means. They died bravely but horribly by steam and fire. In the discharge of duty death had its fears, but these fears were too small and contemptible to be entertained. It is godly to face death in the collision of the monsters of steam and fire. To see the irresistible forces of mechanism rushing into a grapple of fearful consequences and wait to meet death that the lives consigned to their care may be saved is a courage made more than human by the

nobility of the sentiments which prompt it. On our lists of dead are many such heroes.”

Dangers of the Calling.

In a calm, unimpassioned yet forcible manner the young orator pictured the dangers always threatening the engineer and fireman of the locomotive and then drifted to a consideration of their relations to society and their employers:

“The laborer should be proud of his calling. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen as it is today is a grand tribute to honesty, manhood, and hard work. By its principles it inculcates probity and virtue. It appeals to man’s better self; it reaches out the hand of fraternal friendship and lifts the sluggish and despondent to a higher plane; it teaches him that honest toil is no stain upon character and infuses into him a pride of self, a pride that impels him to so conduct himself as to command the respect of his fellows. By the amalgamation of the minds and strength of the locomotive firemen of North America they had brought themselves to a position where they stood — the strongest body of laboring men of a special and distinct class in the country.

“They had no quarrels, do not seek any. Honesty, purity, and sobriety are their mottoes. A few years ago it was customary to see the fireman step off his engine and enter a dram-shop for a drink. Today such a sight is unexceptionable. They have learned that to insure the respect of mankind they must respect themselves. To drink and carouse has been shown to be incompatible with good health, a good conscience, and honest toil. They recognize that they are men, proud of their strength, happy in the consciousness of the respect of humanity and ambitious to deserve and earn still more. The Brotherhood of Firemen is conscious of its power, but seeks no contention. We are not engaged in any quarrel between capital and labor. There can be no such quarrel unless it is caused by deliberate piracy on one side or unreasonable demand on the other.

Honest Pay for Honest Labor.

“We do not ask our employers to treat us any better than we do them. All we ask is an honest day’s wages for an honest day’s work, and we are willing to be considerate and just. Our fundamental principle is justice. In times of disaster and depreciation of values we will not mistake unavoidable depression for tyrannical

imposition. But in prosperity we expect our due share. When the country is teeming with wealth and the great railroad carriers of the country's produce are freighted to their capacities we want a corresponding share. It is but right that the men of brain and brawn who produce shall be recognized in the distribution. We simply ask for a just proportion of the proceeds."

Mr. Debs, after further elaboration of these ideas, spoke of "the sisterhood" and paid a fervid and manly tribute to the influence of womanhood.

"The sisterhood has always been true to the Brotherhood. They have rejoiced in our prosperity, have aided us in our toil, have spurred us on to renewed effort, and no stain so deep; can be put upon our organization but their tears will wash it away.

He closed by thanking Philadelphia for its courtesy to him and to the Brotherhood.

Letters of regret were read from President Cleveland and Ex-Governor [Albert G.] Porter, of Indiana, who were unable to attend. This closed the public proceedings.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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