
The Policy of the Order of Railway Conductors

by Eugene V. Debs

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In writing of the policy of the Order of Railway Conductors, we are animated by a desire to place prominently before the readers of the Magazine, such reflections based upon facts, as will result in a broader comprehension of the relations existing between railroad employers and railroad employees. That we write of the policy of the ORC, is because papers of late date, contain extracts from reports purporting to be the official utterances of Mr. Calvin S. Wheaton, Grand Chief Conductor, and Mr. William P. Daniels, Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the order.

These official documents contain declarations and expressions, the objectionable character of which we are not required to magnify, to obtain for them a careful perusal by railroad employees who are not members of the ORC, and this perusal, will, we think, be accorded all the more certainly, because the documents referred to, indicate a total lack of sympathy on the part of the writers for all railroad employees who are not members of the ORC.

In our readings, associations, and experience, we fail to recall any fact in the history of conductors, in any wise calculated to lift them to such sublime altitudes, that they can not, without soiling their clothes, fraternize and sympathize with other railroad employees. We have failed to discover any good reason why Messrs. Wheaton and Daniels should, in making their official reports to the order, secretly forward them to railroad managers in advance, unless it be, as has been suggested, to gain some consideration in the eyes of railroad managers, by playing the role of abject sycophants, than which there is nothing more repulsive in the estimation of all honorable men. We reproduce from a paper at hand, the following extracts from Grand Chief Conductor Wheaton's utterances that our readers may at their

leisure bestow upon them merited comment, and that we may have unquestioned foundation for such criticisms as we shall deem prudent. Grand Chief Conductor Wheaton, in referring to the strike on the CB&Q system, says:

The “Q” Company have all the engineers they way, and they are all old, experienced men. They are doing good work, and as soon as they learn the road they will do as good work as those who have just left the service. There has not been an engine burned by these men, nor an accident happened, although the press is full of such reports. They are nearly all men with families, and have come here to stay, and are now looking around for houses to rent, so as to be able to move their families here. The cannot be bought off; the CB&Q officers are satisfied with and intend to keep them. Any engineers, formerly in the service, who report for work, should the company see fit to re-employ them, must take places behind all those now in the employ of the company, and be considered new or extra men, no concession will be granted them, and few, if any, will ever be taken back.¹

It is notorious that the statements volunteered by Mr. Wheaton, in the interest of the “Q” are without foundation in fact, and this must have been known to Mr. Wheaton when he made them. The “Q” has not all the engineers it wants, nor are those it has in any sense competent or reliable. On the contrary, they are known to be incompetent, deficient in every quality of head and heart, required for the responsible position of engineers. They have been hunted up from the degraded haunts of idleness and vagabondage, and put in charge of locomotives, in flagrant disregard of every consideration of propriety, and it is such facts that make the “circular,” or report, of Mr. Wheaton, a calculatingly devised mass of untruths, and the managers of the “Q” system, unless irredeemably depraved, cannot but regard such statements as a fawning overture on the part of Chief Wheaton for recognition which hitherto has been denied. The real animus of Mr. Wheaton’s “circular,” or report, is found in the following extract, in which will be discovered in combination, an exhibition of selfishness and jealousy, characteristic only of men who are born parasites, ready at any time to disrobe themselves of the prerogatives of manhood if thereby they can advance in any degree their own selfish ends. Chief Wheaton says:

¹ From *Railway Age*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Jan. 1888), pg. 225.

We can assure you that the Order of Railway Conductors have made a great record for faithfulness and loyalty to principle by its members, among railway officers. To say that we are surprised at the feelings expressed by some members of the order, in other parts of the country, who appear to sympathize with the engineers in this trouble, is but placing it mildly. This is not a fight between capital and labor, but one between right and wrong, as all know that the engineers are the best paid class of men on the railroad, and they are today receiving pay that is justly due the conductor. The public have been educated that they were the responsible person on the train, and the conductor merely a figurehead, while we know that modern appliances are being placed upon our engines that greatly reduce the need of unusual skill that may have been required, in days gone by, to handle this machine, while the conductor's duties are continually growing more arduous and complicated. The engineer has no interests that are identical with ours. They court our friendship to enable them to secure the transportation of their members with us, and to show their feelings, as a class, we insert a portion of a resolution adopted by them at a union meeting held in Kansas City recently, and which we believe fully expresses their sentiments that "the difference between a scab engineer and a conductor who pilots him over the road is so small that a microscope is not strong enough to find it, and after this matter is settled we will refuse to pull a train that is handled by an ORC conductor."

In the foregoing is seen a purpose to promote the interests of conductors by assailing the character, skill and responsibilities of engineers, and the strange announcement is made that engineers are overpaid, and that the excess of payments over earnings, is taken from the pay of conductors, the idea being that the pay of engineers should be reduced and that of conductors advanced.

Now it may be, and doubtless is true, that conductors are not paid as much as they are entitled to, and the reason for this injustice is, we think, easily found. In every effort made on the part of railroad employees to secure fair wages, the Order of Railway Conductors take the side of the railroad officials and antagonize the employees, which Mr. Wheaton calls "faithfulness and loyalty to principle," but according to Mr. Wheaton's statement, so far, this "loyalty to principle" has not resulted satisfactorily in the way of pay, and it is not surprising, as Mr. Wheaton states, that "some members of the order, appear to sympathize with the engineers," an intimation that there are conduc-

tors who believe that the way to obtain justice at the hands of railroad corporations, is not that which is pursued by Mr. Wheaton. When engineers, firemen, switchmen, or brakemen, demand higher wages, it is supremely unbecoming on the part of conductors to take their places for the purpose of aiding the roads in their efforts to defeat the demands of their underpaid employees, and, as a general proposition, officials, while willing and eager to accept such services, regard those who perform them, as men quite incapable of that sort of self-assertion, without which, in this age, a man becomes a mere appendage, and wanting in those traits of character which are conspicuous in other men who know their rights and dare demand and defend them.

The purpose of Mr. Daniels, the Grand Secretary of the ORC, in his report sent out to managers of railroads in advance, was to inform these magnates "in order that the position of the Order in regard to labor troubles and strikes in general, and the strikes of engineers in particular, shall be fully understood." It was scarcely necessary. Railroad managers and railroad employees are fully posted in regard to the position occupied by the ORC.

Mr. Daniels tells the railroad managers that the position taken by the ORC is not owing to any "love for railway companies." He tells the managers that conductors realize that injustice has been done them, and that this is all the more grievous considering the "loyalty of conductors to corporations in time of trouble." This loyalty is not the result of any "philanthropic feeling" toward railway companies, but to keep other railway employees from obtaining fair wages, because such a course would place it out of the power of railway companies to give to "conductors the recognition and remuneration they believe they are entitled to." There may be a lower plane of selfishness than that which Mr. Daniels outlines and sends to railway managers for their approval, but it will be difficult to find, and it is not surprising that there are a large number of members of the ORC who have discovered the inherent viciousness of a policy which, while it does not secure justice for those who practice it, is well calculated to injure others who are striving to obtain fair wages. Mr. Daniels says a majority of the membership of the ORC favor the policy of fealty to the corporations and the resistance of all other employees who seek to improve their condition by obtaining fair wages, but, he says, a minority that has been steadily increasing for the past five years, are weary of waiting and in favor of changing the entire plan of the association in the hope of present gain and regardless of ultimate results,

and he adds, with a threat to railway managers, if certain things are not done, that within the next five years this *minority* of the membership will have control of the ORC and change its policy. In that event the ORC would at once be entitled to the respect of all classes of railway employees. It would cease to be a fawning, cringing, abject organization, at the feet of railway managers. It would dismiss its real or fancied causes of complaint against locomotive engineers, and dismissing its present fawning chief and bringing a man of broad and liberal views to the front, would be accorded its rightful place in the family of railroad fraternities. The "minority," of whom Mr. Daniels speaks, are even now in full accord with the spirit of the times. They are evidently bold and aggressive men who believe that all classes of railroad employees are underpaid, and that the right way to proceed is to demand justice at the hands of railway corporations, and manfully contend for the right.

Mr. Daniels intimates to the railway managers that a suggestion has recently been made relating to a federation of all the railroad fraternities. He tells the managers that "such an alliance is being widely advocated by all other classes of men employed in their service and by some conductors; the more intelligent of the conductors look to the future and wish no such an alliance with other organizations, but if conductors are made to feel that the opinion given to them in so many words by one railway officer, that "the engineers, firemen, and brakemen must be taken care of or they will strike, but we are not afraid of you because you can't strike," is general, such alliance will come as certain as death, despite the present majority. Mr. Daniels' idea, evidently, is that the railway managers, to keep the ORC out of the alliance, will at once advance the wages of conductors. Such childish confidence may be beautiful but it will not pan out to the advantage of the conductors. But such a federation as Mr. Daniels speaks of is one of the certainties of the near future, and the sooner it comes the better.

It is no part of our business to defend locomotive engineers from the attacks made by the conductors, the engineers are eminently able to take care of themselves, and according to Grand Chief [Peter M.] Arthur, the charges made by Messrs. Wheaton and Daniels are beneath contempt.

In writing this article we have no desire, even were it within our power, to dwarf the ORC, and we are glad to know that there is a large minority of its membership whose views, manifestly, coincide

with ours upon labor questions, and we hail with special pleasure the probability that the minority will at no distant day expand to the majority, and this done we are satisfied that when switchmen or brakemen strike, conductors will not as in the past on two notable occasions take their places for the purpose of defeating just demands. According to our view of such matters when a conductor takes the place of another man who is seeking to obtain fair pay he is wanting in those essentials of manhood universally recognized among honorable men.

In every instance when a strike occurs there is a reason for it, and when it is found that the reason is sound and that the cause of the employee is just, the men are entitled to the support of society, and above all things, they should have the support of working men who are dependent upon their daily wages for support.

The CB&Q strike will end in the victory or the defeat of the engineers and firemen, but whatever may be the result, the lesson learned will not be forgotten — and as he who laughs last laughs best, if defeat should be the verdict, there will come a time, when strike and victory will be synonymous terms.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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