
Political Control of Railways

by Eugene V. Debs

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Mr. Appleton Morgan, in the *Popular Science Monthly*, for February, has an 11 page article, captioned, "The Political Control of Railways: Is It Confiscation?"

It should be understood that railroad corporations, by paying enormous salaries have been able to subsidize the very best talents the country affords. As a consequence, when the interests of the people and the greed of the railroad corporation conflict, the corporation enters the arena of debate, whether it be in the press, in legislative halls, or in courts, by its representatives, fully armed and equipped to defend it, and in doing this there is frequently exhibited such legerdemain of logic, such jugglery in the statement of facts, such a masterful flow of fume and froth, that the corporation is able to carry its point and perpetuate its rule and ruin policy.

Take, for instance, the Interstate Commerce Commission, against which Mr. Morgan directs his battering-rams with such violence as he can command; it was about 12 years from the date of the introduction of the first bill, before the present Interstate Commerce law was enacted, and all these years, the railroads, without an exception, fought the legislation with all the power they could command. During these years of struggle, between the people and the railroad corporations, there was always present in Washington the representative of the corporations, lawyers, statesmen, capitalists, writers— all of acknowledged ability — who fought the measure in and out of Congress, and were able to defeat it, time and again. The railroads were always victorious, though it was easily seen, that in every contest their power was waning, and that the people were destined to triumph and bring the railroads to realize that their power was not supreme. It is this triumph of the people over the corporation that Mr. Morgan so much deplors. He assumes that the people are animated by a desire to destroy railroad property, and that juries, disregarding their oaths,

the law and the testimony, take special delight in rendering verdicts that rob the corporation. He says:

But the utmost juries can do toward robbing or crippling railway corporations is a very small matter compared with this latest movement of political forces, to confiscate — under the pretext of caring for — the interests of the people, of which the laws we are about to glance at are the outcome. Every sovereign State in this Union has constituted a “Board of Railway Commissioners,” which is, and must be, political in its character, and so shifting with the politics of the state and of its executive; and to these boards is relegated the whole procedure of the railway companies, and upon them is made incumbent and peremptory the duty of “regulating” the affairs of the railways.

What is, and what must be, the result? The average politician knows fully as little or as much about railway management as he does about photographing the moon or applying the solar spectrum; yet, once upon a board of railway commissioners, he is required to excogitate and frame rules for an industry which not only supplies the financial arteries of a continent, but holds the lives as well as the credits of its citizens dependent upon the click of a telegraph or the angle of a semaphore — an industry which adjusts at once the most volatile and the most ponderous forces of nature to every necessary or luxurious service of our people! And, since 38 boards of these accomplished commissioners were not enough, the general government has kindly added another — not to regulate or supervise these 38, but to act in independent chaos to their tergiversations, and to contribute to the general value of their independent conclusions, ordinances, rules, and codes. What must, or rather what must not, be the result, when the country asks, as it appears to be now asking, to be furnished with railway experts and traffic accountants at the polls? When the socialist program shall be carried out to its full, it is understood that there is to be no inequality between the capitalist and the tramp. This equality, however, need not wait the perfection of that program. It can be achieved today by two extremely simple methods. Either the tramp can go to work, earn money, economize, and become a capitalist, or the capitalist can divide with the tramp. But while the capitalist, for his part, opposes no objection to the first plan, the latter appears to be the only one the tramp will listen to.

It would be difficult to find in current literature a lower estimate than Mr. Morgan forms of the people, of the legislation of the “sover-

eign states,” and of the nation, because in the wisdom of the representatives of the people, “railway commissioners” have been appointed to look after the rights of the people. Mr. Morgan, in his eagerness to make railroad corporations appear immaculate, overleaps prudence and propriety and seriously injures his cause. He ignores fundamental facts, the one vital fact that the corporation is the creature of law, of legislation, and that the “average politician,” whose ignorance he so thoroughly disdains, is the very man who made it possible for the railroad corporation to have an existence at all. Mr. Morgan doubtless, admires the “average politician” in the legislature or in Congress, voting extraordinary powers to the corporation, but [who in asserting] the authority to make the railroad subserve in the highest degree the interests of the whole people, from whom they have derived every right contained in their charters, at once becomes such an ignoramus as to excite Mr. Morgan’s derision and contempt. But Mr. Morgan’s conclusions do not tally with the conclusions of men who are profoundly interested in railroad operations — for instance Mr. Jay Gould, who is of the opinion that the inter state commission is a good thing. As late as March 23rd [1889], this justly distinguished railroad owner said:

In regard to the general railroad situation I put great reliance on the recent amendments to the Interstate Commerce law. They have greatly strengthened the original law and the year’s experience has brought railroad men to a clearer understanding of its practical working. The old pooling agreements were intended merely to make uniform and even rates, and to prevent the vicious rate wars which carried rates down only to be raised too high when peace was declared. Railroad men were forced to see that stable rates alike to all were more profitable, and pooling agreements followed. The stronger lines took care of the weaker ones, and there was less temptation to cut rates, for each road received its agreed percentage of business. The Interstate law will bring about, the same result, although it works in favor of the older and stronger lines.

“What will become of the weaker roads?”

They will eventually fall into the hands of the old and strong companies, because they will not dare to violate the amended law, and on even terms with the stronger companies they will hardly be able to secure traffic enough to support them. I want to see the law strictly enforced, and I have no doubt that it will be. The amendment punishing the shipper as well as the railroad official who makes a cut rate is a powerful incentive to obedience

to the law. A shipper would hardly dare to accept a rebate, even if it should be offered to him, for the commission has power to send for books and papers, and the merchant would be at the mercy of every clerk in his employ. If the railroad company could conceal the rebate the shipper would find it impossible to do so.

In the foregoing, Mr. Gould utterly demolishes Mr. Morgan, clearly and triumphantly demonstrating, that the law is wise and just, and that the "average politician" knew better than the railroad corporation, what was best for it and the people. Mr. Morgan, it would seem has yet to learn that ours is a government by the people, and not by the corporation, and that neither the "General Government," nor the governments of "38 states," are ready to surrender their powers to the corporation. This may seem strange to Mr. Morgan, but experience will teach him and others of his school, that the people are everywhere aroused and are asserting their sovereignty. Mr. Morgan will find out in due time that his sneers at the "average politician" will work no good for the corporation, nor will the corporation be benefited, by dividing the people into two classes, "the capitalist and the tramp." We, as a people, have had quite enough of that sort of literature. There is a species of arrogance in which capitalists may indulge to their heart's content. They can have their charmed circles, their elegant homes, their ten thousand dollar cooks or "chefs," their wines, their purple and fine linen, their poodle dogs and splendid equipages, their servants in livery, "and a' that and a' that," but by the genius of liberty and independence, they must be careful how they put their hands upon the sovereignty of the people. The corporation is not supreme; capital is not king.

Mr. Morgan, throughout his entire article seeks to magnify the corporation, when the verdict is that it is already far too colossal for its own good. This ceaseless glorification of the corporation results in fixing all eyes upon it; under proper surveillance the corporation is well enough — is possibly a blessing, but left to exercise such authority as it may deem wise, it becomes a curse rather than a blessing. Nor are people to be longer misled by the cheap and vulgar demagoguery about the "socialist program," or the "inequality between the capitalist and the tramp." Such tricks no longer deceive the people. It is old powder and is no longer of service. The corporations have been found guilty of committing wrongs against the people, and the law proposes to put an end to them as often as they are discovered, and the late amendments to the Interstate Commerce law make some of the more

glaring wrongs felonies. Mr. Morgan will find that his pen, however mighty it has been in the past, cannot longer resist the power of the people to enthrone justice. In all of this, working men ought to see the dawn of a new era, which the people, in spite of the corporation, are proclaiming — for in nothing is it more significant than that the day of the redemption of labor from the curse of corporate greed, draweth nigh, and how soon its sun shall ascend to its noontide glory depends largely upon the organization and federation of working men for their own good and for the welfare of society.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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