
The Knights of Labor and the New York Central Railroad

by Eugene V. Debs

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I propose, in this communication to United Labor, to discuss two propositions: First, the Knights of Labor, as a labor organization, and second, the New York Central Railroad Company, as a corporation.

Stated in law phrase, the case is The Organization vs. The Corporation.

Now I hold that the whole body of organized labor throughout the United States and Canada, in England and on the continent, regardless of trade or calling, must be, in the very nature of things, in sympathy with the labor organization known as the Knights of Labor.

In saying this, I am not unmindful of human feasibility. I have no patience with perfectionists. I am not in sympathy with optimists, nor yet with pessimists. I do not believe everything is ordered for the best, nor for the worst; in fact, I do not believe things are ordered at all, by an overruling Providence.

It is far better to believe, I think, that certain immutable laws exist, which as certainly relate to *meum et tuum* — "mine and thine" — as to the solar system.

I do not care to bandy words with creed-makers and bigots. They are not lovely to my eye. They make laws and administer them. They permit neither change of venue nor appeal, and here let it be understood that I do not refer exclusively to religious bigots, and, while the term "creed" has a theological twang, I choose to use it as a matter of "belief" on the part of railroad corporations, which, like all corporations, having no souls, their worship of mammon excludes workingmen from their temples. It is the creed of the English landlords in Ireland, a creed as devoid of humanity as a hungry tiger. As well hunt for sunflowers at the poles, or for ice water in Dante's Hades, as to expect corporations to make a move, so much as the fraction of an

inch, towards helping men to better their conditions who work for a living — their overworked and underpaid employees. I do not say there are not exceptions, but at this writing, not one occurs to my mind.

I do not propose to discuss incidents connected with the recent strike of the Knights of Labor on the New York Central. I do not write for the purpose of crimination and recrimination. I do not propose to assert that the Knights made no mistakes in ordering and in conducting the strike. I know of no war since the world began that generals in command did not make mistakes. I know of no great enterprise, and the reader is welcome to search the list, free from mistakes.

Things are right or wrong entirely independent of the mistakes men may make.

The organization of workingmen is fundamentally, inherently, and inalienably right. In the United States of America the right is conceded. It is fixed irrevocably in the constitution and statute. It follows that the employees on the New York Central had a right, unquestioned and absolute, to organize and become a part of the great order of Knights of Labor — just as other employees on the New York Central had a right to join the brotherhoods of engineers, firemen, switchmen, conductors, and trainmen.

Having a right to organize, the organization necessarily possessed certain rights. It had the right to discuss wages, the hours of work, and questions relating to honorable treatment. It had the right to protest when the corporation inaugurated a policy of injustice. In a word, the organization possessed all the rights relating to self-preservation. It will be seen at a glance, if labor organizations do not possess such rights, they are of little value to their members, in so far as protection against wrong is involved.

Such rights as I have imperfectly outlined, the Knights of Labor on the New York Central asserted. They discussed labor questions, increased the membership of their assemblies, protested against wrongs inflicted by the corporation, sought redress in various ways which have the approval of all honest men, and when thrust aside by a haughty, unprincipled, and soulless corporation, struck.

In the war thus inaugurated the Knights of Labor were defeated; victory was with the corporation.

There are those, I doubt not, who will rush to the conclusion that because the corporation defeated the Knights of Labor, the corpora-

tion was right, and the Knights of Labor wrong. To arrive at such a conclusion is to endorse every act of tyranny and oppression that blackens the pages of history. It reverses every maxim of justice. It dethrones truth. It crowns and glorifies wrong. It makes civilization a sham and every high aspiration of humanity a miserable vagary.

I take no stock in the doctrine that might is right. It is not true. To assume it and act upon it is a crime against humanity which defies pardon.

The colonists, defeated at Bunker Hill, in no sense detracted from the righteousness of their cause, and so on through all the poverty, wretchedness, and gloom of the revolutionary war, until at last defeats, by virtue of victory, made the horrors of Valley Forge a sublime picture in the revolutionary panorama than Yorktown.

The organization of Knights of Labor on the New York Central had certain rights, and because these rights were exercised the corporation decided to bring to bear upon it, for the purpose of its annihilation, all of its vast resources. The penalty which the corporation imposed with relentless enmity and cruelty was that the Knights of Labor, because they were Knights of Labor, should be remanded to idleness, should be driven from their homes, should be made, insofar as the corporation had the power to execute its infernal hatred, tramps and mendicants, the victims of hunger and cold, and left to drive wither mattered not.

The question just here arises: "What is the view of the subject organized labor takes?"

It may not be a matter of special concern to the corporation. Flushed with victory, it points to the sufferings and humiliations of the Knights of Labor, and by its actions tells them such will be your fate if you should dare to resent wrong and oppression, as did the Knights of Labor.

In view of such facts, what ought to be the decision of all other organizations of railroad employees on the New York Central, and every other railroad in the land? I have no hesitancy in answering the question. It should be a decision of unqualified endorsement of the rights of organized labor to oppose the tyrannies practiced by corporations — from the action of the small boss to the highest official. If this right is not asserted and maintained by every means workingmen can devise, by protest, arbitration, and strike, then the epitaph of labor organizations can be written now, as well as when the corporation has its iron-clad hoof upon its prostrate form. The individual laborer

finds himself in the world with the absolute necessities upon him which nature imposes. He must have food, shelter, and clothing. Society, as it is organized, is scarcely less autocratic. It makes demands and inflicts penalties. The workingman marries, surrounds himself with dependents. His only capital is his labor, his time, his skill, his ability to work. It is not surprising, therefore, that the workingman should feel timid. His responsibilities are great and he feels their weight. The fact is one of transcendent glory. It crowns the workingman with honor and dignity worthy of American citizenship. But acting by himself, the obligations he is under to his family make him timid. To him, idleness is something in the nature of a scourge; as a consequence, the workingman remains at his task in spite of indignities. To stop working is to invite starvation. To protest against the autocratic orders of the corporation is to invite exile.

The corporation is familiar with all the facts. It has measured the horsepower of hunger pangs. It has estimated with approximate accuracy not only what a workingman will give for his life, but to what degradations he will submit, that his wife and children might not be homeless wanderers upon the face of the earth.

Taking advantage of these noble traits of character, the corporation is eternally seeking to down the organization. The organization is a ceaseless menace to the corporation, but acting by itself, is almost certain of defeat. But the defeat of the organization in any battle for right does not prove that the right was with the victors — and it means the battle will be fought again. I have faith in the enlightening influence of the labor press and in the conquering power of truth.

I am of the opinion that in the march of progressive ideas a way will be found to bring all railroad employees into harmonious alliance. The obstacles in the war are ignorance, bigotry, jealousy, and the lowest order of pride that ever cursed the world.

Aerial navigators say the time is not remote when men will fly, because the principle is in nature. There is no difficulty about power; the question relates to its application. So there is no doubt of the ultimate success of federation, of all workers with an identity of interests, into one great and powerful body. In government the principle is fundamental and it will be found a conquering principle when the workingmen become wise enough to incorporate it into their organizations.

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