
Notes of a Labor Agitator

by Eugene V. Debs

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For just one night I was general manager of a great railroad, though I never received any salary for the service I rendered in that capacity.

The strike on the Great Northern, extending from St. Paul to the coast, was settled on the evening of May 1, 1894. It was a complete victory for the ARU.

President James J. Hill and I had shaken hands and declared the hatchet buried. He said he was glad it was all over and assured me that he had no feeling of resentment. As we stood chatting in his office, he said: "By the way, Debs, you'll have to be my general manager tonight, for the men won't go back to work except upon your orders."

I said: "All right, sir, I'll guarantee that by morning the trains will all be running on schedule time."

He seemed to be nettled and I did not blame him when he said: "How about my wages? I, too, am an employee of the Great Northern Railway. And since everybody gets a raise, where do I come in?"

He laughed heartily when I answered: "Join the American Railway Union and we'll see that you get a square deal."

And then I assumed the duties of general manager. The men all along the lines were extremely suspicious. They had been betrayed before and were taking no chances. The chief operator sat at the keys while I dictated the orders. The messages were soon speeding over the wires. At some places there was no trouble. At others it was not easy to convince the men that there was no trickery about it and that the orders bearing my signature were genuine.

At last we had every point on the line started except one and the answer from there was: "The whole town is drunk and celebrating. Will be ready for duty in the morning." Nor did they cease celebrating until daylight and then they all reported for duty.

When I left the Great Northern headquarters all the trains were moving, the shops, yards, and offices were throbbing with activity, and everybody was happy.

My services as a general manager of the Great Northern were entirely satisfactory to President Hill, as he assured me when I left there, but I never applied for membership in the General Managers Association.

It was not long after this before President Hill and some of our members wired me as to my interpretation of certain clauses of the agreement. It was evident that trouble was brewing again. I went to St. Paul on the first train. Our committee was promptly convened, but Mr. Hill could not be found. No one knew where he was. It struck me that delay was dangerous and that prompt action was necessary. We at once summoned Charles A. Pillsbury, the millionaire miller, since deceased, and a personal friend of Mr. Hill, who had taken an active interest in the previous strike and settlement. Mr. Pillsbury and some associates came to the hall.

Pillsbury said if the agreement had been violated he did not know it. He did not know where Mr. Hill was and suggested that we wait patiently until he returned. When he took his seat, I got up. "Mr. Pillsbury," said I, "if Mr. Hill is not here, or there is not someone here to act for him within 30 minutes, we will tie up the Great Northern from end to end." The hall rang with applause. Within 15 minutes President Hill was in the hall. We went into a back room and in about 30 minutes more everything was adjusted and for the second time the victory of the ARU was complete.

First Union Banners in Political Parade.

In the fall of 1896 I addressed a great political gathering at Duluth, Minnesota. The trade union banners were for the first time in a political procession. It was a red letter day. The crowd was immense. No hall was large enough, and it was too chilly for outdoors; arrangements were made to hold the meeting in the old streetcar stables. The roof was low, but there was ample room, and this was what we needed. Just after I got started some man interrupted. Not understanding what he said I paused and asked him to repeat his remark. "I say you're all right," he exclaimed. Within a few feet of him towered a fellow who seemed seven feet tall. His eyes blazed daggers at the first party as he growled, "By God, you'd better."

The crowd cheered and there was no further interruption that night.

What a Jackass Will Do.

An introduction I once received is good for a hearty laugh every time I recall the incident. There was an intense prejudice against me and the young man who had been selected to introduce me to the audience concluded he would try to disarm it. The house was jammed. He got along quite well until he forgot his lines. And then he closed somewhat abruptly after this fashion: “Debs is hated by some people because he has been in strikes. this is not right. It is the law of nature to defend yourself. Only a coward will refuse to stand up for his rights. Why, even a dog will growl if you try to deprive him of the bone he is gnawing, a cat will scratch in self-defense, a bee will sting to protect itself, a goat will butt if you get in his way, and you all know what a jackass will do if you monkey with him. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Debs, who will now address you.”

He brought down the house and was immensely pleased with his first effort on the public platform.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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