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# The Termination of the Burlington Strike

by Eugene V. Debs

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On January 7th, 1889, the strike on the CB&Q<sup>1</sup> railway system was declared off by the joint action of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. The strike began on the 27th day of February, 1888, and being declared off January 7th, 1889, it follows that it continued 10 months and 9 days. The readers of the *Magazine* are well informed regarding the origin of the notable and now historic struggle, and still, it may be worth while to briefly recapitulate the more important facts which led to it. The real grievance, or that which bore the most heavily upon the engineers and firemen, related to wages. The CB&Q paid their men less for the same work than was paid by other railways which centered at Chicago, and upon which the work was not more arduous, or the responsibility greater, than fell to the lot of the men who were in the employ of the CB&Q. In addition to this, the CB&Q had established a system of classification which, it was contended, was unjust to the engineers, and the full significance of which was that it enriched the corporation at the expense of the men from whom fair pay was withheld.

To arrive at a settlement without a resort to a strike, strenuous efforts were made by the engineers and firemen; their grievances were presented in an elaborate schedule and the corporation was most respectfully asked to consider each specification, but such solicitations were without avail. The corporation determined at last to make no concessions that in any wise satisfied the just demands of the men, and its defiant ultimatum was without concession or compromise, to stand by its peremptory refusal to arbitrate the grievances of the engi-

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<sup>1</sup> The **Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad**, primary line of the Burlington system of roads, colloquially known as the "Q."

neers. As a result, the engineers and firemen, on the 27th of February, quit work. The question was then, Did they do right? Did they act wisely? and the same questions are still up for debate.

We do not hesitate to say that the general conclusion is that the CB&Q has won a victory, or, in other words, that the engineers and firemen have been defeated — in common parlance, “whipped.” The strike has been declared off, and the conditions under which the men who quit the service of the CB&Q will again enter the employment of the corporation, are practically unchanged. Necessarily, on the face of such facts, the conclusion is inevitable that the men, after a struggle of nearly one year, are defeated. But this is not all that can be said, or that ought to be said, upon the subject. There are instances on record in which the word “victory” is but another term for “defeat,” as was the case of the British at Bunker Hill, and of Xerxes at Thermopylae. In discussing wars and battles, for the purpose of arriving at conclusions relating to combatants and issues, it is well to be precise. In the CB&Q struggle we find arrayed upon one side a corporation thoroughly organized and equipped, and of immense financial resources — one of the great corporations of the times— and on the other side two brotherhoods of wage-workers, two organizations whose only financial resources were their daily wages.

It will be well to note, with some care, the parties to the contest. There they stand on the 27th day of February, 1888. The corporation, proud, arrogant, defiant, with splendid property, money by the millions, and confident. It had determined to grant no concessions, and it must be said, that it was plucky. As a foeman it had immense proportions as well as resources. But it was not so colossal as to frighten the two great brotherhoods who had challenged it to combat in defense of right and justice — the principle of fair dealing between employer and employee, a principle that must be asserted and defended if truth and justice are to prevail in the earth. We do not doubt, indeed we know it to be true, that there are those who deemed the strike unwise and ill advised at the start, and who now say “I told you so.” In this there is nothing strange. It has been so from toe beginning. The timid, the hesitating, those who predict defeat and are content with supineness, never did nor never will, help to rescue their fellow men from the enthrallments of oppression and degradation. The engineers and firemen who went into the struggle were inspired by sentiments such as have animated all men since the world began who have had the courage of conviction and have sought as best they

could, when opportunity offered, to emancipate themselves and their fellow men from oppression. That in far too many cases defeat has been the result, will not be gainsaid, but that ultimate victory is to come is as certain as that God and Heaven and true and good men, are in alliance to enthrone, crown, and scepter justice and give it universal dominion in the world.

Whatever may be said of man's stolidity and mental obtuseness, he can be taught in the school of experience. Such lessons are inefaceably engraved upon his mind, and if any one lesson has been taught by the CB&Q strike, more important than another, it is that in "unity there is strength," and that for the purpose of securing and maintaining the right Federation is the supreme requirement, the desideratum, and that with federation of all employees, victory, with all the desired trophies, is assured.

In the CB&Q strike we have an example of moral heroism that it will be found difficult to parallel in these degenerate times, where men, as never before in the history of the world, worship with more than pagan idolatry at the shrine of Mammon. The man who prayed for

A scourging tongue, a scorpion's lash,  
To flay the backs of fools who worship cash, <sup>2</sup>

would now have ample opportunities to gratify his ambition, but his victims would not be found in the ranks of the brotherhoods of engineers and firemen. These men, in the struggle with the CB&Q, sought diligently for the right, and believing they had found it, demonstrated their loyalty to conviction by deducting from their hard earned wages the magnificent sum of \$1.2 million and giving it freely to the cause they had espoused, they set an example of devotion which cannot fail to challenge the admiration of honorable men everywhere. And be it remembered, to the everlasting credit of locomotive engineers and firemen, the giving of this great sum of money did not demoralize them; on the contrary, to their glory, be it said, it solidified the membership, and in a sense of transcendent significance,

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<sup>2</sup> An adaptation of the opening couplet of the anonymous long poem "The Age of Gold" (1839), published in the New York literary magazine *The Knickerbocker*, vol. 13, no. 6 (June 1839). The original reads:

Oh! for a scourging pen, a scorpion's lash,  
To flay the backs of fools, who worship Cash!

at the close of the struggle, the brotherhoods are stronger than ever before in their history. The storm has been fierce, and though the brotherhood ships have battled long against adverse winds and tide, they came into port without the loss of a sail, a rope or a mast.

It affords us no satisfaction to state the disasters that have, during the struggle, overtaken the CB&Q. The victory (?) achieved by that corporation has been the dearest in the history of the labor struggles of the century. The corporation has lost on every hand. There is no necessity, nor is there any desire, to magnify the sum total of its financial disasters. It is modest to place it at \$10 million, and there are experts in such matters who place the sum vastly above the figures given. But more or less, the corporation will not again place itself in a position to duplicate its embarrassments.

In closing this article, which virtually closes the discussion of the CB&Q strike in this Magazine, we are persuaded that it will prove in many ways beneficial to railway employees. It supplies an example of courage and endurance which will not be forgotten in a hundred years. It demonstrates that working men with a just grievance, and satisfied that they are right, will contend for the right regardless of sacrifices and yield only when further resistance would be folly, and it furthermore serves to impress upon organizations of railway employees the demand for and absolute necessity of federation, that strikes in the future may not occur, or if they must come in spite of friendly overtures, that they shall be so quick and decisive in their work that whether victory or defeat attends the effort, results shall be speedily attained.

In declaring the strike off it is generally believed that ultimately three-fourths of the old employees will regain their positions on the CB&Q. Many of those who will go in search of employment elsewhere, will be bearers of letters of introduction from the officers of the corporation. And just here we desire to say that all the brotherhoods of railway employees should make it their special concern to help the men who so valiantly stood by their colors on the CB&Q during the memorable struggle, to obtain employment, and that this help should be extended engineers, firemen, brakemen, and switchmen. To overlook or to neglect this duty would be cruel to the last degree. The CB&Q has pledged itself to treat the men who left its employment honorably and the same treatment is due from the men to the corporation. The war is ended. The bugle no more calls to arms. Let the battle flags be furled.