
Debate between J.C. Nolan and Eugene V. Debs, Century Hall, Minneapolis, Jan. 21, 1894

Published as "Has Their Sun Set? Railway Organizations Said to be Inadequate to the Times" in *Minneapolis Star-Review*, Jan. 22, 1894, pg. 5

A fair sized audience gathered at Century Hall last night [Jan. 21, 1894] to hear the debate between the representatives of the American Railway Union and the brotherhood organizations. Eugene V. Debs and G.W. Howard represented the ARU and J.C. Nolan, of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, represented the other side. The audience was composed largely of railroad men, though there was quite a sprinkling of local labor people. Howard did not take part in the debate. Eugene V. Debs and J.C. Nolan agreed on Miss Eva McDonald-Valesh as chairman.

J.C. Nolan was allowed a half hour to open the debate. He confined himself to a discussion of the principles of the American Railway Union. He said he did not claim that the existing brotherhoods were perfect, and he would be glad to see them adopt more progressive measures in some respects. Still, their failures to achieve perfection were not the fault of the plan of organization. The brotherhood plan was all right, but it had to meet powerful corporations in an unequal contest, and no organization could always compel success. The brotherhoods had to deal with selfishness and other human imperfections within their own ranks, and so would any new organization which came up. He denied the charge that the brotherhoods were too expensive and lost many members on account of inability of members to pay dues, and said every member who desired to retain his membership could make special arrangements, if not able to pay the dues promptly.

The charge that insurance was unnecessarily high was also denied. Nolan claimed that the brotherhoods insured cheaper than any regu-

lar company and gave satisfaction to the members. The gist of his remarks about the ARU was that, while that organization found much fault with the brotherhoods, it provides no practical way of remedying the alleged defects. They claim to reorganize human nature, leaving out the prejudice and selfishness. They would find in practice that they have these same elements to contend with and that their new theories would not ensure perfect results any more than the brotherhoods did.

Eugene V. Debs was received with applause. He has a commanding figure and is a magnetic speaker. He enlivened his speech with many witty remarks and droll sayings. He said:

I have not the slightest personal feeling in this debate, I believe we should diligently seek the truth and not be afraid to stand by it as we see it. I served my apprenticeship in the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and every page of its history is sacred to me.

He spoke more more on J.C. Nolan's letter, published in *The Tribune* on Dec. 10 [1893], than on the the general principles of the ARU, and said:

The time has come when the existing railway organizations are no longer adequate to grapple with the conditions of the passing hour. Their sun has set. you must certainly agree with me that in this day of consolidation and unification of capital they are no longer equal to the emergency of the times. In the CB&Q strike the men went down in the dust of defeat. The same is true of the Lehigh Valley strike. The constant strife between the brotherhoods has weakened them. They have quarreled with each other when they should have shown an unbroken front to the corporations.

The subject of system federation came in for a general review and it was claimed that the head of any one organization could prevent all the others from striking. Much of the technical details between the various organizations was also reviewed. The speaker claimed that the ARU would simplify the technicalities and ensure prompt action. In reviewing the two systems of adjusting grievances he claimed that the ARU would do the preliminaries quicker and in the later stages would act according to circumstances. He unmercifully scored the insurance system of the brotherhoods, especially their compulsory features. In

closing he said the ARU bore malice to none and had a message of peace and goodwill to all.

According tot the conditions of the debate, J.C. Nolan had the closing speech. He came up smiling, despite Debs' eloquence. He claimed that Debs had avoided the main points of the argument and confined himself to generalities. He reviewed Debs' personal work in building up the firemen's brotherhood, and said he was largely responsible for any defects that might exist. He declined to be convinced on the insurance plan, and said, in regard to federation, that it was purely optional whether the brotherhoods went into it or not. He was willing to admit that the brotherhoods might still do much in the way of progress, but did not see any need of a new organization. When the railway employees became liberal enough they could affiliate with all branches of labor through the American Federation of Labor. This closed the debate.

After the debate Debs and Howard held an informal meeting to get recruits for the ARU. They speak in St. Paul this evening.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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First Edition