
Railroad Kings

by Eugene V. Debs

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It is not presumed that the term "Railroad Kings," when coined was intended for anything more than a compliment to such men as had acquired large railroad interests, or were at the head of what are termed "railroad systems," but of late the title is made to signify something more and a Railroad King has come to mean power, often equal and sometimes superior to any power known to the legislative bodies of the country — that is to say Railroad Kings, by virtue of influences which they can command, and of circumstances which they can create, can often shape legislation to suite their interests and defeat opposition.

It is not to be assumed that the average citizen is familiar with the vast power which railroads exert in public affairs, nor is it surprising that such should be the case. The growth of the railroad interests of the United States and of North America has been phenomenal to an extent that defies exaggeration. There are now about 125,000 miles of railroad in the United States, and men are living, in the prime of their mental faculties, whose recollection goes back to the period when the first mile of the entire system was built.

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Such [growth is] eloquent of enterprise such as embellishes the history of no other land under the sun, for it should be stated that the railroad history of the country is one of marvels. It is the romance of fact, and to build and equip these roads has required an expenditure of more than \$6 billion — a sum so vast that no ordinary mind can grasp it.

It might be interesting to show the quantities of the various materials that have entered into the construction and equipment of rail-

¹ Annual mileage construction statistics removed for space reasons.

roads in the United States, and the number of men required to build them, but such statistics would be foreign to our purpose at this writing, but it is pertinent to say that these roads employed, in 1880, 236,058 men, other than clerks; they employed 2,069 officials, and 12,331 clerks and bookkeepers — a grand total of 250,458. If it be assumed that 200,000 of these employees are married men, with families averaging five members — then we would have a population dependent upon railroads of 1,050,248.

In view of such facts, it is not surprising that when individuals control systems of railroads which embrace a large number of miles, that they should receive the title of “King.” There is more in the title than appears on the surface, as we shall endeavor to show.

As we have intimated, the title “Railroad King,” whether applied to the owner of railroad property or the President of railroad corporations, means that the man bearing the title possesses great power that he is chief ruler — having the power to enforce his views and if antagonized, can remove those who have the temerity to oppose him.

We shall not attempt to tell how many Railroad Kings there are in the United States. There are, doubtless, a large number who have not yet been crowned and whose coronation day may never come, but who exercise kingly powers, nevertheless. the powers of Railroad Kings are numerous, extending all the way from granting a railroad pass to the purchase of a judge or a legislature. they have the power to “water stocks.” It is an extraordinary power, and takes on some of the peculiarities attending the working of miracles. The miracle of changing water into wine is familiar to our readers, but Railroad Kings have been known, in numerous instances, to transform water into stocks and money. When Railroad Kings combine their power they can make the products of the soil cheap or dear, as they may choose. They can put up or put down rates of transportation, and if complaints are made, they ask, with frigid nonchalance: “What are you going to do about it?”

When legislatures meet, the first thing in order is to see that every member has a railroad pass. The Kings see to it that their decrees in this regard are obeyed to the letter, the theory being that a legislator with a railroad free pass in the pocket is going to vote the way he rides. From the moment he accepts the pass he is secure. It is what is called strategy. If there are those in the legislature who have refused passes, then the Kings adopt other means to accomplish their purpose. Lobbies are organized, and money directly or indirectly is used

in a way to do it most good (?). What has been said to legislatures applies with equal force to Congress.

Railroad Kings, it should be said, are without exception men of brains, men of large intellectual caliber. They are not only practical businessmen, but are shrewd politicians and far-seeing statesmen, and whether reasoning from cause to effect, or vice versa, are acutely logical. They understand the maxim that politics is the science of government, and they assume that government ought to be of the railroads, by the railroads, and for the railroads, and to a ma Railroad Kings have the courage of conviction.

Instances are rare in which Railroad Kings have taken their titles by inheritance. As a general proposition, Railroad Kings are of the Napoleonic school, men who have fought their way into prominence and power, and have earned the right to rule. We have selected for the embellishment of this article a few names known to fame, who are recognized as Railroad kings in this and in other lands, giving the number of miles of railroad systems which constitute their realm. They are as follows:

King	System	Miles
William H. Vanderbilt	Vanderbilt	2,800
Jay Gould	Wabash	6,000
Alex Mitchell	Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul	5,000
C.P. Huntington	Huntington	9,000
Leland Stanford	Huntington	(above)
Charles Clark	Illinois Central	2,000
Robert Garrett	Baltimore & Ohio	1,700
Milton H. Smith	Louisville & Nashville	2,366
Frank S. Bar	Cincinnati Southern	1,200
W.B. Shay	Santa Fe	2,000
Thomas F. Oakes	Northern Pacific	2,000
James J. Hill	St.. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba	1,700
David H. Moffat	Denver & Rio Grande	1,700
Charles F. Adams	Union Pacific	4,700
Albert Keep	Chicago & Northwestern	5,600
John P. Roberts	Pennsylvania	2,200

Here are 16 Railroad Kings who control 50,666 miles of the railroads of the country, and average of 3,000 miles each, or about one-third of all the railroads in operation.

We have shown that the 125,000 miles of railroads employ, all told, 250,458 persons, or say, two to the mile. this would give the Railroad Kings named control of 101,333 men, who with families averaging five persons each, would give a grand aggregate of 506,665 persons dependent upon them for support; omitting officials, and for

the sake of round numbers, we will say 500,000 persons are directly within control of the Railroad Kings we have named.

To what extent Railroad Kings can exert their power over employees, and the methods employed in that direction, are regarded as questions of great importance. They can, at their pleasure, increase or decrease wages. They are not required to consult their employees on the subject, nor do they. This is a tremendous power. If the Railroad King is just, noble, and humane, and history gives accounts of such potentates, then employees are comfortable, happy, and contented; their homes are bright and cheerful, their wives wear smiling faces, and their children are blithe. But when the Railroad King is mercenary, cold, and callous, a man who, to dress in purple and fine linen, and to fare sumptuously every day, reduces wages, then the condition of employees is changed; then discontent prevails, then is gloom in the homes of the employees, and content takes its departure. And it may be said, as a further illustration of the power of Railroad Kings, that they may at their pleasure dismiss the discontented employees, exile them from work entirely and absolutely, and reduce them to tramps and vagrants.

Are we asked for a remedy for such exhibitions of the power as we have pointed out? We answer, we did not start out to discuss remedies, but rather to show the vastness of the railroad systems of the country, in the management of which men have developed into what has been significantly styled "Kings," possessed of vast powers which are yearly becoming more formidable. What the result will be, time only can determine, but the close observers of the signs of the times are of the opinion that labor is organizing for the purpose of discussing with employers propositions looking to a more perfect agreement relating to the subject of wages, and a more equitable distribution of the wealth which labor creates. And as railroads are, in every instance, the creations of legislation, and partake quite as much of public as of private enterprise, it is not surprising that the people have their attention particularly directed to their management.

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