
Government Control of Railroads and Employees

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Persons calling themselves "Nationalists," and others, perhaps, who choose some other designation, advocate the ownership and the management of the railroads of the United States by the federal government.

We are not, at this writing, inclined to discuss the financial aspect of the proposition; how, if the government should conclude to purchase the railroads, the money could be obtained to pay for them, but instead, to call attention of the readers of the *Magazine* to conditions that would most probably confront employees who would be required to operate the roads, a branch of the subject which does not seem to have attracted much attention, if, indeed, it has been broached at all by the advocates of government ownership of the railroads of the country.

It is eminently prudent to say that it is a question in which railroad employees are vitally concerned, and upon which their views should have due consideration. Nationalism, at least, as applied to railroading, is paternalism, or wilder still, Bellamyism — an ism which dwarfs out of sight the individual, while it indefinitely expands government control to absolutism. It must be this, necessarily, since there is no appeal from the dictum of the government. The subject warrants exhaustive criticism, and the more it is investigated the more urgent the analysis appears.

The value of the railroads of the country is now placed at \$11 billion — or about five times the cost of the war of the rebellion — and the number of employees required to operate 175,223 miles of track of these roads, as reported December 31, 1892, approximates 1 million. In case the government should own and operate these roads, they would be practically consolidated into one great system, and the

interests involved would be of such vast magnitude as would probably make it necessary to create another department of the government. To manage an establishment of such enormous proportions would require military discipline of the most rigid character, in which case employees *enlisted* — that would doubtless be required — they would at once come under laws and regulations of a cast iron order from which, as has been observed, there would be no appeal.

Here it becomes pertinent to inquire, first, in case of government ownership and management of the railroads, would the organizations of railroad employees as now constituted be tolerated? Is it to be presumed that immediately upon the passing of the ownership of the roads from the corporations to government all grievances would disappear, and a railroad employees' millennium would dawn? But suppose employees should insist upon maintaining their organizations with all of their grand officers and machinery for presenting grievances and ordering strikes, is there a man who entertains the idea that the government would for an instant permit the slightest interference with its orders and regulations? A moment's reflection discloses the preposterousness of such a conception. Employees might be permitted to maintain organizations of a beneficiary character to improve the moral, social, educational, and financial condition of their members, but the government would make all regulations relating to time and wages, nor would it for a moment distinguish between a scab and a union man; belonging to an organization would cut no figure at all, and as a consequence, organizations would at once be required to relegate all their machinery for protection to the limbo of forgotten things. As well expect enlisted soldiers in the regular army to maintain organizations for the purpose of criticizing orders of superiors, presenting grievances and proposing to strike if concessions were not granted. Indeed, under laws already in force, as interpreted by certain United States judges, it is questionable if railroad employees connected with the train service are any longer free men, the interpretation of the law being that they are a part of the rolling stock of the corporations, held to their places by the force of law.

With such facts in sight, is it not to be presumed that, under government control of the railroads, the first thing Congress would do would be to make laws concerning their management? Such a conclusion is not only logical, but inevitable. The laws thus enacted would doubtless confer upon a department, which the law would create, the duty of making rules and regulations for the management of the

roads. The government, having become a “common carrier,” would brook no delays — and employees would not be consulted any more than soldiers in the army are consulted about their movements. “Obedience” and “silence” would be the watch words — and any infraction of the rules would be punished with military promptness and rigor.

With government control of the railroads, contracts between the government and the employees, would be based upon law, with penalties attached of more or less severity, in which the punishment of recalcitrant employees would only be considered, because, though the government might be in the wrong, there would be no process by which it could be arrested, tried and punished, the government would be King — and the maxim is “The King can do no wrong,” only the subject, the slave, the employee — hence the proposition for the government to control the railroads becomes a species of despotism, such as applies to the control of armies.

In the management of the railroads, the government would want about 1 million men. It is not to be presumed or assumed that the government would tolerate any happy-go-lucky policy relating to the required force to operate the roads. It would insist upon order. The trains must go their ceaseless rounds, day and night. What more natural than the inauguration of a system of enlistment for a term of years, during which the men, while permitted to die would not enjoy the privilege of quitting, any more than soldiers in the regular army may throw down their muskets with impunity. Desert, they might, but as desertion is a perilous business, employees once in the toils, would probably prefer to serve out their time, rather than be hunted down by spies and detectives governments have in their employ.

Again, suppose an employe was discharged from the service as the lightest penalty the authorities could inflict, what would be the condition of the unfortunate? He would be practically branded as an outcast, blacklisted to an extent that he would not be permitted to enter the service again. True, he might be pardoned and reinstated, but the government, having absolute control, would doubtless prefer that such degraded employees should be warnings to others to obey orders and be silent.

As to the matter of wages, if the government should purchase and control the railroads, what assurance has labor that wages would be higher than at present? Indeed, what is there to inspire the belief that wages would not be reduced below their present averages? Manifestly,

there is nothing upon which labor can hang a hope that its condition would be improved. If the purpose of the government should be to pay high wages and at the same time reduce the cost of transportation, there might be developed the fact that the business, like the post office department, was not a self-supporting enterprise, in which case appropriations would be required to meet deficits. If such a condition of things should occur, a cry would be heard demanding retrenchment and reform, and thus to avoid deficiencies wages might be reduced, in which event, what means of redress would be in sight for the employees? The grievance committee, even if one existed, would not chirp, and the coming together of grand chiefs, and grand masters and grand lodges would be missionless. Neither strike, kick, nor boycott would be tolerated. Mass meetings and whereases would avail nothing, and all that would be left for the employee would be submission and silence.

Whatever else may be said of the government ownership of railroads, it is difficult to see in what regard the employee thereby would be benefited. We regard it quite too early to advocate absolutism in industrial enterprises. As matters now stand, there is quite enough of petty and pusillanimous czarism in shop, forge, factory and mine and in the railroad service, and labor, we feel warranted in saying, does not clamor for more subjugation.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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