
Statement to the Public from Eugene V. Debs, President of the American Railway Union, July 5, 1894

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To the Public:

So many misleading reports have been given currency in reference to the great railroad strike now in progress that I am prompted, in the interest of justice and fair play, to give the public an honest, impartial statement of the issues involved and the facts as they actually exist. My purpose in this is to have the great American public — the plain people — in every avenue of life, conversant with the situation as it really is, that they who constitute the highest tribunal we know may pass judgment upon our acts — condemn us if we are wrong and uphold us if we are right.

First of all, let it be said that the Pullman employees who struck May 6 last did so entirely of their own accord. Their action in so doing was spontaneous and unanimous. They simply revolted against a series of deep-seated wrongs of long standing, and no power could stay them. It has been charged, and the charge has been widely accepted, that they were induced to strike by their “leaders” and labor agitators; that if left alone they would have remained at work. The charge is wholly untrue. The fact is, that the officers of the American Railway Union used all their influence to pacify the employees and advised them repeatedly not to strike, but to bear patiently their grievances until a peaceable settlement could be effected. To the truth of this statement the employees themselves will bear willing testimony.

But the grievance of the employees, men and women, had become so aggravated, so galling, that patience deserted them and they abandoned their employment rather than submit longer to conditions

against which their very souls rebelled. Whether they were right or not, let only those judge who comprehend the conditions under which these faithful employees toiled and groaned. Let us avoid sentiment. The bare facts will suffice, and they are haggard enough to excite the sympathy of every good citizen, rich or poor, employer or employed. The Pullman Company, be it understood, owns the town of Pullman, owns the houses, the homes of employees, controls the light and water, and other necessities of life, and wages are so adjusted to living expenses that in a large majority of cases the employees are barely able to support their families. Proof overwhelming can be furnished. One instance will suffice. At the time they struck the employees were in arrears to the Pullman Company \$70,000 for rent alone. Wages had been repeatedly reduced, but rent and other expenses remained the same. At this rate it would have been a question of a short time only until the employees would have been hopelessly involved in debt —mortgaged soul and body to the Pullman Company.

The employees, from the beginning, have been willing to arbitrate their differences with the company. That is their position today. The company arrogantly declares that there is nothing to arbitrate. If this be true, why not allow a board of fair and impartial arbitrators to determine the fact? At this point we appeal to the public as to whether the position of the Pullman Company or the position of the employees is entitled to the sanction of the public conscience. If the employees were to assume the position of the Pullman Company and defiantly declare they had nothing to arbitrate and arbitrarily demand unconditional surrender as the only basis of settlement, they would merit the condemnation of the public, and it would certainly and swiftly fall upon them with crushing severity.

Committee after committee waited upon the officials of the Pullman Company with a vain hope of effecting a settlement. They were willing to make concessions, to compromise in the interest of peace. All their advances were repelled. The company was, and is, unyielding as adamant. Finally, June 12, the delegates of the American Railway Union, representing 425 local unions of railway employees located on the principal lines of American railways, met in convention in Chicago. The Pullman trouble had been discussed at their local meetings. Many of the delegates came instructed. The grievances of the Pullman employees were taken under consideration. Two separate committees were sent to the officials. Not the slightest satisfac-

tion could be obtained. As a last resort the delegates by *unanimous vote* determined that unless the Pullman Company would agree to do justice to their employees within five days, the members of the order would decline to haul Pullman cars. This action, be it remembered, was not taken until the strike had been on six weeks, and every conceivable effort to obtain redress had failed because of the obstinacy of the company.

Up to this point the trouble was confined to the Pullman Company and its employees. How, then, did the strike extend to the railways? let the answer be given in accordance with the facts. The day before the order of the delegates declining to haul Pullman cars went into effect, the General Managers' Association, representing the principal western railways, met and passed a series of resolutions, declaring in substance that they would uphold the Pullman Company in its fight upon the employees, that they would haul Pullman cars and that they would stand together in crushing out the American Railway Union. The resolutions in question were published in the city papers and can be referred to in substantiation of this averment. It will thus be seen that the railway companies virtually joined forces with the Pullman Company, went into partnership with them, so to speak, to reduce and defeat their half-starved employees. In this way the trouble was extended from line to line, and from system to system, until a crisis had been reached. The business of the company is demoralized to an extent that defies exaggeration. To say that the situation is alarming is entirely within the bounds of prudent statement. Every good citizen must view the outlook with grave concern. Something should, something must be done. The American people are a peace-loving people — they want neither anarchy nor revolution. They have faith in their institutions, they believe in law and order, they believe in good government, but they also believe in fair play. Once aroused they will not tolerate arbitrary and dictatorial defiance, even on the part of an alliance of rich and powerful corporations.

What can be done to dispel the apprehension that now prevails and restore peace and confidence? The American Railway Union by whose authority and in whose behalf this statement is made, stands ready — has from the beginning stood ready — to do anything in its power, provided it is honorable, to end this trouble. This, briefly stated, is the position the organization occupies. It simply insists that the Pullman Company shall meet its employees and do them justice. We guarantee that the latter will accept any reasonable proposition.

The company may act through its officials or otherwise and the employees through their chosen representatives. Let them agree as far as they can, and where they fail to agree let the points in dispute be submitted to arbitration. The question of the recognition of the American Railway Union, or any other organization, is waived. We do not ask, nor have we ever asked, for recognition as an organization. We care nothing about that, and as far as we are concerned it has no part in the controversy. Let the officials deal with the employees without reference to organization. Let the spirit of conciliation, mutual concession, and compromise animate and govern both sides, and there will be no trouble in reaching a settlement that will be satisfactory to all concerned. This done, let the railway companies agree to restore all their employees to their situations without prejudice, and the trouble will be ended. The crisis will thus be averted, traffic will resume, and peace will reign. The railways are not required to recognize the American Railway Union. This has never been asked, nor is it asked now.

If there are those who discover in this statement a “weakening” on the part of employees, as has been so often charged, when an exposition of the true attitude of our order was attempted, we have only to say that they are welcome to such solace as such a perverted conclusion affords them. We have been deliberately and maliciously misrepresented, but we have borne it all with an unwavering faith that the truth will finally and powerfully prevail. We firmly believe our cause is just, and while we hold that belief we will not recede. If we are wrong we are ready to be convinced. We are open to reason and to conviction, but we will not be cowed or intimidated. Were we to sacrifice the multiplied thousands of wage-workers who have committed their interests to our hands and yield to the pressure of corporate power, we would be totally unworthy of American citizenship.

It may be asked what sense is there in sympathetic strikes. Let the corporations answer. When one is assailed, all go to the rescue. They stand together; they supply each other with men, money, and equipments. Labor, in unifying its forces, simply follows their example. The corporations established the precedent. If the proceeding is vicious and indefensible, let them first abolish it. In this contest labor will stand by labor. Other organizations of workingmen have themselves felt the oppressive hand of corporate capital. They will not be called out, but will go out. And the spectacle of Mr. Pullman, fanned by the breezes of the seashore, while his employees are starving, is not calcu-

lated to prevent their fellow wage-workers from going to their rescue by the only means at their command.

A few words in reference to myself, although ordinarily I pay no attention to misrepresentation or vituperation, may not be out of place, not because of myself personally, but on account of the cause I have the honor to in part represent, which may suffer if silence is maintained while it is assailed with falsehood and malignant detraction. I shirk no responsibility, neither do I want credit to which I am not entitled. This strike was not “ordered” by myself, nor by any other individual. I have never “ordered” nor “called” anybody out. Under the rules of the American Railway Union members can only strike when a majority of their number so decide. The vote of the delegates in this instance was unanimous. And wherever en struck they did so of their own accord. I have simply served the notice after the men themselves had determined to go out. This is the extent of my authority, and I have never exceeded it. My alleged authority to “call” or “order” out has been made the pretext on which to assail me with every slander that malignity could conceive. So far as I am personally concerned detraction cannot harm me, nor does it matter if it could. I do not amount to more than the humblest member of our order — perhaps not as much. Fate or fortune has assigned me a duty, and, no matter how trying the ordeal, or severe the penalties, I propose to perform it. The reflection that an honest man has nothing to fear sustains and comforts me in every hour of trial.

In closing, let me repeat that we stand ready to do our part toward averting the impending crisis. We have no false pride to stand in the way of a settlement. We do not want “official” recognition. All we ask is fair play for the men who have chosen us to represent them.

If the corporations refuse to yield and stubbornly maintain that there is “nothing to arbitrate,” the responsibility for what may ensue will be upon their heads, and they cannot escape its penalties.

Eugene V. Debs.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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