

The Early Days of Unionism in Terre Haute (March 2, 1913)

Almost forty years ago, February 27, 1875, to be exact, I was first enrolled as a member of a labor union.¹ On the night of that day Vigo Lodge No. 16 of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was organized in Terre Haute by Grand Master Joshua A. Leach,² over the old Baur drug store, where the Trust building now stands, corner of Seventh and Wabash Avenue. I was duly initiated as one of the twenty-one charter members, all of whom, with but two exceptions besides myself, are now either dead or have left for other parts.

No event that I can now recall had so great an influence on my subsequent life as my enlistment as a recruit in the army of organized labor. I remember the day of my initiation as if it had been yesterday. It seemed to me that I had long been waiting for that day. A new world opened out before my enraptured vision. I felt that there was now a purpose in life which had vaguely haunted me and toward which I had long been groping.

The trials, wrongs, and sufferings of the toilers I had shared with them in the ranks. At fourteen I was an apprentice in the railroad shops and at sixteen I was firing a locomotive. To join a union of my fellow firemen for mutual aid and benefit seemed to be the very thing for me. I had known of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, which had been organized way back in 1863, and I rejoiced greatly to think that the firemen, regarded as far beneath the engineers in that day, were now to have a brotherhood of their own.

So that day, February 27, 1875, was a red letter day in my life and it has blazed out conspicuously in my calendar ever since.

That was an early day for unionism in Terre Haute. The engineers and firemen were the only railroad unions in existence at that time, and these were both practically wiped out in the Pennsylvania railroad strike which followed in the summer of '77.

From the day I joined the firemen's union I felt that all other workers should also be organized and I began actively to interest myself in unionizing the various crafts of wage workers. The printers had a small local at that time and so also had the coopers,³ but beyond these, and the cigar-makers, who were organized a little later, I know of no union in Terre Haute at that time.

Soon after I joined the lodge of firemen, P. J. McGuire,⁴ then general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, came to Terre Haute to organize the carpenters. He was told on arrival that I was an active union man, and he did not have to ask me a second time to help him round up the carpenters for a local of that craft. I joyously gave him all the help I could but with all the urgent appeals we made to the carpenters, including personal calls at their homes, we barely succeeded in getting enough together to start a local.

In the later Seventies the coopers, whom I had helped to organize, had trouble with James Clutter, one of the leading bosses at that time. They came to me for advice. I drew up their grievances and after vainly trying to effect a settlement I advised them to strike. They went out to a man. They then called on me to take charge of the strike, which I did with all my heart.

Mr. Clutter went into the newspapers, charged me with inciting the strike — which was true — and denounced me as an “agitator,” which at that time was almost a penitentiary offense. A heated newspaper controversy followed which would make interesting reading even now. ⁵The upshot was that Mr. Clutter came to see me. He was anxious for a settlement. His shop was tied up and his business paralyzed. Not a striker could be coaxed back for love nor lucre.

I gave Mr. Clutter to understand on the part of the men that they were quite anxious to open up the shop as he was, but that their demands, being reasonable, would have to be granted in full before there could be any settlement. After some parleying he consented. We shook hands. The men went back to work. The strike was a complete victory and a great boost to local unionism. That was the first strike in which I had an active part and so far as I remember, the first strike ever fought to a successful issue in Terre Haute.

In July 1880 I became grand secretary and treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and editor and manager of its magazine, and the headquarters of the organization were removed from Indianapolis to Terre Haute. Henceforth my office was headquarters for organized labor in this city and active preparations were made to unionize all branches of labor. The preliminary meetings until hall arrangements could be made were all held in my office. Printers, carpenters, bricklayers, machinists, molders, cigarmakers, clerks, and laborers were all lined up, one after the other, as new recruits for the union army. Many a night I have spent in tramping about and rounding up the recalcitrant and lukewarm for a union meeting.

In the early nineties I organized the first union of street railway employees in this city and soon thereafter they went on strike and place me in charge of their end of it. R. W. Rippetoe was then president of the street railway company. The strike was won. A second strike at a later time was likewise successful. Still later came the third strike, which resulted in a crushing defeat.

When the second strike was in progress the remains of Governor Hovey of Indiana,⁶ who died in office, were brought here from Indianapolis en route to Evansville for interment. We called a special meeting of the strikers and they unanimously agreed to operate the cars and handle the crowds that were in the city that day. After the funeral train had departed the streetcars were again returned to the barn. This strike, as already stated, won out completely and soon thereafter the union reached the zenith of its power.

The third and last strike resulted otherwise. It was bitterly contested, as many remember. Strikebreakers were imported. The feeling ran high. The company had passed into the hands of a foreign corporation that was deadly hostile to labor unionism and from the very start the purpose was to wipe out the organization.

While the strike was at its height we concluded to have a union parade and demonstration. The papers warned against it and predicted bloodshed. We were told that we were assuming a fearful responsibility. But the parade came off, according to schedule, the miners coming in from all the surrounding camps. It was a great demonstration. When the parade turned into East Wabash Avenue and started westward toward the city the mayor and manager of the street railway company hurriedly ordered all the streetcars manned by strikebreakers into the barns. Had that parade with about six thousand sturdy unionists in it collided with a streetcar in charge of strikebreakers that day there would certainly have been trouble.

There was an ominous silence along the city streets. There was an air of desertion in the residence quarters and many had their blinds drawn. There was a long breath of relief when it was all over. There were a few altercations but no serious trouble.

This strike was the bitterest that ever occurred in this city. The merchants and businessmen were lined up solidly with the foreign corporation until the strike was crushed and the union literally annihilated.

In the early Nineties I was placed in charge of the molders' strike. This was a complete success, all the demands being conceded and the strikers returning to work in a body.

In 1884 I organized the first lodge of the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, now the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, at Oneonta, New York, and I still have the gold badge presented to me by the national convention of that organization held in 1888. I helped to organize the local of that brotherhood in this city, also the local of the Order of Railway Conductors, the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, and a number of other unions. During the first two years that the brakemen and switchmen were organized I gave much of my time organizing locals for them in various parts of the country and making national organizations of them.

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The work of organizing the workers is for the most part serious business, but the humor of life is not entirely lacking and many a tense situation is relieved by it. I recall that in the first strike of the street railway employees an incident occurred which seemed very funny to me and over which I have laughed many a time since. The president of the local was a thoroughly conscientious fellow but he was one of that great number of workpeople who never had a chance to go to school. He was heart and soul a union man, but a tyro at the the business. I had drawn up the grievances of the men in my office, then in the McKeen block on Wabash Avenue, and handed the document to the committee of which the local president was the chairman, instructing them how to proceed in approaching Mr. Rippetoe, the president, and the directors of the company. I particularly cautioned the chairman to be firm.

In the negotiations which followed arbitration was agreed to, and after the failure of the four members constituting the board to arrive at a decision, I was chosen as the fifth member at the suggestion of President Rippetoe, notwithstanding I was in charge of the strike and it was known I would stand for noting less than what the men were asking for. Of course the strike was promptly settled when I decided in favor of the employees and the board awarded them everything they had demanded.

Shortly after the affair was settled the president of the street railway company came into my office and said that he was perfectly satisfied with the settlement and glad the trouble was over. "But," said he, "I was shamefully insulted by the chairman of the union committee and think he should be called to account." I asked him to explain. "Well," said he, "I was in my office with the directors when the committee arrived. The door was flung open with a bang. The chairman rudely pushed his way in

with his hat on the back of his head and holding up a paper said in a harsh voice, "Rippetoe, put your hancock to that!" I was insulted and attempted to remonstrate when he exclaimed, "Be damned quick about it! No monkey business goes."

Mr. Rippetoe was white with anger and evidently deeply humiliated as he told me the story. Truth to tell I could hardly help roaring aloud. But I sent for the chairman. When he stepped in I repeated Mr. Rippetoe's words and asked him what he meant by addressing the gentleman in such rude and uncivil terms."

He was perfectly astounded and a picture of innocence. He did not attempt to deny a word. Turning to me he said, "Don't you remember what you told me?"

"Why no," I answered, "what did I tell you?"

"Why, you told me to be firm," he stated.

"Certainly," said I, "but what do you understand by being firm?"

"Why to give 'em hell from the jump and that's what I aimed to do, just as you told me to."

His face was a study in earnestness, sincerity, and childlike innocence. I could restrain myself no longer. Mr. Rippetoe good-naturedly joined in the laughter. We all laughed. The hatchet was buried in a burst of humor. We shook hands all around and parted friends.

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There has been a tremendous change in labor unionism since that early day when half a dozen attendants in an obscure back room was regarded as a great meeting. In that day the standing of a union in the community was at a low ebb and the "agitator" was looked upon as a mischief-maker and a nuisance, and a good many people haven't changed their mind about him to this day.

But for all that has been accomplished in the way of organizing the working class the movement is still in its childhood. It is the greatest movement ever organized since The Carpenter aroused his fellow-workers in Judea against the slavery and oppression fo the Roman empire. Its field of operation embraces the habitable globe. It knows neither race, nationality, color, creed, nor sex. It knows only the working class, the class which through all history has fed and clothed and sheltered the world, while itself has been housed in humble cottages, clothed in shoddy, subsisted upon crusts, and worn the badge of servitude.

Wendell Phillips with his keen insight and prophetic vision saw that labor unionism was the foundation of the only real democracy and declared that the labor movement was the hope of the world.

Upon ten thousand battlefields organized labor has fought the fight for the right to live, the right to enjoy, the right to be free. At last the world is beginning to recognize its power and its portent and the labor movement is hailed by all thoughtful men as the movement of humanity itself toward a higher freedom, a grander civilization, and a diviner destiny.

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¹ The fledgling Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was actually a mutual benefit society and social organization fostering education and self-improvement of its members rather than a trade union in the modern conception. For Debs's idealistic writing from these early days, see *The Selected Works of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 1, Building Solidarity on the Tracks, 1877-1892, passim*.

² Joshua A. Leach (1843-1919), himself a locomotive fireman, launched the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen with ten of his fellows in Port Jervis, New York, in December 1873.

³ Coopers were manufacturers of wooden barrels.

⁴ Peter James McGuire (1852-1906) was secretary of the St. Louis Trades Assembly, organized in 1878. He was a founder of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America in 1881, which would probably have been the year of his visit to Terre Haute, and he remained a leading official of that organization until 1901. He was a member of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1900.

⁵ No files of the various Terre Haute newspapers of this period were available to the editors of this volume.

⁶ Alvin Peterson Hovey (1821-1891), a Republican, was the 21st governor of Indiana. He died on November 23, 1891.