
About the Union:

Debs on the Organization:

Chat with a Reporter — Rapid Work in the Field — Getting the West Solidly Organized — Clerks Joining

Published in *The Railway Times* [Chicago], vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1, 1894), pg. 1.

In a December copy of the Terre Haute Express we find the following interview with the President of the American Railway Union, touching on some interesting points:

Mr. Eugene Debs, President of the American Railway Union, has returned home from an extended tour of the western country, where, in company with Mr. [George W.] Howard of the new union, he has been organizing lodges in the principal western cities. Mr. Debs is in excellent health, notwithstanding his hard work in the interests of railroad employees during the past few months, and his keen, flashing eye and pleasant smile were evidence that he is in excellent spirits, too.

Though always busy, he found time to say a few words concerning his work during his absence from home, and the success with which he had met in launching the gigantic movement to consolidate under one banner all branches of railway service.

“The sentiment in favor of the new order,” said Mr. Debs, “is widespread, growing so rapidly we cannot attend to the work of organization as promptly as we would like. Since I have been away from home it has been a constant jumping from one city to another, organizing lodges, two nights seldom finding us in the same city. The West is by no means yet organized, but sufficient work has been done to assure an exceedingly rapid growth. The success with which the American Railway Union has thus far met is very gratifying, and many months will not pass by before the country west of the Mississippi will be thoroughly organized.”

“For some two or three years I have foreseen that nothing short of a federation, in which all branches of the service were consolidated, could eventually expect to retain a firm footing, that which would insure it a continuous existence. Conditions in the railway world have changed wonderfully within the past few years, change to such a magnitude that organized railway labor must necessarily change to be in a present to meet this change.

“At the present time,” continued Mr. Debs, “the big railroads of the country number only about 20, that is, of course, the big systems and other roads controlled by them. Organized railway labor in its present condition has shown that it is unable to cope successfully with such large organizations.”

Mr. Debs referred to the number of men annually being dropped from the various lodges of the old orders for non-payment of dues.

“There is no such thing as suspension or expulsion for this cause in the new union. When men are suspended or expelled for non-payment of dues, when possibly they cannot pay, it engenders an ill-feeling, and when strikes are declared these men quite naturally are the ones to take the places of the strikers. such conditions will not exist in the American Railway Union, for no member can be expelled on account of not paying dues.”

One branch of the railway service never before organized and one which Mr. Debs believes will add great strength to the new order is the clerks. Here a rather laughable incident was referred to.

“It was while I was out West that an employee of the auditing department asked to have the auditing clerks of the system organized. A number of the clerks said that the company had informed them that in case an organization was attempted they would be discharged. There is a good deal of difference between a clerk and a switchman, but a party of these switchmen simply walked in and said to the clerks to organize and that should the axe fall the headsman would be invited to come on to the switchyards and finish of the job.”

The clerks, as a general rule, are about the poorest paid class of employees on a railroad, and at the same time about as important, and their coming into the new organization will, Mr. Debs says, add strength to the order.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · May 2013 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.