
Plan of Federation

by Eugene V. Debs

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In the month of September 1888, in the city of Atlanta, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen took the initiative in the great work of bringing the various orders of railway employees, engaged in the train service of railroads, into a federated compact for mutual protection.¹

In the month of June 1889, in the city of Chicago, the alliance was perfected, and since that time has been in full operation.

The plan of federation as devised at Chicago by the three great Brotherhoods — Firemen, Trainmen [Brakemen], and Switchmen — acting under the laws of the Supreme Council, has had numerous opportunities to test its efficiency. So well did it work that at the expiration of the first year of its existence, the young and stalwart Brotherhood of Railway Conductors sought and obtained admission, and now four orders of railway employees, having an aggregate membership of more than 50,000, are in line under the federated flag.

During the year 1890, these four Brotherhoods, viz.: the B of LF, the B of RT, the SMAA, and the B of RC, have held conventions. In every convention the plan of federation as devised by the Supreme Council at Chicago in 1889 was *unanimously* endorsed — not a dissenting vote was cast.

Since June 1889, when the Supreme Council was organized, and federation as it exists, adopted, a hue and cry went forth that the “plan” was unauthorized. The assertion was made, and every conceivable charge that stupidity, ignorance, envy, jealousy, or bigotry could wring in, was resorted to, to create dissatisfaction and defeat the plan

¹ Reference is to the 14th National Convention of the B of LF, held in Atlanta from Sept. 10-19, 1888. There the Ways and Means committee sketched out initial plans for a "Board of Federation" consisting of the three delegates from each of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Knights of Labor, Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, and Brotherhood of Telegraphers.

of federation under the Supreme Council. This ungenerous and ungrateful work went steadily forward, laying, in so far as it played at all, directly into the hands of the enemies of organized labor — into the hands of the corporation, and in direct and flagrant antagonism to the federated orders.

Now, what of all this opposition? As we have said, every federated order has, within the past three months, unanimously endorsed federation as it exists, and their laws relating to grievances have in every instance been harmonized with the laws of the Supreme Council.

Could the defeat of the opponents of national federation be more overwhelming and crushing? We fail to conceive in what way a more disastrous defeat could have been accomplished.

But this is not all. Under the luminous and vitalizing light of the arguments in favor of protection, which finds its culminating power in federation, the ORC, no longer able to withstand the convincing power of reason, split at Rochester [23rd Convention, May 1890], and one faction reasserted its willingness to scab — to lick corporation dirt and crawl on its belly that it might be in a better condition to be kicked — while the other faction which, having knocked out the “strike clause,” continues to assert that it has no power to strike, and that its principles have not been changed.

Again: the B of LE finds within its jurisdiction a mighty host of chivalric men who demand federation, because they know it is right, who are men of conviction, and who have the courage of conviction; who do not quail nor get down into their boots in the presence of Chauncey M. Depew, Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, or H. Walter Webb; men who are neither fossils nor fools, but trained trainmen, whose promotion made them neither dizzy nor crazy; men who love their fellow-man, like D.J. Brown, the engineer, of California, whose splendid words, clarion-toned, have the lifting power of genuine fellowship; such men are pledged to bring the B of LE under the federated flag in due time.

Viewing the situation from our standpoint, we have no grievances to present. The outlook is full of hope, and the banner of federation never floated more proudly in the breeze than now.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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