

Eugene V. Debs and the struggle of railroaders

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As railroad workers prepare for a confrontation against the corporations, the government and the union bureaucracies that falsely claim to “represent” them, they must learn from and grapple with their own history.

Of particular importance is the life of the great socialist worker and railroader, Eugene V. Debs. His long life—from locomotive fireman, to trade unionist, to socialist candidate for American president, to class war prisoner—holds crucial lessons for today’s workers.

Debs and the growth of the rail industry

Debs’ life was bound up with the rail industry. The first railroad reached his hometown, Terre Haute, Indiana, from Indianapolis, in 1852, three years before his birth to Alsatian immigrant parents, who named the boy Eugene Victor after French novelists Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo. Other railroads followed, making Terre Haute into a transportation hub. Over the course of Debs’ youth, the railroads transformed the bucolic Wabash River town into a small industrial city. The population increased sevenfold, from roughly 4,000 in the early 1850s to 30,000 in 1890, when Debs turned 35. Immigrants poured in, including one Johann Dreiser from Germany, whose son, the great novelist Theodore Dreiser, was born in Terre Haute in 1871, the same year as the Paris Commune and the year that Debs, 16 years old, took up work as a locomotive fireman on the Vandalia Railroad.

Debs later said he regretted leaving school, but it was natural for youth to be drawn to work on the trains, which embodied all the technology and excitement of the age, a “*Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent,*” as Walt Whitman put it.[1] Debs soon entered the ranks of organized labor, joining in 1875 the two-year-old Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. His leadership talents were recognized, and he rose quickly in the Brotherhood’s ranks, by 1880 becoming Grand Secretary and Treasurer and the editor of its journal, *Firemen’s Magazine*.

Meanwhile, the national railroad industry grew by leaps and bounds. Some 30,000 miles of track were laid by 1860, with four trunk lines linking the Midwest to the East and realigning it economically away from what had been its traditional orientation to the South via the steamboat and barge commerce of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The rail network thus unified the North economically and facilitated its victory in the Civil War in 1865, when Debs was 10 years old—a Second American Revolution that destroyed chattel slavery and gave birth to a whole new capitalist society.

The railroads were the ligaments of that new society. Another 30,000 miles of track were laid between 1866 and the panic of 1873. Midway between those two years, on May 10, 1869, the last spike in the

Transcontinental Railroad was driven at Promontory, Utah, joining the West and East coasts. The Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1881, the Northern Pacific and Southern Pacific followed in 1883, and the Great Northern in 1889. The transcontinental lines transformed the continent into a vast new arena for the development of capitalism and put an end to the frontier, a fact officially proclaimed by the US Census of 1890. Indeed, it was the iron horse, far more than the American military, that subjugated the Sioux and the other Plains Indians to capitalism. The British, French and Germans used the railroads for similar ends in their overseas colonies. As Lenin noted, it was these “capitalist threads” that

... have converted this railway construction into an instrument for oppressing a thousand million people (in the colonies and semicolonies), that is, more than half the population of the globe that inhabits the dependent countries, as well as the wage-slaves of capital in the “civilised” countries.[2]

Antebellum America had consisted of thousands of small towns like Debs’ Terre Haute, little islands whose small industries catered to regional farming populations, generating a kind of private property, as Lenin explained, “based on the labour of the small proprietor, free competition, [and] democracy.” However, by the 1870s, the steel and coal of Pennsylvania, the wheat and timber of Minnesota, the minerals of Idaho, the cattle of Texas, the cotton of Mississippi, and so on, could be shipped everywhere in a matter of days. But this created not just a continental field of play for the capitalists. It forged a powerful new social force: the North American working class.

If today that class begins its showdown with the capitalists on the railroads, it will make for a tidy historical symmetry. For it was the railroads that gave birth to that formidable antagonist of the worker—the corporation. In the 19th century, no single investor would risk the amount of capital required to build the roads. The privately held joint stock corporation, operating with a public charter, provided the solution. The railroad corporations were the first to separate proprietorship from management, based on the concept of minority ownership, “the legally established authority of a small group of directors and managers to act in the name of a larger, amorphous body of otherwise unrelated stockholders.”[3]

The major owners, holders of the company bonds and stocks, might never set foot on their own lines, much less know anything of their day-to-day operations. This was left to a new species of man, the corporate executive. He had one overriding aim: to increase the value of company’s securities. The means of achieving this was to squeeze ever more profit out of rail workers. For this, a successful executive could be rewarded, even made a millionaire owner himself. This was the career path of the young Scottish immigrant, Andrew Carnegie, who worked his way up the

ranks of the day's richest firm, the Pennsylvania Railroad, en route to become steel baron and world's richest man.

The massive scale of the corporation was "a new power, for which our language contains no name," admitted Union Pacific president Charles Francis Adams, Jr., great grandson and grandson of the Adams presidents, John and John Quincy. "We have no word to express government by monied corporations." [4] Lacking the vocabulary, the political culture of Debs' adulthood still attempted to affix a name and a face to the incomprehensible wealth of the corporation. These personages were the Robber Barons. And indeed, those deriving their wealth from the railroad corporations reads like a veritable "who's who" list of Gilded Age tycoons: Gould, Cooke, Vanderbilt, Stanford, Harriman, Hill, Huntington. Even for Carnegie and Rockefeller, steel and oil wealth were inseparable from their control of railroads. But the most significant figure of all, and the one who most anticipated the future of capitalism, was J.P. Morgan. Historian John Garraty explains how Morgan

[compelled] the lines to substitute "mutual co-operation" for cutthroat competition. The experience, wealth, and prestige gained in railroad finance enabled bankers to exert a growing influence over manufacturing corporations as well... [T]he foundation of banker domination was being laid... In large, heavily capitalized enterprises selling goods all over the United States and sometimes international markets, too, the coordination of many different operations taking place at widely scattered sites made management itself a specialized profession. The ability to see the structure whole, to appreciate its interrelations, became essential. [5]

The vast "coordination" described by Garraty is what Lenin called the socialization of economic production. Yet this socialization, which objectively brings workers together in a massive network of production, transportation, and distribution, is dedicated to the accumulation of private wealth, not social good. This is the most basic contradiction of capitalist society.

The finance capitalists are still around, and more dominant than ever. The descendants of the brotherhoods are still around too, and still dividing rail workers up rather than uniting them. But even at the time of their emergence they were hardly obstacles for the railroad corporations. In fact, they emerged not as "unions" in any modern sense of the term. Half fraternal benefit organizations akin to the Masons, they organized "lodges," not union locals. At first their main practical function was to maintain insurance benefits for injury and death. Based on craft skill, they separated the various sections of the railroad workforce into different organizations. They excluded unskilled workers by custom, and blacks by rule. They did not engage in collective bargaining, rejected the notion that there existed a divergence of interests between capital and labor, and eschewed the strike weapon. Their leaders, the young Debs included, hoped fervently that differences between capital and labor could be reconciled in a "cooperative commonwealth."

The Brotherhoods and the Great Railroad Strike of 1877

Because of these characteristics, the Brotherhoods played only a negative role in one of the greatest strikes of American history, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. It seems that Debs, only 22 at the time and still a loyal Democrat, stood aside from the struggle, though the train men in his own hometown joined the strike, shutting down Terre Haute's lines on

July 23, and occupying the Vandalia line shop.

The Great Strike had begun a week earlier, on July 16, 1877, in Martinsburg, West Virginia, when firemen and brakemen of the B&O walked off the job in response to the announcement of a 10 percent pay cut that had been initiated on the neighboring Pennsylvania Railroad system. Militia sent to free trains from Martinsburg instead fraternized with the strikers. The strike then spread to Baltimore, where much of the working class rallied to the cause of the trainmen. From Baltimore it swept the continent, reaching as far as California, Texas, and Canada. Major strikes, or general strikes, took place in Baltimore, Chicago, Scranton, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Buffalo, Toledo, East St. Louis, and St. Louis. In St. Louis, for a brief period, the working class took power with the formation of a commune led by Karl Marx's followers. In all, more than 100,000 railroaders led perhaps one million workers in the strike. With memories of the Paris Commune fresh in mind, the American ruling class was at first stunned, but it quickly responded to the revolt with a mobilization of the army and state militias.

The central cause of the strike was pay cutting. Big business reacted to the panic of 1873—which erupted because of financial speculation in the railroad industry—with an unprecedented attack on workers' wages. Railroad corporations slashed wages in May and June 1877, for the third time since 1873, bringing pay down by as much as 50 percent.

However, just as is the case today, pay cutting was not the only issue. According to one historian's account, railroad management was also demanding

[w]hat amounted to a complete reorganization of work. [Workers] opposed the system of assigning trains, in which the first crew into town was the first crew out, leaving them no time to rest or see their families; they wanted regular runs to stabilize pay and working days; they wanted passes home in case of long layovers; they wanted the system of "classification" of workers by length of service and efficiency—used to keep wages down—abolished... The men felt they were treated "just as the rolling stock of locomotives"—squeezed for every drop of profit. [6]

Another issue was worker safety. For all the organizational development, for all of the cutting-edge technology which so captured the 19th century imagination, the railroads were brutal workplaces, no better than coal mines or steel mills. In the state of Massachusetts alone, 42 trainmen died on average each year in the mid-1870s. In one three-decade period, 1890 to 1917, some 72,000 men died on the tracks, and another 158,000 died in repair shops and roundhouses. Over the same period another two million more suffered serious injury on the rails. [7]

The railroad firms disclaimed any responsibility for their slaughterhouse. All accidents, no matter what the cause, were invariably chalked up to "worker error." The powerful Pennsylvania Railroad set the industry standard in clauses 6 and 7 of its official regulations:

6. The regular compensation of employes [sic] covers all risk or liability to accident. 7. If an employe [sic] is disabled by sickness or any other cause, the right to claim compensation is not recognized...

The Brotherhoods' solution to this had been fraternal insurance plans. But these were overwhelmed by the economic crisis of the 1870s, having little value to railroad men who were constantly being laid off and rehired. And with their commitment to the "harmony of interests" with capitalists,

the Brotherhoods had no answer for wage cutting.

Instead, the rank-and-file had to organize themselves to take a step forward in 1877. "The self-organized nature of the strike wasn't merely the result of the near absence of labour unions; rather it occurred despite them," writes Robert Ovetz. "The existing train brotherhoods were highly fragmented by craft, didn't coordinate with one another, negotiated separate labour agreements, and were universally opposed to any strikes or disruptions." [8] Preparatory work to make an end-run around the Brotherhoods came with the formation of an industrial union, which would bring together under one umbrella all the industry's workers: the Trainmen's Union, founded in June 1877. The trigger was a new wage cut imposed by the Pennsylvania Railroad. According to Jeremy Brecher,

When the leaders of the Brotherhoods of Engineers, Conductors, and Firemen made no effort to combat the cut, the railroad workers on the Pennsylvania system took action themselves. A week before the cut went into effect, the Newark, New Jersey division of the Engineers held an angry protest meeting against the cut. The Jersey City lodge met the next day, voted for a strike, and put out feelers to other workers; by the day the cut took effect, engineers' and firemen's locals throughout the Pennsylvania system had chosen delegates to a joint grievance committee, ignoring the leadership of the national union. [9]

This effort at building an industrial union was thwarted by an influx of company spies who provided information to the firms, leading to the firing and blacklisting of militant workers. This had its effect. When the rebellion came in 1877, it lacked a centralized leadership, the decisive factor in its defeat. Nonetheless, the strike showed the potential of the American working class. And it announced that the class struggle had taken center stage in American history.

Debs, only 22 at the time, opposed strikes in general. In the autumn of 1877, he addressed a union convention in Indianapolis. "Does the Brotherhood encourage strikers?" he asked. "To this question we most emphatically answer, 'No brothers.'" [10]

How Debs became a socialist: The Pullman strike of 1894

Within a decade Debs was thinking very differently. "The strike," Debs wrote in an editorial in 1888, "is the weapon of the oppressed, of men capable of appreciating justice and having the courage to resist wrong and contend for principle," before adding an appeal to the spirit of 1776: "The nation had for its cornerstone a strike." [11]

By then, Debs had become one of the best-known labor leaders in the country, affectionately called "Gene" by workers from coast-to-coast. He was different than most union bureaucrats. Debs always identified as a worker:

I had fired an engine and been stung by the exposure and hardship of the rail. I was with the boys in their weary watches, at the broken engine's side and often helped to bear their bruised and bleeding bodies back to wife and child again. How could I but feel the burden of their wrongs? How could the seed of agitation fail to take deep root in my heart? [12]

Debs remained committed to an overriding aim, what he called "the emancipation of labor." To him, the craft union was a tool toward that end, not an end in and of itself. And he determined, over the course of the 1880s, that the craft union tool did not work for the job. This became painfully evident in 1886, when the great railroad interests, motivated by J.P. Morgan, combined in a General Managers' Association with a total capitalization of over \$2 billion and a workforce of 220,000. In the face of this leviathan, the Brotherhoods kept up their petty jurisdictional turf wars, raids, and exclusions. "Debs desired a completely new structure of the labor movement in order to offset the power of capital," his biographer, Nick Salvatore, concludes. [13]

True to his convictions, Debs resigned from his office to free himself as a leader. Due to popular demand from the rank-and-file he stayed on for a time as editor of the *Firemen's Magazine*, but he insisted that the union reduce his salary, from \$3,000 to \$1,000 per year.

Debs then went about setting up the American Railway Union, an organization that "would replace the brotherhoods, abolish craft divisions, and unify the railroad workers," as Salvatore puts it. [14] The first test of the ARU came in early 1894 when a strike erupted in Minnesota on the Great Northern Railroad, controlled by "the empire builder," the viciously anti-labor tycoon, James J. Hill. Debs traveled to Minnesota to rally the workers and to conduct negotiations. The solidarity of all the trades under the ARU proved unshakeable, and Hill was forced to agree to almost all the workers' wage demands.

The defeat of the Great Northern was, Debs later said, the "only clear cut victory of any consequence ever won by a railroad union in the United States," a statement that may still be true today. In the weeks afterwards, railroaders flooded into the new organization at a rate of 3,000 per day. The labor bureaucrats, including Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, viewed the ARU with dread, but at that moment they dared not challenge Debs. The stage was set for the great Pullman strike of 1894.

The Pullman Car Company enjoyed a monopoly on the production of sleeping-car manufacturing out of its 500-acre "model town" in Chicago. The owner, George Pullman, pretended that his company paternalism had created a happy workforce. The reality was just the opposite. The Pullman workers seethed under Pullman's fiefdom, which included ownership of nearly every aspect of their lives: their homes, the places they shopped, the local police force, and even the churches where they prayed. Pullman used his company-town domination not for benevolence, but to suppress opposition and to wantonly raise rents and cut wages. A federal commission later determined that the

conditions created at Pullman enabled the management at all times to assert with great vigor its assumed right to fix wages and rents absolutely, and to repress that sort of independence which leads to labor organizations and their attempts at mediation, arbitration, strikes, etc. [15]

When the Panic of 1893 hit, Pullman responded like many other corporations, by cutting wages. Pullman workers announced their intention to strike, counting on the support of Debs and the ARU. Debs let the rail barons know that no trainmen would handle any Pullman cars until Pullman workers' demands were met. If the rail corporations responded by laying off railroad workers, Debs promised a nationwide strike.

This is exactly what took place. The Pullman strike led to a sympathy boycott by railroad workers. Firings of boycotting workers set in motion a growing nationwide strike movement. Once again, as it had against the Great Northern, the ARU showed the advantage of the industrial union over the craft system. Its boycott succeeded in shutting down rail transport in much of the country. And it appeared that Debs was on his way to

another victory, “and the American Railway Union [had] again won, clear and complete [with the] combined corporations ... paralyzed and helpless,” as he wrote in his famous essay, *How I Became a Socialist*. But then, at the very moment of victory, Debs recalled,

there were delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes—and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed.

The “blows” were delivered by the federal government under President Grover Cleveland, a Democratic Party politician Debs had earlier supported. The White House organized a cynical campaign against the ARU, securing a court injunction against the boycott under the allegation that it was an illegal conspiracy. First deployed against workers in Chicago, the Cleveland injunction was actually a model to be used everywhere. It was quickly emulated against the ARU across the country.

Debs rallied the workers. “It will take more than injunctions to move the trains,” he wired. “Get everybody out.” But Cleveland and his attorney general, Richard Olney, were not done. Under the pretext that the strike was interfering with the mails, Cleveland sent in the United States Army under General Nelson Miles, a Civil War veteran of the Union Army. Soon, the military was dispatched to other states. The presence of the army in Chicago triggered rioting, resulting in several deaths, the overturning of train cars, and the torching of seven buildings at the site of the recently concluded World’s Fair, the Chicago Columbian Exhibition.

Debs responded with a call for a national general strike to take place on July 11, 1894. At this point, Cleveland had Debs and other strike leaders arrested for violating the injunction against conspiracy. With the leadership imprisoned and unable to communicate to the rank-and-file, Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL, issued the *coup de grace*. Pretending to assume temporary leadership of the strike, he told the trainmen to return to work. Militants across the country were blackballed.

The US Supreme Court unanimously upheld Debs’ conviction in 1895, affirming the right of the president to use an injunction to break a labor strike. Debs was jailed in federal prison at Woodstock, Illinois. While there he was visited by socialists, and he began to undertake a study of Marx. Debs’ development as a socialist leader of the working class would last the rest of his life. But he emerged from the Pullman experience convinced that industrial organization was not enough. A political struggle was also required.

War, revolution, and the rail strike of 1922

Debs supported William Jennings Bryan and the Democratic Party-Populist Party fusion ticket in 1896, attracted by the Populists’ calls for the nationalization of the railroads—a demand that Bryan and the Democrats were intent on scrapping. Then, as now, the Democrats’ special role in ruling class politics is to absorb, defuse, and destroy popular demands.

But by the turn of the century Debs had broken with capitalist political parties. He ran as a socialist candidate for president in 1900, in 1904, 1908, and in 1912. In that latter year Debs won one million votes in the four-way contest with incumbent Republican President William Howard Taft, Democratic candidate Woodrow Wilson, and Progressive Party candidate and former Republican president, Theodore Roosevelt.

Debs did not stand in 1916, when Wilson won reelection on a peace

platform, a reflection of the overwhelming hostility to the European slaughter in the working class. “*He Kept us out of War!*”—was the winning slogan. But, in fact, Wilson was preparing to drag the US into World War I on the side of Britain and France against Germany. This was fully in line with the aims of American capitalism, and especially the J.P. Morgan interests, which had used domination of the railroads to assert control over steel, anthracite coal, and much of the country’s manufacturing industry. According to business historian Martin Horn,

From August 1914 to April 1917, while the United States was neutral, the Morgan banks worked assiduously to further the Allied cause... In January 1915, J.P. Morgan & Co. was appointed the British government’s purchasing agent in the U.S.; some months later, in May 1915, they assumed the same position for the French government. Acting through its Export Department, J.P. Morgan & Co. coordinated the purchasing requirements of the Allies in the United States, a task that became progressively larger as the scope of Allied buying increased... [T]he bank floated loans for Britain and France, handled foreign exchange operations, and advised British and French officials.[16]

Much was at stake for the House of Morgan and American capitalism. Entry became urgent in February 1917, when a massive working class revolution in Russia drove Tsar Nicholas II from power and threatened to take Russia out of the war. In that case, Germany could concentrate the bulk of its military in the brutal trench fighting on the Western Front against Britain and France. American imperialism could not accept either a German victory or a Russian withdrawal. It financed the Russian war effort in exchange for a promise that the Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky would continue the war. As the head of the American mission to Russia, Elihu Root, put it to Kerensky: “No fight, no loans.” Defeat of Germany was paramount, “whatever the cost in life and treasure.”[17]

On April 6, 1917, the US declared war on Germany. Ten days later an event of still greater significance took place. On April 16, 1917, Vladimir Lenin returned to Russia from exile in Switzerland, and immediately steered the Bolshevik Party on the course of revolution, mobilized behind the slogan, “*All Power to the Soviets!*” One month afterwards, May 17, 1917, Trotsky, delayed by an illegal detention by the British military, returned to Russia from New York, where he had been living in exile, and where he had met Debs.

The February Revolution had produced not just a bourgeois government under Kerensky. Out of it emerged a contending power: a system of rank-and-file working class democracy, organized from factory and neighborhood councils all the way up to the Soviets, or workers’ councils. The power of the capitalists operated through Kerensky’s government. The potential power of the working class, which had toppled the Tsar, was wielded through the Soviets. Under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, the Soviets became the organs through which the proletarian revolution advanced. On November 7, 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd, and created the first workers’ state.

As dramatic as it was, the Russian Revolution was in fact part of a working class upsurge that played out on a global scale. Objectively, this movement of the working class was spurred on by inflation, which devoured paychecks, and politically, by the growing influence of socialism. Within the US, between 1916 and 1922 more than one million workers struck each year. In 1919, the figure reached over four million.

The AFL, under Gompers, along with the railroad Brotherhoods, sought to suppress the strike wave. In return, the Wilson administration, acting through mediating federal structures, came close to official recognition of

the conservative unions. Union officials were invited into tripartite discussions with representatives of government and business, and Gompers became one of the country's leading pro-war propagandists.

At the same time, the Wilson administration turned ruthlessly to crush more radical threats, including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which Debs had co-founded in 1905, and the left-wing of the Socialist Party. The methods of repression included censorship, deportation, arrest, and semi-official vigilante justice that included violent attacks and even murder.

Debs was a major target. He had solidarized himself with the Bolsheviks and vehemently opposed American entry into the war. In 1915, after observing the betrayal of Europe's socialists in the defense of "their" ruling classes, Debs wrote:

I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth; and I am a citizen of the world. ... I am not a capitalist soldier; I am a proletarian revolutionist. ... I refuse to obey any command to fight from the ruling class, but I will not wait to be commanded to fight for the working class. I am opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul, and that is the world-wide war of the social revolution. In that war I am prepared to fight in any way the ruling class may make it necessary, even to the barricade.

In 1917, Debs enthusiastically welcomed the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd. He wrote an essay, published in 1919, defending Soviet Russia and eviscerating the treachery of reformist socialists:

Lenin and Trotsky were the men of the hour and under their fearless, incorruptible and uncompromising leadership the Russian proletariat has held the fort against the combined assaults of all the ruling class powers of earth. ... In Russia and Germany our valiant comrades are leading the proletarian revolution, which knows no race, no color, no sex, and no boundary lines. They are setting the heroic example for worldwide emulation. Let us, like them, scorn and repudiate the cowardly compromisers within our own ranks, challenge and defy the robber-class power, and fight it out on that line to victory or death! From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet I am Bolshevik, and proud of it.

Debs was charged with violating the Espionage Act in his famous Canton Speech opposing US entry into World War I. (This same reactionary law will serve as the legal basis for any prosecution of another class war prisoner, Julian Assange, 100 years later.) Debs was convicted, a ruling upheld by the US Supreme Court. He was imprisoned at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. At his sentencing, Debs delivered perhaps his most famous remarks, telling the court:

Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

Running for president from behind bars in 1920, Debs won nearly one million votes. Debs was frail and old beyond his years, but Wilson disregarded pleas for clemency. Debs' sentence was commuted in 1921

by Wilson's successor, Warren Harding. But his health had been broken. He died in 1926.

In his 1918 *Letter to American Workers*, Lenin called Debs the "most beloved" leader of the American proletariat. Lenin went on:

I am not surprised that Wilson, the head of the American multimillionaires and servant of the capitalist sharks, has thrown Debs into prison. Let the bourgeoisie be brutal to the true internationalists, to the true representatives of the revolutionary proletariat! The more fierce and brutal they are, the nearer the day of the victorious proletarian revolution.

In holding to principle, Debs preserved his integrity as a leader of the working class. As for Gompers and the union officials who solidarized themselves with Wilson and the capitalists in World War I, they left behind a different set of lessons for today's workers.

The unions were repaid for their wartime patriotism with the darkest ingratitude. After the war, with mobilization over and production falling, the US entered a depression in 1920-1921. Employers used the opportunity to launch a far-reaching counteroffensive. Known as "the American Plan," it rolled back all of the gains organized labor had made during World War I. As one rail management journal put it, "The swanking and swaggering will shortly be on the wane. Workers will pay more attention to their jobs and less attention to agitators who fill no pay envelopes, but fill their followers only with wind." [18]

The war years had been good for the labor bureaucrats—or so they thought—but less so for workers. For most of the working class, wage increases were more than gobbled up by inflation. On top of this, railroad workers had worked harder and longer hours to meet ramped-up wartime demand. The combination of workplace stress and low real wages had precipitated a number of wildcat strikes among the railroad workers.

After the war, with the railroad corporations cutting back wages again, the anger of the shopmen could no longer be contained. But the federal government had also made its preparations. In 1920 Congress passed the Transportation Act, which formed the Railroad Labor Board (RLB). The RLB grew out of wartime developments. In 1917, Wilson had put the railroads under federal control for the duration of the war. This "nationalization" marked a further advance in curbing the turmoil of capitalist free market competition, a process that had begun with JP Morgan's monopolization. Like Morgan's efforts, Wilson's order was no left-wing measure. It preserved private property and guaranteed profits.

Yet it also helped to promote ideas among workers, and fears among owners, that the rail system could be converted into a publicly held utility. In response to objections from the rail corporations, Congress passed a law requiring that the rails revert to private management within 21 months of peace. This was the basis of the RLB. It assumed the role of federal oversight in 1920. Pretending to be a neutral arbiter, from the beginning, it in fact acted as an overarching branch of railroad management.

In 1921, the RLB handed down a wage cut that affected two million rail workers. The sentiment for a national strike was strong. This was "narrowly avoided after the Big Four operating brotherhoods refused to give the shop crafts (and other non-operating rail workers) any guarantee over joint action," according to labor historian Colin Davis. "Thus at a critical stage, as in the past, rail union solidarity splintered."

When the RLB imposed yet another wage cut in 1922, with the economy rebounding, the shopmen's strike could no longer be held back. Some 400,000 walked out on July 1, 1922.

The government used its broad array of powers to crush the shop unions. It stood idly by while strikebreakers and company detectives attacked and

murdered workers in a number of states. And it organized its own repression. This involved governors, state legislatures and local police, tasked with harassing and arresting workers; the federal, state, and local courts, which delivered restraining orders and injunctions, and issued arrest warrants; and the Harding administration, which orchestrated the entire anti-labor operation through the RLB. Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty sought and received a court injunction that effectively stripped striking workers of the rights of freedom of speech, assembly, and the press, on the specious grounds that the strike was an illegal conspiracy. The courts ruled in favor of the injunction in the first week of September. It was upheld by another ruling on September 11.

The unions had no answer. Meeting as an executive council in Atlantic City, the AFL refused any concrete assistance to the rail shopmen. On September 7, the union executives threw out demands, coming from the rank-and-file, that a general strike be called against the Harding administration's injunction. The sentiment for a fightback was strong in the working class. The year 1922 had already seen some 650,000 coal miners strike, and a strike among the anthracite miners ran parallel to the shopmen. Instead, the AFL called on its members to agitate for pro-labor legislation.

Even the rail Brotherhoods moved against the strike that they nominally led. B.M. Jewell, president of a committee representing myriad different rail shop unions, announced on September 11 that there would be no attempt to prevent the separate unions from settling with the different rail firms.

Conclusion

Debs' life traced three major developments in the history of the American working class. The transformation from craft unions under the railroad Brotherhoods to industrial unionism of the ARU, and then from industrial unionism to socialism. Two important lessons can be drawn from this history.

One is that the organizational form of the struggle of railroad workers must correspond to the actually existing industry. It is a maxim that armies cannot win the next war by preparing to fight the last. So too, workers cannot win the current struggle by relying on organizational craft union forms and methods rooted in the 19th century.

Nowhere is the trade union straitjacket more crippling than in the rail industry. It is a massive, multi-billion-dollar industry that operates over the entire North American continent, inextricably bound up with all the world's transportation, production, and distribution networks. The railroads are controlled by a handful of powerful corporations and banks. These care nothing for the infrastructure they own, let alone the health and safety of workers. To the capitalists, the rail network is a piggy bank to be raided for stock buybacks and executive bonuses. And for them it is just one of many such operations. The same stockholders and bankers who dominate the rails exert similar control over all sectors of the economy—and the governments of the US, Canada, and Mexico.

The union apparatus is more corrupt and pro-capitalist than they have ever been. But even in their better days, whenever major confrontations with the rail corporations and the American government took place, the various unions either opposed strike action or were peeled off, one by one, to set up defeat and impose sellout contracts. This history underlines the necessity of the building of rank-and-file committees to link rail workers up across all the unions, all the hubs and regions, and across borders, and to build support in ever-broader sections of the working class.

The second lesson is that railroad workers face not just an industrial fight, but a political struggle. The pro-capitalist union bureaucrats like to

tell workers to keep politics out of “bread-and-butter” labor struggles. What they mean is socialist politics. But the fact is that unions are political instruments. It is just that theirs are the politics of the ruling class, not the workers. The rail unions are attached to the American state through innumerable NGOs, think tanks, and a veritable alphabet soup of federal and state agencies—the DOT, the FRA, FRP, RSA, the NLRB, etc.—the very agencies the union executives say they can never challenge. Moreover, the unions funnel millions in worker dues to the Democratic Party—the same Democratic Party that, acting through the Biden administration, is conspiring with the unions to block the rail workers' strike. And if Biden cannot stop workers from striking by colluding with the unions, then the American ruling class will turn to Trump and the fascist right. Regardless, it will use its state.

This is not new. Every time a great confrontation has developed between the railroad workers and the corporations, the government has intervened against the workers, including the Great Railroad Strike of 1877; the Pullman strike of 1894; the national rail strike of 1922; and the strike of 1950 when Democratic President Harry Truman militarized the rail lines.

These lessons demonstrate the need for a political perspective to guide the coming struggles. That perspective is socialism. Workers in all industries and in all countries face the same problems as the rail workers, as well as the threats of war, fascism, pandemic, and ecological catastrophe. This objective reality has to be consciously understood and acted upon. And, in the final analysis, no step forward has ever been taken in the history of the working class without militant, socialist-minded, rank-and-file workers willing to say out loud to the corporations: “We do not accept your ‘right’ to make profit at the expense of our lives.”

Debs arrived at these conclusions over his whole life, which, in its own way, shadowed the development of the railroad industry and American capitalism. With history as their guide, workers today can, and will, learn these lessons at a much more rapid pace.

[1] “To a Locomotive in Winter.” First published February 19, 1876 in the *New York Daily Tribune*

[2] Lenin, *Imperialism*, Preface to the French and German Editions

[3] Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1997: 4.

[4] *Ibid.*: 3.

[5] Garraty, John A. *The New Commonwealth, 1877-1890*. The New American Nation Series. New York: Harper & Row, 1968: 101-102.

[6] Brecher, Jeremy. *Strike!* A Fawcett Premier Book, X603. Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett, 1974: 25, 27.

[7] Trachtenberg: 91.

[8] Ovetz, Robert. *When Workers Shot Back: Class Conflict from 1877 to 1921*. Historical Materialism Book Series, Volume 162. Leiden ; Brill, 2018: 45.

[9] *Ibid.*: 25.

[10] Salvatore, Nick. *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. Second edition. The Working Class in American History. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007: 37.

[11] *Ibid.*: 81

[12] Debs, “How I Became a Socialist” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1902/howi.htm>

[13] *Ibid.*: 108.

[14] *Ibid.*: 25.

[15] Wish, Harvey. “The Pullman Strike: A Study in Industrial Warfare.” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1908-1984), 1939: 289.

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[18] Davis, Colin J. "Bitter Conflict: The 1922 Railroad Shopmen's Strike." *Labor History* 33, no. 4 (1992): 433-55.



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