

The Crisis of Leadership in Our Rail Unions - Part I

How do the perspectives of the leadership of our unions, and the strategies that flow from them, contribute to the deteriorating predicament we find ourselves in today? No discussion on this would be complete without referencing the analysis and conclusions Eugene V. Debs arrived at through his own personal life experiences over 100 years ago. For those of you who may not be knowledgeable of Debs' history and legacy, a brief summary is in order.

Born November 5, 1855 in Terre Haute, Indiana, at the age of 14, Debs started work on the railroad in the paint shop, and soon after became a fireman. He helped to organize his local lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. When he was appointed editor of the BLF magazine, Debs began to get a hearing among railworkers nationwide. Driven by his righteous indignation in response to the harsh and dangerous working conditions, with his fiery passion and energy, he helped other crafts to organize. In 1880 he became Grand Secretary-Treasurer of the BLF.

Debs came to realize that being separated into numerous different craft unions played right into the carriers' divide and conquer strategy. In 1893 Debs founded the American Railway Union, open to ALL crafts, the first industrial union in the U.S. At its peak, the ARU counted virtually half of rail labor in its ranks.

After a decisive victory over the Great Northern Railway, the ARU threw its weight behind the Pullman Strike in 1894. The workers were winning on the picket line and in the streets, but President Grover Cleveland crushed the strike and the ARU with the federal militia, killing 12 and wounding hundreds. As Debs spent six months in jail, in his own words: "...I began to read and think and dissect the anatomy of the system in which workingmen, however organized, could be shattered and battered and splintered at a single stroke." He dedicated the rest of his life attempting to educate, organize, mobilize and inspire the working class to think for ourselves, to get in touch with and to utilize our dormant numerical and economic power, through unity, solidarity and democracy, not only in the industrial arena, but the political arena as well.

Debs wrote an open letter to railroad workers across the country, titled "You Railroad Men", which ran in the February 6, 1906 issue of "Appeal to Reason", one of several prominent Socialist publications of that era. Here Debs made the case that, while the union leaders of the day paid lip service to the interests of the rank & file worker, their deeds served the interests of the carriers. It did not matter whether this was intentional and deliberate or not.

In the last several years, as the attacks on us have intensified, an all too common refrain has been "Boo hoo hoo, the company's so mean to us. Boo hoo hoo, the union's not doing anything." This is sometimes followed by grumbling

about various union officials taking a "suitcase full of money under the table" as the *only* explanation for the concessions freely given without one iota of resistance.

Debs' response to this theme is relevant today. "It is not that Mr. Stone (BLE President at the time) is personally dishonest or corrupt; He may be, and I think he is, perfectly conscientious in what he says and does, and the same is doubtless true of the grand officers of the other railway unions, but that is not the question. If workingmen are betrayed and defeated and made to suffer, it makes little difference if their misfortunes are due to dishonest, or ignorant and incompetent, leadership. The question is not 'Are these leaders honest?'. Let that be conceded. The question is, 'Are they true to the working class?' If their official attitude does not square with the working class as a whole, then they are not in line with the true interests of their own union and are not in fact the friends, but the enemies of labor; not serving, but betraying those who trust and follow them."



Rail union founder and leader Eugene V. Debs with railroad workers in 1908.

It is not our intent, to initiate a public name-calling match with the present leaders of our unions. For that reason, I'll stand down and distance myself from Debs' characterization of "ignorant and incompetent leadership". As with the question of dishonesty and/or corruption, *none* of that matters. *The* question that matters is: "Do their perspectives, and the strategies and tactics that flow from those perspectives, advance *our* interests in the fight for a safe workplace, respect, dignity and quality of life on and off the job?"

RWU contends that the answer to that question is a no-brainer, and that *we, the rank and file* need to discuss amongst ourselves, not only *what* is wrong with the present picture but, more importantly, *why*? If we don't accurately diagnose the source of the "disease", how can we ever possibly figure out the necessary "cure"? Not only is it our democratic *right* to pose these questions but RWU feels it is our collective *responsibility* as rank & file workers to contribute to this vital discussion.

To be continued in the Fall issue of *The Highball*.

Mark Burrows is a Co-Chair of Railroad Workers United, a member of UTU Local #1433 and an engineer for the CP Rail in Chicago, IL. This is the fourth installment in this series.

