

Opinion & Commentary

What Would Eugene V. Debs Do Today?

Whenever, wherever I'm interacting with other workers, be it in the shanty, on the picket line or in a union convention hall, this question serves a constant guide: "What would Eugene V. Debs — the great railway union leader — do today given our current circumstances?" It was in that spirit I gave the following speech at the 2014 SMART-TD convention in Las Vegas, NV. Many delegates, as well as some officers, complemented me personally following the warm fraternal response I received. This deepens my convictions that there is an increasing openness to our vision, ideals and principles.

I'm running for the office of International President because I'm convinced that rail workers need a new bold, aggressive vision, as does labor in general. I started railroading in 1974, so I can accurately state that I have 40 years of perspective. When I hired out, 3 men on the ground made for an equitable division of labor, and sometimes the engineer had an assistant (AKA- the fireman). Now, most of the time 1 man does the work of 3, and if they could get away with single employee train crews, they would.

On the Wheeling & Lake Erie, a regional short line running through Ohio and Pennsylvania, (represented by the BLET), a strike last September, over this very issue, was put on hold with a temporary restraining order. Negotiations have been at a standstill, and it is quite possible that they may be forced to strike again. Rail labor needs to take an "all hands on deck" approach to this, or any other struggle posed, like we should have during the mid 60's, instead of letting the unions at the Florida East Coast Railway be busted. As the carriers pick us apart, ramming through concessions at various properties, their conquests ultimately spread throughout the industry.

Last summer, I was threatened with termination on the spot, because I had the audacity to plead the case for my conductor, who was being pulled out of service because he refused to keep going after 9½ hours on a 110 degree heat index day. Yelling at me like I was a stray dog who had just scarfed down a slab of ribs off the grill, when he asked, "Have I made myself clear, Mr. Burrows?", I wanted so bad to say, "Yes Master Tom." Make no mistake, in spirit and intent, this was the psychological equivalent of the master's whip, because in that moment I had to just take it or get fired. Never had I felt such humiliation and indignation. My own parents never talked to me like that, even in my most rebellious, hellion days. Now at age 57, some punk trainmaster 25-30 years younger, is going to assault my dignity because I'm fighting for the safety and well being of my co-worker. The very essence of unionism is human solidarity, because an injury to one is an injury to all, and he's going to make human solidarity a terminating offense by decree?!

This is just one of thousands of stories, but it's symbolic of where we're headed if we don't go on a counter-offensive, resolve to fight by any means necessary, for the safety, dignity, respect and quality of life, on & off the job that WE are ENTITLED to. We, the workers, move the freight thru 110 degree heat index days to 50 below wind chills, rain, sleet and snow. Why should we continue to unconditionally accept

whatever wages and working conditions the carriers are gracious enough to give us? We do the work, we create the wealth; "the pie", why should we accept begging for crumbs?

Time does not permit me to describe all the gory, sordid details of what's happening at Canadian Pacific, but suffice to say we are being busted in slow motion.



Eugene Debs in 1922

It's as if the contract doesn't even exist. This is no exaggeration. The atmosphere is a hybrid of a slave plantation and a prison industrial complex. The new management team is simply taking by force what they want, and if we don't voluntarily sign on the dotted line, then they'll most likely provoke us into a strike that they've been preparing for and without the national support we need, it could be very ugly for us.

Do as you're told, file your grievances later. The carriers hide behind the skirt of the Railway Labor Act (RLA), which gives them the right to assault us while simultaneously dictating to us how we can defend ourselves. Trying to defend our contract, and by extension our union, limiting ourselves to the grievance process is the equivalent of running out on the battlefield of class warfare with a pistol, given to us by the carriers, when you pull the trigger a flag comes out that says "BANG". What do we expect when we allow the enemy to dictate the terms of engagement?!

We, the rank and file, need to educate ourselves on labor history and the economics of the profit system. We need to organize and mobilize ourselves to fight alongside, not only any rail workers under attack, but any workers under attack. Eugene Debs said, "... without solidarity, nothing is possible, and that with solidarity, nothing is impossible." We need to have a stone-cold sober discussion to at least question the moral and ethical legitimacy of the RLA, and we need to break from the dead end trap that the only way to defend ourselves is to work harder to get out the vote for our so-called "friends" of labor, within the two party political system.

Again, we need to set the agenda and dynamics. Imagine if the forces that mobilized in Madison, WI back in 2011, and the millions more that those 100,000+ demonstrators represented, were galvanized into an independent political party, that could use our numerical majority and economic power to fight for - not only our interests as rail workers - but for the best and righteous interests and needs of society as a whole.

Thank you.

Mark Burrows currently serves as the Organizer for Railroad Workers United. He is a member of UTU Local #1433 and works as an engineer for CP Rail in Chicago. He first hired out in 1974. This is the 12th installment in this series.

