 Cataclysmic events would unfold during 1894 that would lead U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney to proclaim that the nation has been pushed to “the ragged edge of anarchy”. He was making use of the words employed by the rich and powerful when they felt threatened by labor unrest. A strike of a few thousand railroad car builders in Chicago had escalated into an uprising by hundreds of thousands of workers, and their newly formed industrial union, the American Railway Union (ARU).

In his new book, “The Edge of Anarchy”, journalist, novelist, and historian Jack Kelly sets the stage for the events, then provides the reader with a blow-by-blow account of the conflict and sums up why the ARU and the ideology of Eugene V. Debs are so relevant to today’s “labor question.” His book is not the first to examine the Pullman Strike, but Kelly gives us a unique “ringside seat” as a railroad worker at the ARU Convention, a delegate to the Chicago Labor and Trades Assembly meetings, and to the violent actions of strikebreaking police, state militia, and federal troops. History holds little interest to many like me if it is simply regurgitated as a string of facts, figures, names, and dates. But as George Santayana said, “Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it”. So, it takes a book like Kelly’s to make history truly relevant to what we face today. It brings to life the victories and defeats of a generation of workers who struggled with the same oligarchical conditions that workers face today.

Kelly’s accounts of the battles between citizens and the forces of strike-breaking “law and order” can be a bit tedious at times. But his attention to the details of important worker meetings, and revelations of the complex politics, strategies and tactics are quite fascinating. The author details the ARU Convention on the “race question” and the debate that accompanied it. And he examines the debates of the Chicago Trades & Labor Assembly meetings that swirled around the question of a general strike.

Kelly provides background on the strike’s most prominent leader, Eugene V Debs. He details Debs’ employment on the railroad at age 14, his rise to locomotive fireman and his efforts on behalf of the railroad “brotherhoods.” Debs became disillusioned with craft unions and their failed efforts at federation. In 1893, he and other rail unionists formed the American Railway Union, and soon after chartered 425 locals with 170,000 members. The purpose, Debs noted, was not to quarrel with the brotherhoods of the craft unions, but to unite all railroaders.

Within a year, the ARU would shut down the Great Northern Railway and force James J. Hill, the “Empire Builder,” into arbitration. This was a complete victory for this new style of union. Weeks later, workers at Pullman would go on strike, then appeal to the ARU for support. At its convention in June 1894, the ARU called for a boycott of Pullman rail cars, calling on members to refrain from handling them in any and all trains until the strike of the car builders was won. With these battle lines drawn, the stage was now set for the “Great Strike”.

Unfortunately, the Great Strike was lost. The union’s offices were ransacked by authorities, the leadership jailed, and its members blacklisted. For railroad workers, as you read this book, ask yourself some key questions: Why did they lose this battle? What could ARU and the workers have done differently to win? What about allies in organized labor and in the community? Understand we are not merely engaging in “locker room” academics, but we are initiating a discussion of tactics and strategies to better prepare us to win our own inevitable battles yet to come.

Readers of the book – especially railroaders – will find yourselves rooting for the strikers. Here are some of the factors that this reader gleaned from the book, each of which may have contributed to the workers’ defeat:

- Craft Union Scabbing and Conservative Union Leadership: The rail craft union officials never endorsed the strike, nor supported it. Conservative union leader Samuel Gompers – head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) - at first pledged support for a general walkout, then reneged.
- Racism and Discrimination: Widespread racism of many workers, and the resulting failure of the ARU to admit black workers, undermined the strike and boycott’s effectiveness. As a result, the porters and other Black rails would see the strike as just another quarrel among whites and take no active role in it.
- ARU Immaturity: The ARU was barely a year into its existence and without the experience, discipline, consolidation and resources, the ARU was ill-equipped to win such a battle against the “robber barons” and most powerful corporations of the day.

State Repression: The strikers found it impossible to combat the use of thousands of troops and police that were used by authorities. The effect cannot be underestimated. Court injunctions made practically any assemblage, let alone strike activity, punishable by immediate jailing.

The Capitalist State: Most branches of government were arrayed against the strikers in favor of the oligarchical corporations. The most obvious manifestation of this was that Attorney General Richard Olney - still employed as general counsel and a director for the Boston & Maine Railroad – was who was the driving force behind the federal government’s strike breaking effort.

While the strike was lost for a myriad of reasons, it nevertheless demonstrated the awesome power of an industrial union, paving the way for Debs and others to organize the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other forms of worker resistance.

Kelly notes that in 1891, corporations and the government united again, going on the offensive against workers and unions. President Reagan’s actions destroyed the air traffic controllers, and labor was confronted with the same questions as before: Do workers have a right to organize? Is labor a mere commodity subject to only a capitalistic law of supply and demand? Should workers in an enterprise have a say in how it is run? Is all power in the workplace to be retained by oligarchical capitalists?”

When he was released from Woodstock jail in 1895, strike leader Debs returned to Chicago, met by 100,000 supporters. From the podium that night, he asked, “What is to be done?” His answer to his own question speaks volumes. “You cannot do your duty by proxy. ... Not only will you lose nothing, but you will find something of infinite value, and that something will be yourself.”

I urge all union activists to read Jack Kelly’s book. Imagine that you were an ARU member engaged in the struggle. Then fast forward 125 years to what must be done today in order to protect our wages, benefits and working conditions. We can all start by taking the advice of Eugene V. Debs and find that “something of infinite value.”

Railroad Workers United draws great inspiration from the American Railway Union’s effort to unite railroad workers across craft and union, skilled and unskilled, operating and non-operating crafts alike. Like the ARU, we do not wish to fight with the “brotherhoods.” Rather, we see a united railroad workforce, one built upon the principle of “an injury to one is an injury to all”, as being essential to victory. We encourage all railroad workers to find yourself and get involved in the struggle!

“The Edge of Anarchy” - along with a number of other books about railroad history and safety - is now on sale at the RWU online Store. See Page 2 as well as the back page of this newsletter.