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# Supreme Council Formed

by Eugene V. Debs

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In furnishing the readers of the *Magazine* with a summary of the proceedings of the meeting of delegates, representing three orders of railway employees, held in the city of Chicago, Illinois, commencing June 3rd, 1889, we deem it appropriate to refer to the fact that as early as February 1887, the *Firemen's Magazine* referred to "federation" as the hope of workingmen of the country, we refer to the fact here and now, because we desire to have it understood, that while the CB&Q strike brought into the boldest possible prominence the importance and necessity of federation, it did not suggest such action on the part of workingmen to the *Magazine*. We said:

Federation is not impracticable. On the contrary, federation is feasible, and if labor is ever to reach the goal of equality with capital in shaping policies, in the assertion of prerogatives, it will have to federate. \* \* \* No greater service could be done for society, for the welfare of all, than for thoughtful men to devise plans whereby labor organizations could be brought into a grand national federation.

At the time these expressions were printed, the CB&Q strike was not thought of, but when it did come, "as waves come when navies are stranded," it served as a convincing argument in favor of federation, and the logic of facts and the logic of events finally, and at a much earlier date than was anticipated, culminated in the **federation** of the three orders of railroad employees, *viz.*:

**The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen,**  
**The Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen,**  
and the  
**Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association.**

The great strike on the CB&Q had but just begun to develop the staying qualities of the strikers and the corporation when this *Magazine* put upon record its views relating to “federation, the lesson of the great strike” and among other things, said:

Viewing the subject from such standpoints, we venture the prediction that the day is near at hand when the Brotherhoods of railroad employees will federate for mutual protection. \* \* \* Federation means victory for the right, and the great strike on the C., B. & Q., has brought its necessity into such bold relief that its advocacy becomes a duty, and its consummation will be fraught with incalculable blessings, not only to employees, but to employers, to society and to the whole country.

During all the dreary days and months of the strike on the CB&Q, days of hopes, and doubts, and fears, when money flowed in from a thousand sources, and the hearts of all brotherhood workingmen beat responsive to duty, and sacrifices were endured with a heroism as sublime as ever embellished the pages of fiction or fact, thoughtful men saw the weak link in the chain of circumstances which was the want of federation on the part of all the brotherhoods of railroad employees on the system. As a consequence, federation became the theme the one important subject of discussion in the lodges of railroad employees. It reached beyond the boundaries of the organizations, and was discussed in the press of the country, and the more it was discussed, the more convincing became the conclusion that federation was the one thing needful to achieve victory for the right.

In the month of September, 1888, the

### **Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen**

at its first biennial session, held at Atlanta, Georgia, took action upon the subject and decided to federate with such other organizations of railroad employees as should arrive at the conclusion that federation was required to emancipate them from oppression and secure to them their rights as men and citizens.

Fortunately the

### **Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association**

was then in session in the city of St. Louis, and was at once informed of the action of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. promptly, without delay, the Switchmen's Association came into line under the banner of federation. Its bugle blast was grand. Doubts and fears were given to the winds. Reason triumphed. There was conviction and the courage of conviction. Misgivings went down before the conquering power of facts, and the outlook was such as to dispel despondency.

In the month of October 1888, the

### **Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen**

held its annual convention in the city of Columbus, Ohio. It is needless to say that all eyes were turned towards that city, and the question was everywhere asked, what will the brakemen do? The country did not have long to wait. In fact, it never had been a debatable question, and soon the wires flashed the tidings. "The brakemen have declared in favor of federation." Then there were three great orders in line, shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee, hand in hand, they had decided to form a national and an international alliance, the fruits of which they hoped and had a right to believe, would be fruitful. This done, the discussion went forward, and the agitation strengthened conviction that federation was in the line of emancipation.

The subject having been thoroughly analyzed, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen issued the following letter to the organizations of Switchmen and Brakemen:

Grand Lodge of the  
Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen,  
Terre Haute, Ind., March 18, 1889.

Dear Sirs and Brothers:—

The subject of federation having been brought to the attention of our respective organizations In convention, and having been passed upon favorably, and all matters Involved, referred to the Grand Officers of each, for further deliberation and action, we respectfully submit the following propositions:

1st. That the time has arrived when the representatives of the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, the representatives of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, and the representatives

of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, as designated by the conventions of the respective orders, should meet for consultation and to perfect and put into practical operation, the *alliance* contemplated by the action of our respective orders.

2nd. We respectfully suggest that the time for the meeting of the representatives of the orders named, and for the purpose set forth, be the first Monday in June, 1889, and that the city of Chicago be selected as the place for holding the conference.

3rd. We suggest that the representatives of the orders prepare a plan of federation to be submitted and discussed at the conference, as this will, we believe greatly facilitate action, and enable the representatives of the orders to arrive at wise and judicious conclusions.

The foregoing suggestions are respectfully submitted for your consideration. With regard to the time and place designated, we hope they will suit your convenience, as we are desirous of doing all in our power to facilitate deliberations, so that dual conclusions may be readied with as little delay as possible.

In conclusion permit us to say, that our respective orders have conferred upon us great power, which, if wisely used will not only redound to the glory of our orders, but will lie fraught with untold blessings to organized labor throughout the land. Our orders fortunately are the *avant courier* of a new departure, which, if wisely inaugurated, is to lead to victories in the interest of the rights of labor which the most sanguine of us find it difficult to estimate. That we can meet reasonable expectations we feel assured and that we shall set an example of equality and mutual respect and confidence, we do not doubt.

Anticipating, at the earliest possible date, your reply to this communication, with such suggestions as you may wish to make, we subscribe ourselves in the bonds of federation, most respectfully and fraternally, your friends,

**F.P. Sargent**, Grand Master.

**J.J. Hannahan**, Vice Grand Master.

**Eugene V. Debs**, Grand Sec'y and Treas.

The response to the letter was favorable. The time and place were agreed upon, and as a consequence the official representatives of the federating orders assembled in the city of Chicago, on the first Monday in June, 1889, to formulate a plan of **federation**.

The representatives of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, were: F.P. Sargent, Grand Master; J.J. Hannahan, Vice Grand Master.; E. V. Debs, Grand Secretary and Treasurer.

The representatives of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association, were: Frank Sweeney, Grand Master; John Downey, Vice Grand Master; John A. Hail, Grand Organizer and Instructor.

The representatives of the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, were: S.E. Wilkinson, Grand Master; W. G. Edens, Vice Grand Master; Edward F. O'Shea, Grand Secretary and Treasurer.

### **Organization.**

The representatives of the Orders having assembled, they were called to order by S.E. Wilkinson, whereupon an organization was effected by the election of F.P. Sargent, Permanent President; E.V. Debs, Permanent Secretary, and J.A. Hall, and Edward F. O'Shea, Associate Secretaries.

The organization having been effected, a committee of three was appointed, representing the three federating Orders, to formulate a plan of federation. The committee was constituted as follows: S.E. Wilkinson, J.A. Hall and E.V. Debs. J.A. Hall was made chairman of the committee, and E.V. Debs, Secretary. The committee promptly entered upon the task of formulating a **constitution** for the government of the orders in their federated capacity. After two days of exhaustive work, the delegates were reconvened and the constitution prepared by the committee was submitted for final action. Every section and paragraph was critically considered, and when a vote was taken the constitution, as submitted, with a few unimportant alterations, was unanimously adopted and subscribed to, on Thursday, June 6th, 1889. The constitution thus adopted confers upon the new order, which it creates the following title:

### **The Supreme Council of the United Orders of Railway Employees.**

In connection with the proceedings of the Supreme Council, the following official letter was prepared and ordered sent to all the local lodges of the federating orders:

*To all Subordinate Lodges:*

Dear Sirs and Brothers:—

You are hereby notified that at a meeting of the representatives of the three orders above named, held in the city of Chicago, Ill., beginning June 3rd, 1889, a plan of federation was

formulated and agreed upon, the same being now In full force and effect.

The federated board, having jurisdiction of the three organizations, is known as the Supreme Council of the United Orders of Railway Employees, and its acts and decisions upon all matters of grievance are final.

A constitution and common seal have been adopted.

The Supreme Council takes occasion to warn all members of the several organizations embraced in its jurisdiction against the so-called Voluntary Relief Associations, which are being organized upon some of the principal railways. The purpose of such relief associations is apparent to the most casual observer. The methods employed to capture employees Is like the alluring song of the spider to the fly. Of course it is made to appear that the authors of the movement are animated by a purely philanthropic spirit, that the high purpose Is to provide for "our dear employees," who must be cared for on the same principle that the owners of plantations, in the days of chattel slavery, provided for their slaves.

Brothers, the simple purpose of such movements, stripped of their alluring embellishments, is to undermine and ultimately destroy every organization of railway employees. At first the system is voluntary, so as to make the bait more tempting, and the scheme more plausible; but, as soon as a sufficient number of the employees have been taken in under the voluntary arrangement, penalties more or less direct will be attached to the non-participants, and later on it will be found that the so-called voluntary plan is compulsory, and that the men have placed themselves in a position to be the victims of the despotic sway of the corporation.

We are persuaded that the time has not come for railroad employees to abdicate their manhood, sacrifice their self-respect and strip themselves naked of independence. We are inclined to the opinion that railroad employees have an ambition above the plane contemplated by voluntary relief associations, which would reduce them to the level of serfs and constitute them a part of the tolling stock of the corporation. We take the position that a corporation is simply required to treat its employees fairly, and pay them fair wages for fair work. If this Is done, the employees can provide for their own relief In their own way; they can employ their own doctors and otherwise administer their own affairs, without becoming the wards of the corporation or being subjected to humiliations of surveillance, under the guise of solicitude for their welfare.

Brethren, we call your attention to this matter for your own good. We would warn you against what we believe to be an organized effort to destroy your organization, thereby depriving you of the protection you now enjoy, and which, if successful, will place you at the mercy of the corporation.

Now, that the organizations of brakemen, switchmen, and firemen have federated, the supreme desire is unity and harmony all along the line. Let local discontent and factional feeling disappear. Let the motto be, "Each for all and all for each."

The step we have taken has far reaching significance. It practically unites the three organizations into one body, for mutual protection. We appeal to each member who is enlisted under the banner of federation to be a true soldier in the cause. Let the past with its differences and prejudices be forgotten. A new era has dawned and the future is rich with promise. Hand in hand we shall march forward together, animated with high ambitions and noble purposes. Our sympathies for each other, born of mutual peril and mutual privations, should cement us together as one brotherhood, and to be a true and devoted member of that brotherhood should be the ambition of each and all who hope for the triumph of labor over corporate oppression and injustice.

We salute, you, brethren, in behalf of the Supreme Council of the United Orders of Railway Employees, and trusting that your hearts are attuned, as are our own, to the harbinger notes of victory, we are.

Yours fraternally,

<b>S.E. Wilkenson,</b>	<b>John A. Hall,</b>
<b>W.G. Edens,</b>	<b>F.P. Sargent,</b>
<b>Ed. F. O'Shea,</b>	<b>J.J. Hannahan,</b>
<b>Frank Sweeney,</b>	<b>Eugene V. Debs.</b>
<b>John Downey,</b>	

*Supreme Council UORR.*

Immediately following the adoption of the constitution, the representatives of the federating orders, proceeded to the election of officers for the Supreme Council, resulting as follows: F.P. Sargent, President; Frank Sweeney, Vice President; Edward F. O'Shea, Secretary and Treasurer, who are to hold office one year, or, until their successors are elected and qualified. The **Supreme Council** meets annually at Chicago, on the 3rd Monday in June, and the constitution makes provisions for special meetings as exigencies may arise.

The constitution makes provisions for admitting **other organizations** of railway employees, which the Supreme Council will welcome when application is made, and it is believed that other organizations will, at no distant day, see the reasonableness of the movement and unite their power and influence with the federated orders.

At present, and as it has ever been, the weak are at the mercy of the strong. Power is only overcome by power. In theory, the wrong is always weak, the right always strong. The saying is as old as the hills, that "Truth is mighty and will prevail," but the history of the world shows conclusively that Error has stubbornly resisted Truth, and by federating its forces, has scored innumerable victories.

The time has come for Truth to federate its forces and stay the onward march of Error. The firemen, the switchmen, and the brakemen have federated to secure and to maintain the right. The right wrongs no man. Its triumph is alike a benediction to all, to the employee, to the employers, to society, to the state, to humanity.

The Supreme Council of the Federated Orders of Railway Employees sets up no claim to infallibility. It believes its constitution fairly meets demands, but it may be amended as time and circumstances make known requirements.

With this, for the present, it must be content. Every provision bears the impress of an earnest desire for the betterment of conditions, the elevation of labor, in which, say what we will, the hopes of humanity (croakings to the contrary) center.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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