
Austin Corbin — Russianizer

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Published as "Austin Corbin" in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*,
vol. 14, no. 2 (Feb. 1890), pp. 97-100.

This *Magazine* has on more than one occasion referred to Austin Corbin, President of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company, and another company, the offshoot of the P&R Co., more properly, perhaps, the tumor of the P&R Co., an abnormal growth, the result of inoculating the P&R Co. with the virus of Corbin's scoundrelism, and which, according to the reports of a Congressional Committee, enables Corbin, the land pirate and Napoleon of Knavery, to "Russianize" one of the richest portions of Pennsylvania. Such a notorious pal of the devil as Corbin, such a moneyed miscreant, such a repulsive rascal, rogue, and reprobate, ought to be ceaselessly castigated, excoriated, at least. Every workingman in the country should take pleasure in whipping, metaphorically, at least, the scapegrace, the wealthy wretch, through the world.

This soulless swindler of rich and poor; this man with a national reputation of enmity to organized labor; this wrecker of railroads and the organizations of workingmen; this demolisher of lodges, Divisions and Assemblies; this employer of Huns, Dagos, and imported paupers; this degrader of American workingmen; this enemy of the American home; this man whose methods for getting money are worse than footpadism, as is known, was permitted to defend his nefarious practices in a publication known as the *North American Review*, whose late proprietor, being a millionaire, had, doubtless, a fellow-feeling for Corbin, and for a consideration, we suppose, permitted him to assail organized labor through its pages; or, it is quite probable, the venal creature wrote the article for so much money — an arrangement, which, if it was made, compensated him for the wear and tear of his fangs and rattles while employed in denouncing labor organizations, and making it appear that he (Corbin) was something

better than a Shylock, who, to get 5 or 10 cents a day out of the wages of workingmen, would not quite cut his heart out of him. This caiff Corbin, in his *North American Review* article, says:

The wage question is one in which capital, as such, is only remotely concerned. It is primarily and essentially a question between the employers and the employed.

In this, Corbin manifestly tells the truth. As a general proposition, there is not now, there has never been, nor can there be, war between capital and labor. Labor creates capital; it is the child of labor. The war in the past, and at present, is between the working man and his employer, when his employer is such an enshrined wretch as Austin Corbin but not between such employees and an honest man.

Notwithstanding the fact Austin Corbin had, as the Congressional Committee puts it, “Russianized” the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania; had forced a strike for the purpose of advancing the price of coal and reducing wages — something at both ends of the line — he has the impudence to say:

There never has been a time — and it is fair to assume there never will be — when employers, and public sentiment as well, have not fully conceded to the worker the right to better his condition by leaving his employer’s service and obtaining more congenial or suitable employment elsewhere, at his pleasure. The worker in this country at least, under the law, happily, is not a slave; he owes no permanent service to anybody; he is a free man, as he ought to be, and nothing save his own environments, for which no employer can be justly held responsible, can compel his service at any time or place, or to any man or set of men.

Here we have declarations from “Russianizing” Corbin, in consonance with the genius of American institutions, made for the purpose of hiding from public view the scoundrelism perpetrated by himself and his co-workers in the villainous business of placing workingmen in a condition which prevented them from leaving his “service and obtaining more congenial employment elsewhere.” It has been shown that Corbin inaugurated the strike on his railroad and in his mines. Thousands of his men, having been paid less than was required to supply food and shelter and clothes, thrown out of work by his “Russianizing” methods, could be told to find “congenial employment elsewhere,” with calculating cruelty. They could not go elsewhere.

Half starved and half naked, wretched beyond exaggeration, “Russianized” to serfs, degraded, crushed and penniless, the victims of curses planned with Satanic cunning, they were compelled to accept conditions that horrified the Congressional committee that investigated them. The remark made by Corbin that “the worker in this country, at least, under the law, happily, is not a slave,” is the climax of irony. Workers under Corbin may not be chattels, but in a most grievous sense they are slaves, being compelled to work for such wages as Corbin may name, or starve. Corbin creates their “environments” and is responsible for their “Russianized” degradation. Having accomplished his purpose, he attacks trade unions, labor organizations, as follows:

In some foreign countries, the tyranny of trade unions has dominated the lives of a majority of the working people, and only those have been able to escape from it whose indomitable energy, skill, and perseverance have carried them up out of the ranks. With other good, bad, and indifferent importations of foreign products, we have found ourselves, within recent years, to have acquired a body of professional labor agitators, which has been largely reenforced by lazy imitators of domestic growth.

Those who know anything of the advancement of labor from degrading conditions, know that it has been through labor organizations, and to say such organizations have depressed labor is not only a malicious, but a foolish lie. The testimony of the most astute thinkers, those most familiar with facts, declare that trades unions have been of incalculable benefit to their members. Organization, in its very nature, resists oppression, resists degradation, exalts manhood, self-respect, and is conducive to good citizenship. The attempt to degrade labor agitators, men who champion the cause of workingmen, will prove a failure; it has already proved a failure, and the fact that Corbin’s efforts have been successful in Pennsylvania, should only prove to him that with the sentiment abroad in the land labor agitators will, at no distant day, overwhelm him in defeat. He says:

Like other phenomenal social and political movements which have had their birth, growth, and decline, this labor agitation assumed the methods of leagues and societies, with forms and ceremonies, oaths and penalties, mysteries and fearful punishments, and, withal, parades and paraphernalia generally. These, and all the like, would be harmless, and are, until they come

within the legitimate domain of the laws of *meum* and *tuum*, upon which our government rests.

In saying this, Corbin demonstrates that he is a miserable observer of phenomena. Labor organizations have had their birth and are still growing. The decline has not set in. They are just now grappling with “the laws of *meum* and *tuum*,” “mine and thine,” upon which governments rest. The Congressional committee decided that Corbin was all *meum*, that he ignored *tuum* from the first. Workingmen are studying *meum*, and the time will come when such men as Corbin will have to disgorge; nor is the time discouragingly remote. Corbin evidently saw the meanness and weakness of his malicious antagonism of labor organizations, and deemed it proper to make some sort of an apology for the organization of trusts, syndicates, and pools with which the country is flooded and cursed, and puts in the following plea:

Businessmen organize associations for such purposes, and are continually widening their own spheres of observation and usefulness by such conferences; and in the domain of the mechanical arts there are constantly forming new societies for comparison of views and experiences and the promulgation of knowledge concerning the matters of which they know. But these, and such as these, are not dominated by unprincipled demagogues, whose sole purpose is to live by the labors of others; they are unselfish bodies of men who are only too glad to let their light shine, and to teach the new generation what they have learned from their philosophy and experience.

That is to say, business men like Corbin “organize” within the legitimate laws of *meum* and *tuum* — mine and thine — but such organizations have little regard for *tuum*; it is all *meum*, and the workingman’s *tuum* is so small that he starves, goes in rags, and lives in dens, becomes “Russianized,” as in Corbin’s dominion. Business men’s organizations may not be “dominated by unprincipled demagogues,” but they are dominated, as a rule, by unprincipled scoundrels, whose sole purpose is to rob workingmen and degrade them to the level of cattle. They do let their light in their palatial homes shine, while they darken all the huts of the men who toil that they may be rich. The workingmen have “learned from their philosophy and experience” that the time is at hand when labor, organized, and federated,

will not long tolerate the robberies of such men as Corbin. In this connection Corbin eulogizes scabs and serfs as follows:

It is their just pride that their own industry and energy, and their thorough loyalty to the interests of those who trusted and employed them, have been the foundation upon which their prosperity was built. Not a single one of them all owes his prominence and success to the "labor unions."

What prominence has a scab or serf ever secured that was honorable by being the fawning, abject lickspittle of the men who sought by any device to overthrow labor organizations? Labor organizations have reduced the hours of labor from 14 and 16 hours to ten and nine and in many instances to eight hours a day. Union wages are the best wages paid in the country, and in this, as in his figures relating to the sale of coal, Corbin lies. Speaking of the efforts to overthrow labor organizations, Corbin makes the following statement:

Some employers have endeavored to accomplish this. They employ no new men who are members of any of the labor unions; applicants are required to promise not to join any while retaining their employment; those who prefer the unions are required to quit the service, and promotions are entirely confined to those of *undoubted loyalty to their employer and his policy*. The day of terrorism from the unions and their salaried and titled leaders is over in cases where this policy has been rigorously pursued. The walking delegate is not now doing much walking in the neighborhood of works of this class — at least not at the expense of the workmen.

Here we have it in a nutshell. Workingmen can see through the scheme at a glance. It is, boiled down, simply this: Abandon your labor organizations or remain idle: starve, tramp, become vagabonds and outcasts. Workingmen can and do comprehend the scheme. Some will yield, some will crawl for a time, but the day is coming when they will resist; when they will organize, in spite of the world, the flesh and the devil, with Corbin thrown in. The "undoubted loyalty to employer and his policy" will give way to undoubted loyalty to right, justice, truth, and fair play. Having sought, as best he could, to justify his Russianizing policy, Corbin takes occasion to laud the workingman, as follows:

It is a great satisfaction to know, as the writer does, that the industrious, independent and law-abiding element among the workingmen is growing fast in this country; and, if the employers of labor will show a tenth part of the independence and willingness to suffer temporary ills that their non-union employees do, there will soon be an end of the matter, and these indolent agitators, who figure only in conventions and newspapers as the friends of the workingman, with salaries attached and expenses paid, will fade out of sight and mind. Any case of real oppression of laboring men by cruel or selfish employers will speedily be detected and remedied by a just public sentiment, without violence to the individual liberty or breach of the public peace.

The “writer,” Corbin, knows that he has about 35,000 serfs on his railroads and in his mines, including thousands of the most degraded creatures to be found on the American continent — “dumb, driven cattle,” for whose welfare there is less regard than is exhibited for the mules that work in the mines. The fact that labor agitators are not “indolent” but on the alert is what troubles Corbin and his pals, just as policemen and detectives who are on the alert trouble burglars, sneak thieves, footpads, sandbaggers, and the entire gang of professional criminals that infest society. The talk about “any case of real oppression of tailoring men by cruel and selfish employers” being “speedily detected and remedied by a just public sentiment” is intensified impudence when coming from a man like Austin Corbin, advertised by a Congressional committee as a colossal scoundrel, known to be “a cruel and selfish employer,” who, to defend his degrading policy, goes into print, where he advertises himself still more than the Congressional committee had done as a brass faced, leather-hearted, conscienceless knave. Corbin, as he winds up his screech, turns exhorter, as follows:

The workingmen of this country should never lose sight of the fact that every labor agitation, even if only spasmodic and temporary, tends to destroy the smaller industries of the country which are scattered all over the land, whereby employment for all kinds of workers, skilled and unskilled, is found throughout nearly the whole of our diversified territory, and to concentrate all productive industries in the larger centers of population, where labor is abundant and cheap, where rents and means of subsistence are comparatively dear, where squalor and wretchedness prevail, and where filth and disease most abound.

Corbin would have workingmen remain quiet. Agitation disturbed his nerves. He pleads for “smaller industries.” He would have it understood that he wants competition in mining and transporting coal; that he wants the small operators to prosper, and hence he wants workingmen to remain quiet, submit, wear fetters uncomplainingly, desert labor organizations and consent to be Russianized. Corbin has no more sense of shame than a courtesan, no more than a petrified dog. Thousands of his employees have astonished all beholders by the filth, squalor, and wretchedness of their surroundings. The Congressional committee sent to investigate his rascalities could hardly believe that such conditions could prevail in the United States, and yet Corbin has the audacity to don the robes of a saint that he may the better serve the devil and continue his worse than Russian policy. In closing, Corbin gives the Congressional committee a whack, as follows:

Freedom from dictation is the birthright of every citizen. The politician who seeks to take away its safeguards should be reminded that the people have long memories, and that sooner or later their just judgment will be visited upon the unfaithful public servant who, for personal political reasons, by unwise legislation strikes at the independence of the individual wage-worker and his right as a free man to work at such trades, for such wages and for such persons as he pleases, without dictation from any quarter.

Austin Corbin doesn't like the appearance of a Congressional committee in his Russianized dominion. He wants freedom from dictation. He thinks it his “birthright” to rob and degrade workingmen. The fact that the people have “long memories” will yet make Austin Corbin wish they had short memories. He is yet to be more firmly in the grasp of the politician. The unfaithful public servants who have permitted Corbin to riot in his rascalities will be relieved. The days of the “unwise legislation” that “strikes at the independence of the individual wage-worker” are numbered; the wise legislation is coming that will strike at the Russianizing methods of such Christless whelps as Corbin coming as certain as day follows night; coming as certain as light dispels darkness, and it is coming to stay. Let workingmen organize and federate and get ready to hail the coming of the time when the Corbins, like prehistoric monsters, shall disappear from the earth.