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# The Strike on the New York Central

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Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 14, no. 9 (Sept. 1890), pp. 803-805.

On the night of Friday, August 7th, as unexpected as it was sudden, business on the New York Central and Hudson River railroads, from the city of New York to Buffalo was suspended — trains ceased to move — except those carrying the mails. It requires an effort of the mind to grasp the situation. The New York Central and Hudson River railroad, more properly the New York Central system of railroads' owns and leases 1,441 miles of track and employs about 20,000 hands, paying out annually for wages about \$10.5 million.

The New York Central is one of the richest, strongest and best equipped roads on the continent. It is sometimes called the "Vanderbilt road," and "Vanderbilt" is regarded as a highly expressive synonym of wealth, fabulous wealth — and it certainly does no violence to metaphor to say it means a mountain of gold.

The company has about 900 locomotives and must necessarily have 900 engineers and 900 firemen in constant employment and it is fair to estimate the total number of engineers and firemen in the employ of the company at 2,000.

In the state of New York the B of LE has 31 divisions and the B of LF 28 lodges, a total of 59 local organizations and a large percentage of the membership of these divisions and lodges, it is presumable, are employed on the Central. It is known that besides members of the organizations named, non-brotherhood men are employed, as also a large number of Knights of Labor. The troubles which led to the strike on the night of the 7th of August, seem to have been between the Knights of Labor and the officials of the road, and related as charged chiefly to the discharge of men because they were Knights of Labor, though it is asserted that the officials violated certain pledges relating to promotion and some other minor matters.

After the strike had been inaugurated, in response to the request of T.V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, the chief executive officers of the four orders represented in the federated body, visited Buffalo and New York City. While in New York, these representatives of great labor organizations became profoundly impressed with the fact that the demands of the Knights of Labor, were just, and the officials of the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad should have promptly recognized Mr. Powderly as the Chief Executive of the Knights of Labor, and that arbitration, as proposed by Mr. Powderly, for the honorable settlement of the strike, should have been conceded by the officials of the road.

This was not done, and because it was not done, and for the purpose of enabling the Supreme Council of the Federated Orders of Railway Employees to hear all the facts and to take such action as the situation demanded, the Supreme Council was convened, and its action is fully set forth in the following declarations, which were given to the public at the time the date indicates:

*Headquarters of the Supreme Council of  
United Orders of Railway Employees,  
Terre Haute, Ind., August 23, 1890.*

*To all Labor Organizations:*

Men and Brothers:—

On the night of August 7th a strike began on the New York Central A Hudson River Railroad, involving about eight thousand men in the employ of said road, who were members of a great Labor organization known as the Knights of Labor.

The reasons set forth by T.V. Powderly, chief executive of the order, may be summarized as follows:

The peremptory discharge of between fifty and sixty men, employees of the road and members of the Knights of Labor, because they were Knights of Labor, without giving them any reason whatever for their discharge.

Prior to the strike the men sought, through the representatives of the order, to have their grievances adjusted, but their appeals being disregarded, a strike was inaugurated.

At this juncture T. V. Powderly, General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor,<sup>1</sup> entered upon the task of adjusting the difficulty and of making such arrangements as would result in an

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the chief executive position of the Knights of Labor was changed from "Grand Master Workman" to "General Master Workman" in 1883.

honorable peace between the employees and the officials of the road, but his efforts were unavailing.

Mr. Powderly, comprehending the purpose of H. Walter Webb, third vice president of the company, to make war upon the Knights of Labor, and ultimately upon all Labor organizations represented on his road, sought a conference with the Supreme Council of the United Orders of Railway Employees.

The request of Mr. Powderly was granted to the extent that four members of the Council, the chief executives of the Federated Orders, met him in the city of Buffalo, N. Y., viz:

F.P. Sargent. Grand Master of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and President of the Supreme Council.

George W. Howard. Grand Chief of the Brotherhood of Railway Conductors and Vice President of the Supreme Council.

S.E. Wilkinson, Grand Master of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, and Frank Sweeney, Grand Master of the Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association.

At the conference with Mr. Powderly, at Buffalo, the members of the Supreme Council became satisfied that the officials of the road, by every consideration of fair and honorable treatment of labor organizations, should meet Mr. Powderly and adopt some just plan for the adjustment of the grievances of the striking employees.

This conclusion having been reached, the members of the Supreme Council, in response to the request of Sir. Powderly, extended their journey to New York, to afford such aid as was in their power to bring about a settlement between H. Walter Webb, third vice president of the company, the official having full authority in all matters pertaining to the strike, and T. V. Powderly, General Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, having authority to negotiate such arrangements as might end the dispute.

An interview having been secured, Mr. Powderly sought to have the men discharged heard in their own defense in the presence of Mr. Webb and himself. This fair and honorable proposition was refused.

Mr. Powderly proposed arbitration, which was also refused.

There were other propositions made by Mr. Powderly, having for their object the honorable settlement of the existing trouble, all of which were refused on the part of Mr. Webb.

The members of the Supreme Council, while in Buffalo and the city of New York, had ample opportunities to thoroughly inform themselves upon all matters concerning the strike. They saw and heard both sides. They appreciated the gravity of the situation, and comprehending impending consequences to labor organizations, deemed it advisable to convene the Supreme

Council for deliberation and such conclusions as facts should warrant.

In response to the order of F.P. Sargent, President of the Supreme Council, that body was convened in the city of Terre Haute, Indiana, on Saturday, the 23rd day of August, 1890, and remained in session until noon on Monday the 25th.

In making their report to the council, the members who went to New York to confer with Mr. Powderly found all the statements made by him fully corroborated by the facts.

In an interview with Mr. Webb, he refused to entertain any proposition looking to a settlement of the difficulty.

He would not arbitrate any question nor make any explanation or concession whatever with regard to the discharged employees.

He claimed the right to discharge employees at will, without making explanation, or giving to the victims of his power any reasons for his despotic action. He would manage his road to suit himself without reference to any rights claimed by his employees, or any rights claimed by labor organizations to interfere in the matter to protect their members.

The council, having heard the statements of its members who had visited New York for the purpose of ascertaining the true condition of affairs, exhaustively discussed every important proposition, and arrived at conclusions its follows:

1. That the position of the Knights of Labor, as set forth by T.V. Powderly, General Master Workman, and the General Executive Board of the Knights of Labor, meets with our unqualified approval.

2. That the course pursued by H. Walter Webb towards Mr. Powderly and the Knights of Labor, notwithstanding his declarations to the contrary, evinces a purpose to disrupt and destroy labor organizations on the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad, as was done by Austin Corbin on the Philadelphia & Reading.

3. That the policy of H. Walter Webb is despotic to an extent that outrages every principle of American citizenship, and if generally adopted would, if successful, reduce American workingmen to the degraded condition of serfs.

4. That H. Walter Webb, by the employment of Pinkerton thieves, thugs, and murderers, vile wretches from the slums and brothels of New York and other cities, to kill workingmen because they dared to protest against his rule and strike for their rights, is a crime of such enormity as will associate the name of H. Walter Webb forever with those who, dressed in a little brief authority,

have used their money to secure power to degrade their fellow-men.

5. That the efforts now being put forth by H. Walter Webb to destroy the Knights of Labor would, were circumstances changed, in like manner be made to destroy the organizations of engineers, firemen, conductors, trainmen and switchmen, and if successful, it is only a question of time when a similar effort will be made to seal the fate of other labor organizations.

6. That H. Walter Webb, by the course he has pursued towards the Knights of Labor, and the representatives of labor organizations has shown a total disregard of those principles of citizen sovereignty, dear to every American worthy of the name, and, considering only his money power and the corporate power of the company he represents, his acts, which speak louder than words, say, in the language of W.H. Vanderbilt, once the autocrat of the New York Central, "the public be damned."

7. H. Walter Webb seeks to support his arrogant attitude towards workingmen and labor organizations by assuming that the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad is private property and that his acts in the treatment of his employees is in no sense a matter of public concern; that he can with impunity discharge men and remand them to idleness and poverty and render them homeless wanderers without giving them any reason or explanation whatever for his conduct, disregarding the fact that the corporation for which he plays autocrat is a thing created by laws, in the making of which, the men he seeks to degrade, have a voice, which, once unified, will bring his corporation to the bar of justice where his millions and the other millions he represents, will cease to be potential in deciding questions of right.

In view of the foregoing facts, the Supreme Council puts upon record its unanimous and unqualified approval of the strike on the New York Central and

Hudson River Railroad for the causes set forth by T.V. Powderly, General Master Workman, as also the efforts made by Mr. Powderly to bring the strike to an honorable termination. In this general expression of approval of the action of the Knights of Labor, the course of Vice President Webb is as unequivocally condemned.

The power of the Supreme Council in the matter of the strike has been exerted to aid the Knights of Labor, through their representatives, to secure the recognition of their order by the officials of a rich and powerful corporation, to secure for workingmen, the victims of autocratic power, a hearing, and to perform such other kindly offices as were proper under the circumstances, demonstrating sympathy and good will, thereby aiding

the Knights of Labor to bring the strike to a close upon principles of right and justice. In this the council met with failure, owing to the autocratic attitude of H. Walter Webb.

It now becomes necessary for the Supreme Council to say, that owing to the fact that the order of Knights of Labor is not a member of the Federated Orders of Railway Employees, the laws of the Supreme Council do not permit of its doing more than it has done to aid the Knights of labor, and its inability to participate otherwise in the strike is now known and appreciated by Mr. Powderly.

Referring to the laws of the Supreme Council relating to strikes, the matter is concisely presented as follows:

In the first place, If the members of either of the organizations, on any railroad, have a grievance, it is submitted to the proper officers of the road by the local grievance committee. In the event of failure to obtain satisfaction the chief executive officer of the order having the grievance is called upon and In connection with the committee seeks to amicably adjust the difficulty. If failure still attends the efforts to adjust the trouble then the Supreme Council is convened at the headquarters of the railroad officials, with whom a conference is requested and its influence is exerted to obtain a settlement alike just to all parties. If failure still follows efforts to remove the cause of complaint, and the council by a unanimous vote decides the grievance to be of such gravity as to justify a strike, it is promptly ordered, In which event all the members of the various organizations employed on the road where the grievance exists, viz: firemen, conductors, trainmen, and switchmen, abandon their work.

In conclusion, the Supreme Council places upon record its high appreciation of the manliness of the Knights of Labor employed on the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad in struggling to maintain a principle sacred to every workingman on the continent and to all men who love justice and hope for the triumph of right over wrong as flagrant as over stained the pages of history.

Attest: **Frank P. Sargent**, *President.*  
**W.A. Sheahan**, *Secretary.*

In commenting on the foregoing declarations of the Supreme Council, the *Magazine* records its commendation of their letter and spirit.

We have little to do with the whys and wherefores of the discharge of the Knights of Labor employees on the New York Central.

The action of the officials, may have been justifiable, at least from their standpoint, though the facts warrant a different conclusion. Be this as it may, the discharged men had a right to a hearing, the denial of which by H. Walter Webb exhibits him in the role of a petty tyrant, and the facts are of such consequence that labor organizations should consider them as of vital importance.

But, dismissing such reflections, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen is profoundly concerned in another phase of the subject, the disclosure of which, more than compensates for all the trouble experienced by the members of the Supreme Council in their efforts to arrive at honest conclusions concerning the strike.

While in the City of New York, F. P. Sargent, Grand Master of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, in the course of an interview with H. Walter Webb, Third Vice President of the New York Central, said to that official: Suppose a locomotive fireman, a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, was discharged by Mr. Buchanan, the Superintendent of Motive Power, and suppose the discharged fireman should endeavor to secure reinstatement and not succeeding, a committee should take up his case in accordance with the laws of the brotherhood, and the committee should also fail to secure the man's reinstatement, after which I, as the Grand Master of the brotherhood should be called upon to adjust the difficulty with Mr. Buchanan, and should also fail, do I understand you to say, that if I called upon you, you would not treat with me as the Chief Executive officer of the brotherhood? To this pointed and important question, Mr. Webb replied: "These cases are all investigated by subordinate officers of the company, and no man is discharged without just cause."

The declaration of Grand Master Sargent, is, that "Mr. Webb evaded the question and left the impression upon my mind that he would not recognize nor treat with me as the Chief Executive officer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen."

Here then, we have the case in a nutshell. This H. Walter Webb, who has money which he never earned and by virtue of which he holds a petty office and plays tyrant, has given the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen to understand, that should he, or any of his underlings wreak their revenge upon members of the Brotherhood, he, Webb, would not recognize its Grand Chief Executive officers, for the purpose of having justice done; in a word, H. Walter Webb, acting for

the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad, places himself and his road on record in line with the policy of Austin Corbin.

There is no escape from the conclusion, that on the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad the policy relating to the recognition of organizations of railroad employees for the purpose of protecting their members against outrages, is sharply defined. The declaration is, "we will discharge men at will, and for any cause whatever that may be assigned, or for no cause whatever that would bear investigation, and no organization shall interfere to remedy any wrong inflicted."

Taking this view of the case, of what importance is an organization of railway employees on the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad in so far as the protection of its members from wrongs is concerned? Manifestly, the answer must be, that so far as H. Walter Webb can control such matters such organizations are shorn of their power and their mission is ended.

The facts as stated, have been brought out by the strike of the Knights of Labor, and warrant the full measure of denunciation contained in the declarations of the Supreme Council.

In conclusion, what of it all? This, the fight against organization of railroad employees is on. If labor is to win it must federate, combine. In the absence of this, defeat and degradation awaits the workingman.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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First Edition.