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# Grand Lodge Address to the 4th Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Indianapolis — Sept. 11, 1877 <sup>1</sup> by Eugene V. Debs

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*The following address was delivered before the Convention by E.V. Debs [*sic.*] of Terre Haute, Ind.:*

Grand Master and Brothers:—

We are again assembled in Convention for the purpose of legislating in behalf of our organization. The reception given us by the generous people of Indianapolis is a splendid acknowledgement of their

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<sup>1</sup> Owing to the absence of Grand Master W.R. Worth it abruptly fell to an ordinary delegate, 21-year old Gene Debs of Vigo Lodge No. 16, to deliver the keynote report of the Grand Lodge to assembled delegates at an opening session held the morning of September 11, one day prior to the formal start of the 4th Convention of the B of LF. Debs was not himself an executive officer of the organization at the time; four executive officers who were present seem to have yielded the task of whipping together an extemporaneous speech to the enthusiastic youngster. Debs would sit on 4 of the 8 standing committees and gain unanimous election the B of LF's "Grand Marshal," its fifth ranking official, by the convention. See: "Fourth Annual Convention, Indianapolis, Ind., September, 1877," in *Journal of Proceedings of the First Twelve Annual Conventions of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, from 1874 to 1885, Inclusive*. Terre Haute, IN: Moore and Langen, 1885; pp. 4-6, 28.

devotion to our cause, and I trust they will never have reason to regret the many favors they have bestowed upon us. In contemplating the past history of our Order and determining upon the course to pursue in the future, we should be guided by true motives and a firm determination to do right. Therefore, I would impress upon the minds of this assemblage of firemen the necessity of reflecting with due consideration upon the duties we are about to fulfill.

The past year has been one of unusual interest in connection with our Order. Obstacles of every description have been encountered, yet at each test the integrity of the institution has shown forth with a form forcible ray of brilliancy. the branch of labor which locomotive firemen represent is of the most vital interest and benefit to the commercial world. What is a railroad, and what means these endless miles of immutable iron?

Indirectly speaking, I might say: A railroad is the architect of progress, and by its magic power the uncultivated inhabitant is lifted from the shades of ignorance and idleness and placed upon an exalted line of equality. the course of a roadbed is the pathway of enlightenment. See with what rapidity our country became populated and developed after having successfully constructed and inaugurated her magnanimous railway system.

The correct guidance and management of a railroad train requires conservative judgment and involves considerable responsibility on the part of the men acting in the capacity of engineer, fireman, conductor, brakeman, etc. It is strictly necessary, therefore, that these men should be thoroughly competent to fulfill their duties in a faithful manner. Admitting this, is it not equally necessary, on the other hand, that they should in turn receive an equivalent amount of compensation? To this question every fair-minded man will readily answer in the affirmative. Contrary to this, however, the wages of employees have been reduced from time to time, until today these men can scarcely provide themselves and [their] families with the necessities of life. This continual reduction of the price of labor was the direct cause of the recent strikes, which terrified the entire nation. A strike at the present time signifies anarchy and revolution, and the one of but a few days ago will never be blotted from the records of memory.

The question has often been asked: Does the Brotherhood encourage strikers? To this question we most emphatically answer: No, Brotherhood. To disregard the laws which govern our land? To de-

stroy the last vestige of order? To stain our hands with the crimson blood of our fellow beings? We again say, No, a thousand times No.

Strikes are the last means which are resorted to by men driven to desperation after peaceful efforts to obtain justice have failed. The Brotherhood endeavors to qualify its member to become honest and upright citizens, bearing as its motto "Benevolence, Sobriety, and Industry." Benevolence being the principal object, it is obvious that we are organized to protect and not to injure. I trust that we have come together to pursue the same peaceful policy which thus far has crowned our Order with success, thanks to the many efforts on the part of our Grand Secretary and Treasurer for the able manner in which he has conducted the affairs of our organization. The name of William N. Sayre will forever be recognized by the locomotive firemen of the United States.

In conclusion, I will hope that the entire proceedings of this Convention will be effected with the utmost harmony, and when the day for adjournment arrives we will return to our respective homes confident that all in our power has been done to promote the welfare of our organization.

*The Convention then went into secret session and remained so until the hour of noon adjournment.*

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*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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