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**Closing Address to the  
5th Annual Convention  
of the Brotherhood of  
Locomotive Firemen:  
Buffalo, NY — Sept. 14, 1878  
by Eugene V. Debs**

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* [Dayton, OH],  
vol. 2, no. 11 (October 1878), pp. 341-342.

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*Following the adoption of these resolutions, Brother E.V. Debs, Associate Editor, delivered the following closing address:*

**Bro. Debs' Address.**

Worthy Grand Master and Brothers:—

I desire to claim your attention for a few moments, in order to speak to you briefly upon diverse topics which are entitled to a calm consideration. Through the kind partiality of the people of Buffalo we have met with a welcome of which we have reason to be proud. Upon entering our hall for the purpose of calling the meeting to order, we find that we are greeted by a few of the most eminent citizens of the Queen City of the Lakes. The fervent prayer of the Rev. Mr. Ward in our behalf, the generous reception and cordial welcome of the acting Mayor, Mr. Sackett, and the judicious advice given by Mr. Wilder, Master Mechanic of the New York, Lake, Erie & Western Railroad, were bestowed upon us; and I feel it to be a duty incumbent upon every member of the organization to acknowledge the kindness, and be grateful to those gentlemen, who on behalf of the people of

Buffalo, tendered us a welcome which will never be blotted from the records of memory. For all these favors we are not ungrateful, and I venture the assertion that the time will never come when it can be said that we have proven ourselves unworthy to be the recipients of the same.

The impression prevails to a great extent that we, representing a class of ordinary laborers, are but the representatives of a rude and uncultivated proportion of the inhabitants of this land. I deny this. Standing as we do beneath the frown of what society is pleased to call respectable, and we can give proof that the locomotive firemen of the United States and Canada are entitled to the same respect and consideration that is so lavishly bestowed upon many other classes of laborers. It is true we cannot appear in the gilded laces and gaudy garments necessary to put the polish upon the "gentleman" of our day, yet "beneath many a ragged dress there beats a noble heart," and on the same policy, the locomotive firemen of our land are a class of laborers who are not entirely unworthy to receive the respect of society; nor are they destitute of the principles requisite to stamp them as moral and honest citizens.

Five years ago the first rays of the Brotherhood were faintly discernible in the distance, but from that time until the present moment the sun of its existence has continued its ascendancy, until today its beams of light and intelligence have penetrated the most remote parts of the nation. As many of our people are somewhat prejudiced regarding the true merit of our brotherhood it might be well to pause and give those persons an insight into our objects and thereby demonstrate to the satisfaction of all that our institution is one of the most necessary and useful organizations that has ever been established.

First of all I want to prove conclusively that the first object of the Association is to provide for the widows and orphans who are daily left penniless and at the mercy of public charity by the death of a brother. Upon looking over our constitution and bylaws, and reading the laws contained therein, one-half of which have been established for the sole purpose of promoting our insurance system, it is obvious that the benevolent feature of our institution is the basis upon which it is founded. The widows and orphans of our deceased brothers must not suffer for the lack of attention or support. We know that mortality among railroad men is greater than among any other class of laborers, and in view of this fact it should be the duty of everyone to

recognize an institution that provides for those who are left bereaved and helpless. Benevolence, then, is the principal object, and with this as a plea, we believe we are entitled to a degree of recognition.

The idea prevails to a great extent that we are banded together for the purpose of conspiring against railway corporations, and of resorting to violent means in the event that we cannot exact our demands in a peaceable way. I brand this as an infamous lie. I challenge anyone to show me a single instance where the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen have been implicated in an act of violence toward railroad corporations. It is the sheerest folly to suppose that such would be the object of the order, when their interests are so closely allied with those of their employers. But I can tell you, my friends, of the only manner in which our brotherhood intends to take advantage over corporations. It is this. We intend to give them a class of honest and intelligent laborers, men upon whom they can depend, men who are equal in every way to the responsibility under which they are placed, and then I think that we are justified in asking for recompense in accordance with the kind of labor performed. This is our policy and we shall never deviate therefrom.

I now want to speak a few moments upon the proposed consolidation of the two orders of locomotive firemen.<sup>1</sup> For the past year the subject has been handled by both organizations, but it seems that it is impossible to effect a consolidation that would afford terms suitable to both parties. It is deemed expedient by all the members of our order to effect an annexation, as in unity there is strength, but it is apparent that the Independent Firemen's Union is less anxious to consolidate since they were to have a committee present at our Convention to hold a conference relative to the matter, but failed to present themselves. Arrangements had been made on our part to meet them with cordiality and courtesy, but they having failed to be present indicates that they were unwilling to meet us. We shall then continue to sail under the colors of the B of LF, and with our past record as a proof of our worth we can safely depend upon the future for a realization of our bright and glorious prospects.

Look at the strength of our order today, and notwithstanding we have experienced panics and a distress in the labor interests of the nation, our organization has steadily increased in numbers. We can

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<sup>1</sup> The competing firemen's organization was the Grand International Union of Locomotive Firemen (GIULF), which from 1871 published a magazine called *Locomotive Firemen's Monthly Journal* in Schenectady, New York.

point to 84 lodges, all of which are progressing finely, and this goes to show that order is alive and prosperous. Now, my brothers, all that is necessary is that we conduct ourselves in such a manner as to gain the respect of the people, to show them that we are worthy to stand beneath the beautiful motto “Benevolence, Sobriety, and Industry,” and then we will soon be recognized as a feature of universal admiration.

I should like to be more elaborate in my remarks, but time at present bids me forbear. We are about to leave one another. Those beloved friends with whom we have become so fondly attached are soon to be separated, and perhaps forever. In leaving you my brethren I can only say, God bless and protect you all. My heart is with you in all your endeavors to establish more firmly the pillars of our brotherhood. Remember our mottoes, and be determined to be a credit to the order and then we will be happy and prosperous. Though certain classes may revile against us by calling us communists and stigmatizing us otherwise, the time will never come when it can be said that we have been unfaithful to what we believe to be good and true. In conclusion allow me to bid you all adieu with hopes that we may meet again in the interest of our order.

*Following this address the delegates sang the “Sweet Bye and Bye,” after while the Convention was ordered closed, to meet in Indianapolis, Indiana, the second Monday in September 1879.*

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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