

How Unions Affected the Railroads

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Thesis Statement

The scope of this research paper is to discuss the contribution of the unions in the railroad industry.

The discussions and recordings of this paper will be limited to the scope of the literature surveyed.

Introduction

The unions in the railroad sector were among the earliest in the country. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers was established in 1863, after a first attempt to constitute a union was made as early as in 1855. By 1894 it had enrolled 32,033 members. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was formed in 1873 (Ransdell, 1995). The engagement of Eugene Victor Debs as its leader in 1880 was a watershed in its history. By July 1893 it had enrolled nearly 28,681 members. In 1883, the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, to be renamed the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen after 1890, was orchestrated at Oneonta, New York, which reached a membership of 8,540 by 1893 (Ransdell, 1995). Furthermore there were the Conductors' Brotherhood (later recognized as the Order of Railway Conductors) and the Switchmen's Union of North America, resulting from the reorganization of the defunct Switchmen's Mutual Aid Association (Ransdell, 1995).

The Pullman Strike in 1894, at the Pullman plant near Chicago, the American Railroad Union (not affiliated with the AFL) struck the company's manufacturing plant and called for a boycott of the addressing of Pullman's sleeping and parlor cars on the nation's railroads. Within a week, 125,000 railroad workers were intermeshed in a sympathy protest strike (Warne, 1995). The government swore in 3,400 special deputies; later, at the request of the railroad association, President Cleveland moved in federal troops to break the strike—despite a plea by Gov. Aitgeld of Illinois that their presence was redundant. Ultimately a sweeping federal court injunction coerced an end to the sympathy strike, and many railroad workers were blacklisted. The Pullman strikers were basically starved into submissive defeat (Warne, 1995).

Union membership developed in the early twentieth century and had a outstanding surge during World War I after the government took over the railroads. Since that time, the unions have remained strong and, though they have rarely struck, it is generally professed that they could shut down the railroads rather effectively if and when they did. Many of the unions have remained independent, but some of them are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor or with the Teamsters.

Government and the Railroad Industry

At the outset the restrictive regulation detracted crucial managerial authority from the railroads and vested it in the Interstate Commerce Commission. This was supplemented, in turn, by various legislative prohibitions of general application. In the second place, government subsidized and otherwise privileged competing means of transport. In the third place, government furthered the organization of railway unions and aided them in various ways in circumscribing and hamstringing the use of rail facilities.

Impact of Railroad Unions

It is imperative to state that no other form of transportation has had the impact on this country that the railroads had in the middle and late nineteenth century (Peterson, 1945). The silent role played by the unions, which has ushered in development across many segments in the United States, is enumerated below.

Civil War

The Civil War was the first in which the railroads were employed for military purposes. Both the Confederacy and the Union realized the power to carry large numbers of soldier's great distances in a very short period of time (Ransdell, 1995). Train could now arrange a move, which required a march of longer than a month, overnight. The railroad cars could carry the army entirely intact. Soldiers, horses and mules, ammunition, kitchen and food as well as medical supplies traveled together on one train. The soldiers and horses were ready for battle straightaway upon arriving somewhere; there was no longer the need for soldiers and animals to rest before the fight.

The Union organized its railroads during the initial days of the war. It had better lines that could bring recruits and fresh food from the Midwest. Its Baltimore & Ohio Railroad ran along the northern border of the Confederacy, which gave northern generals a great advantage (Ransdell, 1995). Moreover, the Union expended hospital trains to carry wounded to hospitals, and all the locomotive and related factories were in the North.

The South had fewer trains and lacked the means to construct new ones and make repairs on the old. They had neither national system nor direct east-west tracks. They were also very incompetent in using the rails to move troops. In short, the use of the railroad was the key ingredient to the Union's winning the Civil War.

World War I

During World War I, the railroads were called upon to transport troops and materials to east coast ports of embarkation. The dual system of both the military and the government giving orders led to holds up and confusion. The federal government "took over" the railroad system in 1918 and ran it through an agency, the United States Railroad Administration. The railroads were returned to their private owners in 1920(Ransdell, 1995).

World War II

The railroads achieved their finest hour during World War II. They not only transported troops and military equipment to both coasts, U.S. railroads had to carry products usually traveling by ship. The Japanese and Nazi submarine menace jeopardized coastal shipping during the war. Moreover, the military had its own railroad battalions that transported soldiers and supplies right to the front in both Europe and Asia. In fact, there was a separate "railroad draft" by which officers' rank was determined by age, skill and experience. The railroads accounted for 83% of the nation's traffic and 97% of all military travel (Ransdell, 1995).

In cooperation with local population, several railroads established "canteens" at stopovers. Some gave free food to service men and women in transit. The United Service Organization (USO) had areas of "home away from home" in larger stations and terminals.

More than moving people and things, the railroad industry cooperated with the government in every way possible manner. As its own workers were drafted in the U.S. Railroad Service, women took on positions with many companies. To sum up it would have been impossible for the United States to

win World War II without its railroads. The industry that consolidated the nation led it to a quick victory in a two-front, global war.

Communication

The railroads in reality gave the nation a sense of place and time. From 1840s onward, whenever a railroad entered a community, it was no longer detached by distance or season of the year. News came almost in a flash by telegraph as well as U.S. mail delivery within a matter of a few days. After the Civil War, railroad companies would cover hundreds of miles from end to end. With the greater distances, railroads noted the deviation between the time set at one end by the sun and that at the other. There would be a complete four-hour difference when traveling between New York and San Francisco. Before the railroad, traveling that distance would take over six months, so no one detected the change as it happened gradually. By train it took less than six days, and the sun and pocket watch were quickly no longer together by any stretch of the imagination, not to mention sleeping and eating schedules. Railroad leaders met in St. Louis in 1883 to amend the situation. They created time zones: the hour would begin at precisely the same minute all over the country. It would be one hour earlier in each of the zones going westward. The entire railroad system created "noon" to commence at the same minute in each time zone on November 18, 1883(Ransdell, 1995)..

Within a few weeks, every community began to adjust to "railroad time." Each town gave up its "sun dial" to align with the rest of the nation. This practice synchronized the entire country socially, economically, and psychologically to function as a complete unit. The railroad time zone concept was later adopted worldwide by the end of the century. The United States Congress legitimized the time zones in 1918(Ransdell, 1995).

Transportation Networks

Until the time of railroad building there was an absence of a transportation network in the United States. Transportation, such as it was, comprised of wagon roads, rivers, and canals. Travel from the East to the West Coast was an once-in-a-lifetime experience and return trips were uncommon.

Economy

Railroads affected the country to a much greater extent than by merely offering better transportation. The settlement models and growth of the economy were determined in large part by the railroads (Fogel, 1964). Rail construction altered the demand for coal, steel, and iron production. The railroads dictated where people lived and worked, both in urban and undeveloped areas. Moreover, the railroads' support industries attracted immigrants.

Political Policies

The major purpose of labor unions is to improve the job conditions of its members through collective bargaining with employers. Job conditions are also impacted by government action, and laws, which define its allowable procedures and areas of operation, influence collective bargaining itself. Beyond the government and the employers is the general public, whose opinions in the long run will decide what kinds of laws and employer-union relations will prevail.

Welfare Programs

Unions are focused in all matters that affect the well-being and economic security of their members. High on the list of such activities have been health and old-age insurance programs. Others have been directed toward furnishing members with better housing, recreational and credit facilities. Some activities, which were actively sponsored at one time, have been discontinued because of disappearing need; others have been abandoned because of lack of success. Among the latter are the producers' cooperatives and banking enterprises

Public Safety

As the nation's largest railroad, Union Pacific not only strives for a safe internal operation, it also is committed to public safety. By its very nature, a railroad directly interfaces with the public far more than most businesses – all along its track, and particularly at thousands of highway-rail grade crossings. To meet this commitment, UP's senior management supports an array of projects aspired at preventing crossing collisions, fatalities and injuries.

Finance

It is not an exaggeration to state that railroads created Wall Street. Before the 1840s, there was little American industry, and therefore, not much buying and selling of stock(Ransdell, 1995).. As different railroad companies got started, people became concerned in purchasing ownership in this new industry. Stock trading in railroads increased spectacularly and Wall Street gained the reputation it has in the financial world today. In fact, the rapid stock trading abbreviated the American lunch period. Restaurants formed "fast lunch" counters near Wall Street stock houses so shareholders could return to the market quickly to keep an eye on their fortunes.

Many railroad companies were constituted, and many went under. Many speculated: they purchased risky stock at cheap prices. They either made a lot of money or lost their fortunes. Such investing caused "booms" and "busts." Whichever, the railroads were the undisputed leaders of the financial world.

Scandals aside, railroads were Wall Street leaders until the Great Depression in the 1930s. As the builders of United States industry, they were also at the forefront of the nation's finance and markets. They were the steel and mortar of the buildings on Wall Street today(Ransdell, 1995)..

Conclusion

The contribution of the railroads to the nation was made possible by the various unions that underwent a tumultuous period right from its start. The unions paved way to improve the quality of life of its employees, enhanced the bargaining power and the overall economy of the nation.

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