

CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW ON THE MIDDLE CLASS UNION

Need for Organization of Public to Protect Itself Against Strikers and Profiteers Set Forth by Former Senator—Objectors Answered, Advantages Outlined

CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW, who was 86 years old last Friday, will not accede to the requests made in scores of letters that he organize a Middle Class Union, but his reason for declining is not doubt as to the practicability or effectiveness of such an organization. He is satisfied that it is needed and is feasible.

Mr. Depew's prestige as an orator and a wit would give great initial impetus to the organization of a Middle Class Union, but his duties as chairman of the Board of Directors of the New York Central Railroad and director of many great corporations keep him busy.

"It is a mighty big job," he said the other day in his office as chairman of the New York Central, "and I'm not going to undertake it on my eighty-sixth birthday, because I think it might impose hurdles on my efforts and ambitions to reach a hundred which I couldn't jump—and I am not riding for a fall!" But he is confident that there is enough "public spirit and ambitious youth" in every community to effect an organization; and he is willing, in anticipation, to present the arguments for such a union and to answer the objections already offered to it.

"When I was called up suddenly (after I had been assured that it would not be done) to speak at a luncheon of the Merchants' Association," he explained, "other speakers had been discussing the transportation situation and the trouble the strike had imposed on the whole public. I had been thinking over the need for a union of the public, because I saw clearly that the way to counteract the evils due to the stoppage of transportation, through the improper use of the power of the unions, must come through the proper use of the power of another union. Who should constitute that union? Everybody affected! All who want coal, all who want food, all those mothers and fathers who want milk for their children, all those persons who want to move from their homes in the suburbs to their places of work or business, should have an organization through which to make themselves felt in such an emergency.

"I called that the great middle class. Statistics show that it comprises 80 or 90 per cent. of our population.

"In the great battles of the world the parties in the fight have usually been the only ones immediately interested. In a prizefight there are but two participants, but in some strikes, such as those affecting transportation, there is no ringside. Everybody is a participant. The 80 per cent. which suffers most is at present unorganized. What we need is a union of that majority, a union of the middle class consumer, whether he be a consumer of food or transportation.

"There may be a strike in an isolated industry, in a single factory, which affects only the employer with his capital and the employe with his income. But in a strike affecting transportation there are no bystanders in the real sense. To a certain extent the same thing is true of a coal strike. Not only the capitalists and the workmen, but salaried men



CHAUNCEY M. DEPEW.

and women not immediately concerned in the industry find themselves deprived suddenly of the usual things necessary to their living or necessary to make life worth living. It would seem that in such disputes some other rule would be required than is applied in the usual industrial conflicts.

"Let us narrow the field to one class. Commuters are among the best citizens of any large community. They are persons who work in cities, but live in the country, in order to get the benefits of better air and light, of satisfactory conditions for the education of their children, and so on. To deprive them of facilities for getting to their work and back to their homes is as great a cruelty as though an invading army were to lay siege to the city from which they get their living. It does everything to them such a situation would do, except to

seize their homes; and if it last long enough the Sheriff will do that.

"Our civilization must be proved a humiliating failure if some means cannot be provided which will both prevent the stoppage of traffic and at the same time examine and adjust equitably any grievance the complaining railroad man may have. As a matter of fact the whole power of any subdivision of a class that can prevent all other classes from functioning in their daily life is due to the organization of a small minority who control the machinery necessary for the existence of the public. If by some means the public were organized, then 1,000 men could not prevent 300,000 persons from Long Island and New Jersey and Westchester from getting to their work in New York and back to their homes.

"It does not require that all the

brotherhoods or unions engaged in railroading act together to stop transportation. Any one of them which is vital to the movement of passengers and commodities can paralyze the whole industry, as well as the activities of their co-workers. Now, if the public were organized for the public benefit, the organization would express public opinion. Every organization is immensely susceptible to public opinion. The very capable, able and shrewd men who are the leaders of the labor unions appeal at once to public opinion to support their cause. If they appeal to a public in distress because of their action, they appeal to a crowd very mad and very resentful; but if they could apply to an organization capable of giving voice and effect to public approval, they would be sure of a hearing, and, if they were in the right, sure of justice without the stoppage of transportation.

"For the people most susceptible to public opinion are the managers and directors of the transportation companies. Their sole support is the public, and if their customers through an organized public opinion made a decision it would at once affect their judgments and decisions and actions.

"In our complex civilization, which imposes great difficulties in getting together for harmonious action, nobody has any right to expect a Utopia or a heaven on earth. I have been dealing with the public and appealing to the public all my life. I have been for more than sixty-four years on the platform, presenting to audiences my views upon policies I thought best for all of us and defending the course of the corporation of which I was an officer. I have always found that sanity and common sense are not a residuum to be pumped up by a miracle, but that they are diffused overwhelmingly in general human nature. It doesn't require an X-ray to find them, but a discussion which promotes mental activity brings sanity and common sense into active play. To have that discussion there must be an organization.

"There is plenty of public spirit and ambitious youth to organize every community, with a view to detecting the disturber of the public peace and dignity, so that the disturber for his own comfort and the comfort of his family can't stay there. The whole question gets back to the often-thrashed-out and sometimes successfully operated community spirit and community welfare.

"Theoretically matters affecting the public peace and the public welfare are regulated by the courts. Theoretically, then, the courts are the refuge of the

public when their comfort is invaded and their very existence threatened by a coal strike or a transportation strike. As a matter of fact we still have these troubles. The courts do not reach everybody. A Middle Class Union would be everybody.

"It is argued that our Government is designed to do exactly what it is proposed to do by means of a Middle Class Union. In a democracy the ballot is supposed to be the last resort. But when the fruit of the ballot is a legislator whose life is his re-election he often finds his life threatened by a minority organization, while there is no majority organization to reassure him or defend him or bring the majority influence to bear on him.

"We have a Government by minority. The majority is helpless because it has no organized means of expression. That is the answer to those shallow critics who say that the Government can be expected to do the things the Middle Class needs to have done for its protection.

"As a matter of fact, this question is not strictly within the province of politics. The troubles of the Middle Class are not so much political as economic. And it is impossible to do more than mitigate the effect of troublesome economic conditions through political or legislative action. The economic situation often resolves itself to this: Employers and employes constitute the producing class, and industrial conflict between them is waged without regard to the consumers, who are the Middle Class. (It is true that employers and employes are themselves consumers, but in their disputes they ignore their own rights in that capacity just as they ignore the rights of the public.) What is needed is an organization of the consumer class, the clerks and salesmen and professional men and so on, who make up the unprotected bulk of our population. In the recurring industrial disputes the unions and the employers affect production. A Middle Class Union would have power over the other factor—demand.

"Let me put that another way: Prices are regulated by supply and demand. Those are the chief factors, and we need consider no others for the present. The employers and employes control or vitally affect supply. The Middle Class should organize so as to control or at least vitally affect demand.

"This brings us to another argument advanced against the Middle Class Union, the assertion that it couldn't be formed because of the diversity between

AS VICE PRESIDENT MARSHALL SEES IT.

"Watching Congress at work I sometimes get the notion that we only legislate for the very rich or for the comparatively small group of organized workmen. The real public, the great majority of the people, seemingly have no voice in our legislation.

"But this condition will not continue. The public will stand just so much, and then it will assert itself. There are more than sixty millions of us plain, every-day Americans. We are more than all the hyphenates, and all the profiteers and all the union labor men combined. We are the majority, and as the majority the day will come when we will assert ourselves."—Thomas R. Marshall, in The Evening Post, April 21, 1920.

the interests and objects of the groups which would comprise it. That is as absurd as to say you couldn't have a golf club composed of doctors and lawyers and buttonhole makers. The common object of a Middle Class Union would be the protection of the consumer. All groups of the Middle Class have a common interest as consumers, just as all members of a golf club have a common interest in the game. The transportation strike hit the doctor of philosophy who commuted to his classes at Columbia just as it hit the shoe salesman who commuted to Fifth Avenue. At one point their interests were identical, however widely they may have varied at other points.

"The loose thinking which has brought about this objection is due partly to a misapprehension of the nature of a Middle Class Union. The labor unions as we know them are built on craft lines and embody the guild principle. A Middle Class Union would not embody such a principle. It would not be built on lines of production, but upon the vastly more inclusive lines of consumption.

"It must not be supposed that a Middle Class Union would look primarily to adjustment of wages. The goal of its members would not be a strike, but their own protection in case of a strike by others, or their own protection against manifestly exorbitant prices. If, for instance, the Middle Class Union were organized now, and its members found that the prices of clothes were extortionate, they need not resort to overalls, and thereby force up the price of a garment necessary to certain classes; they need only to agree to wear old clothes, and to buy no new ones until the prices were reduced to a reasonable level. It would thus become a mark of distinction to be shabby. It would be a union badge. Nobody would be ashamed of it. On the contrary, the wearer of last season's suit would be proud of it. And there is nothing more certain than that the prices of clothes, if they had been established on a profiteering basis, would speedily be reduced.

"I would not be urging the practicability and need of a Middle Class Union if I were opposed to unions. I believe in them. During most of my life I have been in close contact with the railway unions, especially when I was in active authority as President of this railroad. I found the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, as then governed, actually the governor and stabilizer in the labor machinery of the company. I do not believe it is going too far to say we couldn't have got along without it."

Among the many letters Mr. Depew received, after his talk to the Merchants' Association, some were from persons who suggested themselves as secretaries of a Middle Class Union, and some from persons who said they had already formed such an organization and had not found support for it. But the most of them urged the imperative necessity of the union and begged Mr. Depew either to form it or to formulate its principles.

Perhaps it will be the next thing on the books—who knows?