

Union Pacific

When first unto this country I was twenty years of age
Seeking for adventure and for glory
I crossed the broad Atlantic, and upon the landing stage
I vowed that there would be a life here for me
Now I knew no life but farming and the shovel and the plow
I did intend to leave so far behind me
For my blood had poured on down into that hard and stony ground
And I vowed no more that in the fields you'd find me

In New York town the work was scarce and every door was barred
And more poured through the harbor every morning
My back was strong, my shoulders broad, my hands were rough and hard
But tighter grew my belt with each new dawning
So with my last Yankee dollar I took passage on a train
And lit out west in search of better times
I landed in Wyoming, where it's first I heard the name
Of Durant and the Union Pacific railroad line

*And it's bad luck to the barons and the bosses on the line
For they'll break a workman's body and they'll rob him of his time
They'll say the pay is decent, but I tell you boys, it's true
You can only break so many stones before the stones break you
You can only break so many stones before the stones beak you*

Now the Union Pacific was to be a grand affair
And stretch from California to Missouri
There were hands aplenty needed, and they said the pay was fair
And of it they spun such a lovely story
Mr. Durant had a plan, they said, to build a great railway
That would stretch from sea to sea across this land
I hired on that morning and they sent me out that day
With crowbar, pick, and shovel in my hands

We drove the spikes and laid the rails and leveled out the ground
With pick and hammer, dynamite, and all
We slept in tents where cold winds blew with high and mournful sound
And woke at dawn to hear the foreman's call
And then, one fateful morning when our payday came again
Not a man received his thirty or his five
There's none of us will work for free among the railroad men

And the word that spread all up and down the rails was “organize”

Chorus

We held a meeting in the camp and spoke of our demands
Better wages, better hours, and the like
We swore Durant would listen if together we could stand
And if he didn't, we would call a strike
Next day we called the foreman and we told him then and there
We would not work until we saw our pay
The foreman he turned scarlet and began to curse and swear
Then turned upon his heels and marched away

That night we woke to thunder all around our canvas walls
And all around were screams and rifle fire
We saw the men in masks take aim and saw our workmates fall
And screamed and ran as bodies piled higher
We had built a railroad bridge a week or so before
That stretched full fifty feet into the air
Back to the bridge the leaders of our little strike they bore
And without a trial hung the union organizers there

Chorus

We woke up in the morning to a sun of bloody red
And counted six good men who'd rise no longer
We cursed the name of Durant as we tended to our dead
And buried them before the light grew stronger
The foreman came back to us as the gloaming turned to day
Said “boys, you'd best get back to work this time”
We'd nowhere else to go and we would starve without our pay
And with heavy hearts we went back on the line

Now the years have passed with blood and sweat and I am nearly free
For the golden spike tomorrow will be driven
I'll leave this cruel country and its farce of liberty
And for my labor may I be forgiven
For liberty and freedom they are notions grand and fine
But many men who went out west to find them
Lie buried underneath the Union Pacific line
For no crime but speaking out against the tyrants who would bind them

Chorus

Composed by: Alex Sturbaum

Appears on *River Run Wide*

The specific events of this song are fictitious, but brutal suppression of worker's rights is a common theme in American history. Our past is not as squeaky clean as we'd like to imagine.