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Eugene V. Debs: an American paradox

*Abolition of child labor, equal pay
for equal work for women, and pensions
for both men and women were among 'radical' causes
supported by Debs during the early 20th century*

J. Robert Constantine

Eugene Victor Debs played an important role in popularizing ideas and ideals which were denounced as radical, even “un-American,” in the early part of the 20th century. These ideas later were considered orthodox and are now viewed as traditional. His career marked an honorable chapter in the history of American dissent, a history significantly enhanced by Debs’ willingness to pay a heavy price for holding unpopular views.

Debs was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on November 5, 1855. His parents had emigrated from Alsace, France, in 1849 and settled in Terre Haute soon thereafter. Debs left school when he was 14 years old and took a job in the Terre Haute railroad shop, which paid him 50 cents a day for scraping grease and paint off locomotives. In 1871, he became a locomotive fireman. He joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1875, and soon began serving as an organizer and recording secretary for the union. He was elected associate editor of the *Firemen’s Magazine* at the national convention held in 1878. In 1880, he was elected as the national secretary-treasurer of the union and editor of the *Firemen’s Magazine*.

Union official

Debs served as city clerk of Terre Haute from 1879 to 1883. He was elected to the Indiana legislature in 1885. His public service appeared not to have interfered with his dedication to the interests of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and during the 1880’s, he gained recog-

ognition as an effective union organizer and labor journalist. In addition to organizing numerous Firemen’s locals, Debs also organized locals for the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, the Switchmen’s Mutual Aid Association, the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, and the Order of Railway Telegraphers. He also assisted in the organization of carpenters’ and painters’ locals in Terre Haute and in other Indiana cities and responded to calls for help in organizing miners’ locals.

Frustrated by the failure of the railroad brotherhoods to maintain solidarity in their dealings with management, especially during strikes, Debs resigned as secretary-treasurer in 1892. In 1893, he founded and became president of the American Railway Union.

Throughout its brief, dramatic career, the American Railway Union attracted thousands of members. It won a notable victory in an 18-day strike against James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railroad in April 1894. A few months later, the new union (against Debs’ advice), but in sympathy with striking Pullman Palace Car workers, voted to launch a boycott of Pullman cars on all of the railroads served by the union. The resulting Pullman Strike of 1894, possibly the most famous strike in American labor history, paralyzed much of the commerce in the western half of the Nation before being broken by an alliance of railroad management and the full legal and military power of the Federal Government.

In the aftermath of the Pullman Strike, Debs was imprisoned for 6 months at the Woodstock, Illinois, jail for violating the “blanket” injunc-

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tion handed down by the Federal court in Chicago against the American Railway Union leadership. While in prison, Debs became convinced that no union could protect the interests of workers in the prevailing economic and political system, and, in January 1897, he announced his conversion to socialism.

Political candidate

During the next 30 years, Debs carried a message of democratic socialism to millions of Americans, arguing that unbridled capitalism was destroying democracy at home and leading to war abroad. He insisted that only through industrial unionism in the economic realm and socialism in the political realm, could workers' interests be protected. His influence in shaping his generation's attitudes and opinions on public issues resulted chiefly from (1) his Presidential campaigns; (2) his extensive writings; and (3) his speaking and lecture tours. After joining in the creation of the Socialist Party of America, Debs was that party's Presidential candidate in 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920. Although Debs never believed that he would be elected President, he waged energetic and dramatic campaigns across the country, attracting enormous crowds. More important historically, he familiarized millions of Americans with ideas that were considered "radical" when Debs advocated them, in the period before World War I. His ideas, however, were gradually co-opted by the major political parties and have since become public policy. Among those ideas were the abolition of child labor, the right of women to vote, a graduated income tax, the direct election of U.S. Senators, unemployment compensation for workers, employer liability laws, a national department of education, and pensions for men *and* women. Some of these ideas were adopted by the Democratic and Republican parties before Debs' death in 1926, and others later evolved into State and national laws.

Debs' most dramatic and colorful Presidential campaign was in 1908, when the Socialist Party chartered a train, "The Red Special," which carried Debs on a "whistle stop" tour of the Nation, a 15,000-mile trip that was widely reported on in both the Socialist and non-Socialist press. On election day, Debs received only 420,793 votes out of 14 million cast, but he considered the campaign a successful "educational enterprise," and urged Socialists to begin immediately to prepare for the next Presidential election.

In 1912, Debs waged a vigorous campaign against Woodrow Wilson (who won the election), Theodore Roosevelt, and the incumbent

President, William Howard Taft. It was noted that during the campaign, both Wilson and Roosevelt had "stolen Debs' thunder," that is, taken over several of the ideas of the Socialist Party and made them their own. Debs received nearly a million votes, or roughly 6 percent of the total cast on election day. This was his best performance in a Presidential election and he considered his standing a moral victory for many of the ideas he had long advocated.

Debs declined to run for the Presidency in the 1916 election, and instead ran unsuccessfully for Congress. But, in 1920, Debs was once again the Socialist Party's candidate in what turned out to be one of the strangest Presidential elections in American history. He was obliged to campaign from the Atlanta Federal penitentiary, where he was serving a 10-year sentence for violating the Espionage Act. (One of his slogans was, "From the Jail House to the White House.") During the campaign, he was permitted to issue one statement each week. He took this opportunity to

The Labor Hall of Fame

The Labor Hall of Fame, an activity of the Friends of the Department of Labor, posthumously honors Americans who have contributed most to enhance the quality of lives of American workers.

The twelve persons elected to the Labor Hall of Fame are Samuel Gompers, John R. Commons, Cyrus S. Ching, Frances Perkins, John L. Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, George Meany, Walter P. Reuther, Henry J. Kaiser, Robert F. Wagner, James P. Mitchell, and Eugene V. Debs.

A panel composed of national leaders from unions, industry, academia, and government, and chaired by Monsignor George Higgins, makes the selection to the Labor Hall of Fame. Former Secretary of Labor W. J. Utery, Jr., chairs Friends of the Department of Labor, an independent membership organization established in 1987 "to support the traditional programs and goals of the U.S. Department of Labor, and to generally support the cause of improved labor-management relations."

The Hall of Fame is housed in the north lobby of the Frances Perkins Building, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20212. Friends of the Department of Labor invites Hall of Fame nominations. They may be submitted to Friends of the Department of Labor, Box 2258, Washington, DC 20013.

Eugene V. Debs

attack his opponents, Warren Harding and James Cox, and the “Too Old Parties” for their fence-straddling positions, and to criticize the government’s role in the “Red Scare” of 1919–20, in which hundreds of anarchists, Communists, Socialists, Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World), and others who were considered “un-American” were the victims of physical violence, arrests without warrant, and deportation. Harding won a landslide victory, but, once again, Debs received nearly a million votes, even though the Socialist Party had by that time suffered mortal wounds from massive wartime defections and the secession of members attracted to the new Communist Party splinter groups. In his five Presidential campaigns, Debs had won the support of hundreds of thousands of men and women who believed in his vision of a society which would provide dignity and security to all citizens in a democratic political system. From a handful of “radicals” in 1900, the vision came to be shared by working men and women all over the country—from farmers in Oklahoma and miners in Colorado to textile mill workers in New Jersey. These workers were joined by many of that era’s leading writers—Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Carl Sandburg, and Theodore Dreiser—and by leading professors, clergy, social workers, and social reformers, and by a large number of men and women of considerable wealth.

Whenever there was a major strike or labor unrest, Debs was most likely to be on the scene.

Writer and editor

In addition to his Presidential campaigns, Debs’ ideas on some of the vital issues of his time were spread through his thousands of editorials, essays, published interviews, letters to editors, and pamphlets. Although Debs’ formal education was limited, his family life exposed him to books and literature, especially the German and French classics. An avid reader, Debs sprinkled his writings with allusions to classical and modern literature.

When he became editor of the *Firemen’s Magazine*, Debs had little experience as a writer, but he developed a skill for turning out hard-hitting editorials on a wide range of topics. Beginning as a conservative trade unionist, who opposed boycotts and strikes, Debs gradually altered his stance on such issues and, by the late 1880’s, he considered strikes an essential and legitimate tool for workers. In hundreds of editorials published in the *Firemen’s Magazine*, Debs urged workers to educate themselves on vital issues, to join unions, to strengthen their unions’ political clout at election time, and to pressure politicians to secure the passage and enforcement of prolabor laws. By 1890, the

Firemen’s Magazine was widely recognized as one of the leading labor journals in the country and Debs was often asked by others in the labor field (including Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, and Terence V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor) to contribute articles to their publications. That same year, the editor of *Labor Engineer* said that Debs was “by far the ablest labor speaker and writer in America.”

After leaving the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Debs became the editor of the *Railway Times*, the weekly paper of the American Railway Union, and later served on the editorial staffs of the *Appeal to Reason*, a Socialist weekly, and the *National Rip-Saw*, a Socialist monthly. Given a free hand by these two publications, Debs continued his advocacy of the cause of workers and his insistence that industrial unions were the answer to the needs of the millions of unskilled or semiskilled American workers.

In 1905, he joined with Daniel De Leon and William Haywood in launching the Industrial Workers of the World. He soon left that organization in protest against its policies regarding the use of sabotage and “direct action.” He also broadened the scope of his editorials to attack racism; to defend the rights of women to vote, to earn equal pay for equal work, and to practice birth control; to oppose war, in general, and America’s entry into World War I, in particular; and to defend First Amendment rights, especially that of freedom of speech and press. (Debs was on the founding board of the American Civil Liberties Union.) Debs’ writings sought to promote and protect the interests of workers, and an index of his work would resemble a catalog of late 19th and early 20th century labor history. It seemed appropriate that, in poor health, and shortly before his death, Debs launched a new weekly, the *American Appeal*, which he hoped would reverse the antilabor tendencies of the 1920’s “Era of Normalcy.”

Speaker and lecturer

Debs’ role as a gifted speaker and lecturer should be added to his roles as a Presidential candidate and prolific writer. As with his writing skills, Debs’ skills as a public speaker were self-taught and slowly acquired. Taking as his models Wendell Phillips and Robert Ingersoll, whose speeches he had heard in Terre Haute in the 1870’s, Debs eventually developed a speaking style characterized as “fiery” by his admirers and “incendiary” by his critics. Whatever they were called, Debs’ speeches attracted huge crowds (15,000 people paid from 15 cents to \$1

to hear him speak at Madison Square Garden in New York City). Whenever there was a major strike or other labor unrest, Debs was most likely to be on the scene, urging worker solidarity, and helping raise funds to support striking workers and their families.

The central theme of Debs' speeches was his vision of better days to be ushered in by industrial unionism and socialism. But many of his speeches were given in support of the social reform movements of the time: Margaret Sanger's work on behalf of women, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's attacks on Jim Crow, the defense of immigrant anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and many others; and he steadfastly opposed the Prohibition Movement leading to the 18th Amendment!

Debs' most controversial speech was delivered in Canton, Ohio, in June 1918. Following the outbreak of World War I in 1914, in both his writings and speeches, Debs had denounced the war, opposed the Wilson administration's preparedness program, and demanded that the United States remain neutral. His Canton speech contained little that was new—the relationship between capitalism and war, the uneven burden of war on capitalists and workers, the injustice of the convictions and imprisonments being carried out under the government's wartime loyalty program—but it was taken by the Federal Government as a violation of the Espionage Act and became the basis of Debs' indictment and conviction under that law. At his trial in Cleveland, in September 1918, Debs acknowledged that he had made the Canton speech as reported but insisted that his criticism of the war was protected by the First Amendment. He was found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Debs' imprisonment from April 1919 to December 1921 appeared to have elevated him from a nationally-known radical labor and Socialist "agitator" to a symbolic martyrdom. The "Debs case" became a rallying point for Socialists and others who deplored the nature of the wartime "loyalty" program and the excesses of the Red Scare following the war. (The one million votes he received in the 1920 election clearly included the votes of many who were not Socialists.) Amnesty and "Free Debs" rallies were held around the country. Led by the American Legion, there was also a "Keep Debs in Prison" campaign. President Wilson was flooded with letters, telegrams, and petitions seeking Debs' release, but Wilson ignored all such appeals. One of the ironies of Debs' career was that the calls for his release found a warmer reception from the "conservative" Warren Harding than from the "liberal" Wilson. Harding ordered Debs'

release at Christmas time in 1921.

Following his release, Debs' remaining years were spent trying to recover his health (prison had taken a heavy toll) and to revive the Socialist Party. He was pressured to join the newly founded (1919) Communist Party or one of the other groups that viewed the Soviet system as a model for American workers to follow. But, while praising the Russian Revolution and the overthrow of the czar in 1917, Debs rejected the Soviet system, attacked its suppression of dissenting opinions, and renewed his allegiance to democratic socialism and the Socialist Party.

Once again, he undertook extensive speaking tours, attracting large audiences, and providing much needed financial aid to the party. Now, his speeches concentrated on the need for prison reform and the release of Sacco and Vanzetti. His prison experiences had convinced him that the black and the poor received far harsher sentences for their crimes than did affluent whites, and that their treatment as prisoners was much more severe. Debs argued that the conviction and death sentences of Sacco and Vanzetti were the result of prejudice against their radical political and economic beliefs and a reflection of the bias built into the capitalist judicial system. Debs' ideas on the subject were summed up in "Sacco and Vanzetti: An Appeal to American Labor," a 1926 pamphlet, whose proceeds were given to the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee.

The large crowds and outpouring of affection, which marked Debs' speaking tours, however, did not reverse the decline of the Socialist Party's membership nor add to its appeal to voters. A special national convention of the party in Cleveland, in 1925, was so poorly attended and, in Debs' view, so poorly organized, that he judged the party to be "as near a corpse as a thing can be." Debs was urged to run in the 1924 Presidential campaign but he emphatically declined and supported Robert M. LaFollette against John W. Davis, the Democratic candidate, and the incumbent Calvin Coolidge, who won in a landslide.

In January 1926, Debs used part of the proceeds from his 1925 nationwide speaking tour to launch the *American Appeal*, a weekly paper intended to revitalize the Socialist Party and to address the problems created by the probusiness, antiunion environment of "Normalcy." For a time, his editorials against the open shop, the Ku Klux Klan, and the treatment of Sacco and Vanzetti resembled his earlier writing. But in the summer of 1926, his declining health required him to return to the sanitarium where he had spent extended periods in 1922 and 1924. He died in Elmhurst, Illinois, on October 20, 1926. □

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