



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

"Red Special": Eugene V. Debs and the Campaign of 1908

Author(s): H. Wayne Morgan

Source: *Indiana Magazine of History*, September 1958, Vol. 54, No. 3 (September 1958), pp. 211-236

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27788589>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/27788589?seq=1&cid=pdf-](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27788589?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

[reference#references_tab_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/27788589?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Indiana Magazine of History*

JSTOR

INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

Volume LIV

SEPTEMBER 1958

NUMBER 3

“Red Special”: Eugene V. Debs and the Campaign of 1908

*H. Wayne Morgan**

The days when American socialists counted their sympathizers in hundreds of thousands are gone, and many students and historians are unaware that fifty years ago the Socialist Party of America was a power to be reckoned with in presidential elections. The history books that extol the campaign exploits of William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson often fail to record that the most famous American socialist, Eugene Victor Debs, waged five presidential campaigns between 1900 and 1920. None of these campaigns was more colorful than that of 1908, the year of the “Red Special.” Preserved in song and poem, as well as in the fading memories of participants and bystanders, the Socialist party’s campaign of that year illustrated the vigor of the organization and the amount of effort which Socialists could pour into a national campaign.

By 1908, the Socialist Party of America had made considerable progress toward fulfilling the promise it had shown in the presidential election of 1904. It could now claim its place as the third party of American politics, a position it had taken from the Prohibitionists in 1904. Politically, the Socialists were gaining strength on local levels. In Milwaukee, one of their strongholds, they had come close to capturing the mayor’s office in 1906 and had used their influence with

* H. Wayne Morgan is John Randolph and Dora E. Haynes Fellow for 1958-1959 at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he has served as teaching assistant in the Department of History. Research for this article, however, was done at the Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California.

the voters to force the parties in power to improve municipal services, public transportation, and to assist other reform groups in combating corruption in local politics.¹ The Wisconsin Socialists had also elected some of their number to the state legislature and to the Milwaukee city council.² Elsewhere, Socialists had shown growing strength in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and in various areas in the Midwest.³

In addition to devoting a great deal of time, energy, and strength to waging electoral contests, the Socialists continued their work in the labor movement. They acted as an ever-present irritant to conservative leadership in the American Federation of Labor, which feared the Socialists' tactics of "boring from within." Furthermore, several prominent Socialists, among them the nationally known and influential Eugene V. Debs, helped found the radical Industrial Workers of the World in 1905.⁴ The I.W.W. was especially dedicated to organizing the "unorganizable" workers in the mines, mills, and lumber camps of the country, and the A.F. of L. quite rightly looked upon it as a rival. Particularly in the West, the I.W.W. acquired a radical tone that caused it to be tarred with the brush of anarcho-syndicalism, and it quickly became anathema to other labor unions and labor leaders.

In addition to political action and work with organized labor, the Socialists by 1908 had begun what promised to be a substantial program for the farmers of the West and Midwest.⁵ Socialism was more and more becoming a topic of serious conversation in the middle-class drawing room, the

¹ Robert Hunter, "The Socialist Party in the Present Campaign," *American Review of Reviews*, XXXVIII (September, 1908), 295-296.

² By 1908, there were 6 Socialists in the Wisconsin legislature and 12 Socialists on the Milwaukee city council. A total of 48 Socialists held elective office in the state as a whole. Roland Phillips, "Unfurling the Red Flag," *Harper's Weekly*, LII (September 26, 1908), 14.

³ See *Ibid.*, and "Socialism in the New York Campaign," *Outlook*, LXXXIV (November 3, 1906), 541-542.

⁴ See Debs' speech in *Proceedings of the First National Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York, 1905), 142-147.

⁵ Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1949), 269-270; Grady McWhiney, "Louisiana Socialists in the Early Twentieth Century: A Study of Rustic Radicalism," *Journal of Southern History*, XX (August, 1954), 315-336; Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken* (New York, 1940), 255-267.

scholar's den, and the church pulpit.⁶ A rising quantity of literature favorable to the theory of socialism, often written by nonsocialists, paid tribute to socialism's place in the progressive movement that dominated American political and social life between 1901 and 1909.⁷

Though their growing strength seemed substantial, the Socialists posed no immediate threat to the political control of the two older parties; but they stood as a reminder that they were perhaps only the first expression of a much larger potential. The Socialists who were elected to public office were usually moderates pledged to political reform rather than to revolution. They usually seemed content to work for a more distant socialistic utopia. Their propaganda not only contributed to their own success but in some areas, such as Wisconsin, also acted as a reform lever against the older parties in power.

The delegates who converged on Chicago in May, 1908 for the Socialist party convention had reason to be cheerful, for they represented a party whose prospects had greatly improved since the national convention of 1904. They spoke for more than 40,000 dues paying members, twice as many as in 1904, and represented an organization that was divided into approximately 3,000 locals in nearly every state and territory in the Union. The dues and contributions paid into the national headquarters supported a propaganda program that operated day and night to spread the message of socialism. A number of full time paid organizers, as well as an estimated 4,000 volunteer stump speakers, were in the field the year around on behalf of socialism. More than 100 weekly newspapers were pro-Socialist, and the party boasted that its newspapers in Chicago and New York alone served more than 70,000 readers.⁸ The *Appeal to Reason*, always a favorite among Socialists, reported an average circulation of 350,000 copies per issue; and *Wilshire's Magazine* sold 270,000 copies

⁶ See Ernest Poole, "Harnessing Socialism," *American Magazine*, LXVI (September, 1908), 427-432; Upton B. Sinclair, "The Socialist Party," *World's Work*, XI (April, 1906), 7431-7432; "Why I Left the Ministry for Socialist Propaganda," *Independent*, LVIII (June 8, 1905), 1284-1288; James T. Van Renssalaer, "The Identity of Socialism and Christianity," *Arena*, XXXIV (July, 1905), 39-44; J. O. Bentall, "Why I am a Christian Socialist," *Ibid.*, XXXVIII (June, 1907), 600-604.

⁷ David A. Shannon, "The Socialist Party Before the First World War: An Analysis," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXVIII (September, 1951), 279-288.

⁸ Robert Hunter, "The Socialist Party in the Present Campaign," *American Review of Reviews*, XXXVIII (September, 1908), 293-299.

every month.⁹ In other cities, Socialist and pro-Socialist newspapers reported rising circulation figures.¹⁰

Only seven years had passed since the formation of the unified Socialist Party of America, but the membership had already undergone striking changes. These changes were reflected by the delegates who came to Chicago in 1908 to attend to party business and to nominate a presidential ticket. Most of the founders of the party had been young people engaged in radical pursuits within journalism, lecturing, labor organizing, and the professions.¹¹ Many of their successors at the convention of 1908 bore testimony to the growing strength of the "parlor socialists" within the party, those Socialists who were willing to reform rather than to revolt. Their watchword was orderly evolution toward state socialism; they rejected the class struggle and the need for social revolution. They were usually ministers, lawyers, writers, professors, and small businessmen.¹²

These "Slowcialists," as their more radical comrades called them, were opposed within the party by a radical left wing and by a group of centrists, who hoped to avoid violence but who called for a more forthright socialism. The more radical labor organizers, lecturers, journalists, and a few national figures like Eugene V. Debs either belonged openly to the radical group or flirted with it. The organization of the I.W.W. by this group in 1905 and their continued talk of social revolution and labor violence alarmed the right wing of the party, and by 1908 lines were drawn between the groups for a struggle over policy making organs and for control of the party machinery.¹³

⁹ The figures are taken from N. W. Ayers and Son's *American Newspaper Annual* (Philadelphia, 1908), 293, 615. The *Appeal to Reason* was published in Girard, Kansas, and served a large midwestern and western audience. *Wilshire's Magazine* was then published in New York City. Many labor and independent newspapers carried a great deal of material favorable to the Socialists.

¹⁰ David A. Shannon, "The Socialist Party Before the First World War: An Analysis," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXXVIII (September, 1951), 279-288.

¹¹ Ira Kipnis, "The American Socialist Movement 1897-1912," (New York, 1952), 81-106.

¹² Robert Hoxie, "The Convention of the Socialist Party," *Journal of Political Economy*, XVI (July, 1908), 442-450; Charlotte Teller, "The National Socialist Convention," *Arena*, XL (July, 1908), 26-39. One reason for the lack of worker delegates may have been the fact that the party did not pay the delegates' living expenses.

¹³ The author has adopted Ira Kipnis' denomination of the factions, which were actually more numerous, but which for convenience sake, may be accurately studied within the three groups described above. See Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 164-213.

The dragon's teeth of intra-party conflict had been sown long before 1908, and it was evident to all who went to Chicago that struggle would be the watchword of the day. Dissension quickly appeared in the debates over the party's official attitude toward organized labor and in the preliminary skirmishes over drafting a platform for the coming national campaign. The left wing delegates wanted open condemnation of the A.F. of L. policies of cooperation with management, a strong call for organized labor's political support in the coming campaign, and official recognition of the I.W.W. On the other hand, the right wing demanded that a conciliatory tone be adopted. The result was a compromise resolution which called on labor to vote the Socialist ticket and a general statement on the importance of organized labor.¹⁴

Factionalism again reared its head when nominations for president and vice-president were in order. Eugene V. Debs had borne the Socialist standard in 1900 and 1904, and it was inevitable that his name would be placed in nomination again. No figure within the Socialist movement was more widely known and loved than Debs, and the cheers that greeted his nomination were a tribute to his past work for the party. Once the cheers died down, John Spargo of New York, a conservative, rose to second the nomination but in doing so alluded to Debs' rumored poor health and his "mistakes" in past campaigns.¹⁵ When Spargo finished it looked as though the right and center wings might be able to combine and prevent Debs' nomination. Many delegates had heard rumors about Debs' health and wondered if he was able to conduct another grueling national campaign. Seymour Stedman of Chicago rose and braved a chorus of boos and hisses from Debs' loyal supporters to place in nomination the name of Algie Martin Simons, a well known moderate and a prominent journalist.¹⁶

At this point, while the convention hall buzzed with excitement and speculation, the slight figure of Benjamin Hanford rose in the New York delegation, waving a piece of paper. Hanford was the beloved creator of "Jimmie Higgins," the journalistic symbol of the Socialist rank and file who worked day and night for the socialist commonwealth. When

¹⁴ Socialist Party, *Proceedings of the National Convention of 1908* (Chicago, 1908), 93-102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148-150.

the delegates quieted, Hanford revealed that the paper was a letter from Debs. Whatever doubts the delegates may have had faded as Hanford read the letter. "My general health is about all that could be desired," Debs wrote. "So far as strength is concerned, I never had more to my credit, if as much."¹⁷ The letter ended with a pledge of support for whom-ever received the nomination and a tacit invitation for the nomination. "You need have no fear that I shall shirk my part in the coming campaign. I shall be in good condition, and I hope there will be no good ground for complaint when the fight is over."¹⁸ The letter did not prevent further nominations, but Debs' assurances that he was well and physically able to conduct another national campaign, together with his great support among the rank and file Socialists, assured his nomination. The first ballot gave him 159 of the 198 votes cast.¹⁹ Hanford was nominated for the vice presidency and after a long wrangle the convention adopted a compromise platform and adjourned, anxious to begin the groundwork for the campaign.²⁰

Few people were surprised when Debs received his third successive presidential nomination. No other Socialist commanded the audience and respect accorded Eugene Victor Debs. He had been a member of the Socialist Party of America since its founding in 1901; and prior to that time, he had engaged in Socialist politics in the old Social Democratic party. He had come to socialism with a national reputation gained from his work in organized labor before the turn of the century. Born in Indiana in 1855, Debs had grown up believing that labor unions could be used as tools of social progress. At an early age he began work as a labor organizer and gained substantial recognition when he founded the American Railway Union in 1893. It was an industrial union and Debs championed industry-wide unionization throughout his long career.

Debs attained national prominence when the American Railway Union joined the Pullman strikers in Chicago in 1894. Debs was found guilty of violating court injunctions during the strike and served a jail term. When he emerged from jail he was a changed man, and shortly thereafter he ac-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-164, 320-323.

tively joined the Socialists, using his prestige and talents to champion their cause. In 1900 he ran as the presidential candidate of the Social Democratic party and polled almost a hundred thousand votes. Four years later he quadrupled that vote as the candidate of the unified Socialist Party of America. He was eminently successful as a propagandizer and agitator and was quickly recognized as one of the prophets of American socialism. He wrote much and campaigned perpetually, lecturing to large audiences all over the country the year around. His studied efforts to avoid entanglement in party factionalism were not always successful; though he considered himself a radical Socialist, he retained his popularity with almost all the factions within the party and especially with the rank and file party members and sympathizers throughout the country.

Ever anxious to avoid quarrels with his comrades, Debs had gone to Girard, Kansas, to write copy for the *Appeal to Reason* while the convention was in session; he received the news of his nomination while working in the cramped editorial offices there. He began his campaign at once. Fred Warren, an *Appeal* staff member, suggested that he and Debs take a walk to the town square, where a "carnival" was in progress. Anxious for a little exercise, Debs agreed. The "carnival" turned out to be a crowd waiting for Debs. Though somewhat surprised at Warren's little subterfuge, Debs launched into a characteristic biting attack on capitalism which set the tone of his whole campaign. He told the assembled farmers and townspeople that he hated capitalism because it was "a system in which labor is simply merchandise; in which the man who works the hardest and longest has the least to show for it."²¹ To him the eternal question was the many versus the few, of want versus plenty; and he blamed all evil on capitalism. Unemployment and idle factories reminded voters in 1908 of the Panic of 1907, and Debs exploited this theme to the fullest. "Nothing is more humiliating than to have to beg for work," he told his Girard audience, "and a system in which any man has to beg for work stands condemned. No man can defend it."²² He ended with an appeal for organized labor's support, in which he also vigorously expressed hope that the farmers

²¹ Eugene V. Debs, "The Issue," reprinted in *The Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs* (New York, 1948), 298.

²² *Ibid.*, 299.

would support him and asked his audience to join him in his attack on capitalistic society. "Progress is born of agitation. It is agitation or stagnation. I have taken my choice."²³

The response from the crowd was electric, proving that Debs could still hold a crowd as no other Socialist could. A recent throat operation had sparked the rumors that he was in poor health, but there was little evidence of illness in his first speech. At the beginning of his career, Debs had been considered an indifferent orator. Julius Wayland, the peppery publisher of the *Appeal to Reason*, had thought him only average; Art Young, famous radical cartoonist, had compared him to a schoolboy elocutionist.²⁴ By 1908, his two previous presidential campaigns and his perpetual speaking tours on behalf of a multitude of causes had had their effect, and he was considered one of the most effective orators in national life. There was little variety in the content of his speeches but he combined the drama of radicalism, the verve of appeal, and flair for the dramatic into vivid words and gestures that indelibly impressed the minds of his audiences.

A few weeks after Debs' speech at Girard, which opened his own campaign, the Republicans held their national convention in Chicago. President Roosevelt had assured the country after his election in 1904 that he would not seek another term; and in 1908 he advanced his Secretary of War, the genial and well-known William Howard Taft, for the Republican nomination. With Roosevelt's backing, Taft was easily nominated on a platform that extolled the reform program of the Roosevelt administration and which promised four more years of liberal Republicanism under Taft.²⁵ Though Taft himself was considerably more cautious in his public statements than Roosevelt would have desired, he had the President's full support throughout the campaign.

In July, the Democrats congregated at Denver to nominate their favorite son, William Jennings Bryan, for a third

²³ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁴ Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 265; Arthur Young, *Art Young: His Life and Times* (New York, 1939), 216.

²⁵ A discussion of the candidates and issues of the campaign of 1908 can be found conveniently in Eugene Roseboom, *A History of Presidential Elections* (New York, 1957), 347-355. The Taft campaign can be traced in Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft* (2 vols., New York, 1939), I, 358-378. Taft's campaign speeches are collected in William Howard Taft, *Political Issues and Outlooks* (New York, 1909).

time. Though balder and more paunchy than in his golden days, Bryan still championed the common man, organized labor, the farmers, and spoke for a variety of political liberals and reformers. Though he had twice failed to attain the presidency, he was still the most prominent and powerful Democrat in the country. The Democratic platform called for a variety of reforms, condemned the slowness of Republican reform, and in general was a more liberal document than the Republican platform.²⁶ The campaign promised to be a battle between personalities and between reform programs.

While the Republicans and Democrats were nominating their candidates and drafting their platforms, the Socialists were busily organizing their campaign. Once the ice was broken, the campaign developed rapidly and it soon became apparent that there would be little rest for Debs until election day. Though he had said he would rather write than speak during the campaign, once nominated he entered the fray with all his strength. By late summer he was speaking several times a day in New York and other eastern cities. Though admission was charged at his speeches in order to defray campaign costs, he generally spoke to packed houses. Everywhere his speeches inspired scenes of adulation and the receptions accorded him were often idolatrous. While he was trying to quiet a crowd in New York City, a young woman jumped to her feet and cried out that Eugene Debs was "the living and not the missing link between God and man."²⁷ No matter how large the audience, the listener felt that he was being addressed personally when Debs' long, bony forefinger shot out and waggled up and down to emphasize a point, or when his fist smashed into his open palm. The watcher felt himself electrically identified with Debs' torrential eloquence as the tall, lanky, balding speaker strode back and forth across the platform, his voice alternately scornful and soothing, rousing and hopeful, ironic and biting. He never spared his opponents, but his audiences were never overcome by a sense of hatred or by a feeling that Debs employed vilification for its own sake since even his hardest

²⁶ Bryan's stand on the issues of the day in 1908 can be found in William Jennings Bryan, *The Commoner Condensed* (7 vols., Chicago, 1902-1908), VII.

²⁷ "Debs—the 'Living Link,'" *Current Literature*, XLV (July, 1908), 35-39.

words were softened by his sentimental belief in the basic goodness of man, a belief that shaped his whole career. His quarrel was not with men but with the economic and social system that corrupted them. "When Debs speaks a harsh word," one of his admirers said, "it is wet with tears."²⁸

The flurry of activity around the Socialist campaign and the apparent success of Debs' speeches aroused the interest and curiosity of Lincoln Steffens, veteran journalist and muckraker. He asked Debs for an interview in order to question him about his own and the Socialist party's stand on the issues of the day. He met Debs in Milwaukee after attending a Socialist picnic at which he estimated that twenty five thousand people had bought admission tickets to hear Debs give a rousing speech. Steffens, Debs, and Victor Berger, who was a veteran Milwaukee Socialist and a leading conservative in the party, went to the latter's home for the interview when the picnic was over. Debs gave some forthright answers to Steffens' questions. Asked what he would do with the trusts, he shrugged his shoulders and replied that he would simply confiscate them without compensation to the owners on the grounds that the original investments had long since been repaid. Berger was instantly on his feet. "No. No, you wouldn't. Not if I was there," he snapped at Debs. "And you shall not say it for the party. It is my party as much as it is your party, and I answer that we would offer to pay."²⁹

If Debs and Berger disagreed on the question of confiscation of the trusts, they at least agreed that once capitalism was uprooted mankind could enter into an age of limitless progress. Berger too blamed all evils on the capitalistic system, but he employed softer language than Debs and was anxious to avoid violence. He agreed with Debs who argued that the trust owner, like the improverished worker, was only a product of the capitalistic system and that once the trusts were nationalized and operated for the benefit of all the people they would cease to be an evil.³⁰

The interchange between "the Bear," as Berger was called by his comrades, and the more radical Debs must have amused

²⁸ "The Surprising Campaign of Mr. Debs," *Ibid.*, XLV (November, 1908), 483.

²⁹ Lincoln Steffens, "Eugene V. Debs on What the Matter Is In America and What To Do About It," *Everybody's Magazine*, XIX (October, 1908), 455-469.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 462.

Steffens, who had observed more than one reformer at close range. The argument between the two Socialists highlighted the differences between the wings of the party. Berger insisted that the revolution was "coming every day" and that the socialist commonwealth could be established without violence. He and the conservatives for whom he spoke were anxious to hold political office in an effort to enact their set of "immediate demands" and were often willing to cooperate with other reform elements in order to obtain half the Socialist loaf. They feared that the work of the radical Socialists in the labor unions would weaken the party's appeal to the "respectable" reform element. They were content with evolution rather than revolution. "Next year, or ten years, or twenty years, or a hundred years from now, we shall perhaps still be working toward the completing of our civilization—toward Socialism," Berger told the delegates to the national convention.³¹ His conservative supporters could only nod in agreement.

Debs had as much faith in the coming cooperative commonwealth as any Socialist, but he had less time. He felt that organized labor and political agitation were the keys to the Socialist kingdom. There was often a wide gulf between Debs' public statements and his private actions. In reality, he was no more fond of violence than Berger, regardless of his sharp tongue and tall words, and he too hoped that the revolution could be avoided by educating the public in Socialist doctrine. He insisted, however, that American socialism would fail unless it was truly socialistic with its base on the working class rather than on the middle class. He watched the growing power of the conservatives within the party with alarm, and he undertook another exhausting national campaign in part to counter these conservative tendencies. To Berger's question "Did you ever see an impossibilist do something?"³² Debs could answer that he had—at the Pullman barns in 1894, in his many tours of the West, and in his daily contacts with the people.

Steffens commented frankly that Debs did not seem to be presidential timber, and the Socialist candidate readily agreed. He answered that he campaigned for propaganda purposes,

³¹ Socialist Party, *Proceedings of the National Convention of 1908*, 227.

³² *Ibid.*

not for office, and that when Socialism's day came he would step aside in favor of a more qualified man. Debs realized as much as anyone else that he was the evangelist of American socialism, not the thinker or practical politician. He agitated frankly and used every means at his command to spread the Socialist gospel. He never burdened his audiences with theories or abstractions, preferring to hammer home epigrams that remained embedded in his listeners' memories. He preferred to speak and write in idioms and metaphors that the people at large could understand, that made socialism's message live for them. One of his friends once told Debs that he simply could not accept some of the wild things that he often said. Debs replied, "Well, you have to give the workingmen something vigorous if you want to wake them up."³³ Steffens left Milwaukee apparently satisfied that the Socialists had nominated a qualified man to carry their standard, for he later wrote Brand Whitlock urging him to vote for Debs even though he had no chance of winning.³⁴

While Debs was touring the Midwest and East, speaking at rallies, picnics, parks, giving interviews, and writing material for the Socialist press, his campaign manager, J. Mahlon Barnes, had a brainstorm. Why not rent a train and outfit it as a moving campaign headquarters? Debs could ride across the country speaking in every city and at every crossroads. What better way to advertise socialism and to reflect its growth as a national political force? Though most conservative Socialists were skeptical, Bill Haywood, Debs, and others set to work raising the necessary funds. It was estimated that such a train would cost \$20,000; it ultimately cost \$35,000.³⁵ Haywood conducted a series of huge meetings, asking for contributions; a corps of lesser Socialists went fund gathering and before long enough money was available at least to launch the "Red Special," as the train was immediately dubbed.

Chicago's La Salle Street station was treated to a rare spectacle when the Red Special headed west on the morning

³³ Quoted in Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 254-255.

³⁴ Lincoln Steffens to Brand Whitlock, October 20, 1908; in Ella Winters and Granville Hicks (eds.), *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens*, (2 vols., New York, 1938), I, 209-211.

³⁵ Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 212; Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 269.

of August 31, 1908. A large crowd came to see Debs and his party off and waved enthusiastically as the train departed with its red flags, bunting, and streamers flapping in the breeze. Later that evening the train stopped in Davenport, Iowa, where Debs spoke to a large crowd.³⁶ At each stop local Socialists and well-wishers swarmed aboard, stumbling over piles of literature, boxes of buttons and red flags, all eager to shake Debs' hand and to pledge their support for the campaign. Though it seemed necessary to greet such party workers and admirers, they proved an immense drain on Debs' time and strength. Often exhausted after a series of speeches, he would sink down in his chair, loosen his collar, and smile weakly after shaking their hands, trying to say as little as possible in order to spare his throat for the next speech. The train consisted of an engine, a combination sleeper and diner in which Debs, his brother Theodore, and their assistants somehow had to eat, sleep, and work, as well as a baggage car stuffed to the top with all kinds of Socialist literature. A brass band provided music when the train pulled into a station.³⁷

Even before the train was underway, Debs took note of the enthusiasm that greeted his speeches and was sure that this was the year of promise for American socialism. "The meetings out here are big as all outdoors and red hot with enthusiasm," he wrote from Kansas a week before launching the Red Special. "The 'Red Special' is trump. The people are wild about it and the road will be lined with the cheering hosts of the proletarian revolution."³⁸

Moving across the Midwest and West, Debs made a series of hard-hitting speeches to audiences of farmers, workers, and miners. In Colorado he spoke to large crowds of miners who had not forgotten his long affiliation with organized labor. More than eighteen hundred people, half the population, jammed the largest hall in Grand Junction, Colorado, to hear Debs flay capitalism. The Red Special band gave a concert, and Buffalo Bill called on Debs after the speech to pay his

³⁶ McAlister Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs: A Man Unafraid* (New York, 1930), 245; Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 274.

³⁷ Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs*, 245-248; Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 274; David Karsner, *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters From Woodstock Prison to Atlanta* (New York, 1919), 191.

³⁸ Karsner, *Debs*, 191-192.

respects. In Leadville, Colorado, an estimated two thousand people stood in the streets to hear Debs talk.³⁹

The meetings on the West Coast surpassed even those of the Midwest. In Los Angeles on a hot September night, Debs addressed a sweating but enthusiastic crowd that filled the Shrine Auditorium. In the course of the speech he condemned practically everyone and everything in sight—capitalism, Republicans, Democrats, Roosevelt, politicians—and called on his audience to adopt socialism. The Los Angeles *Times* reporter sitting in the audience was unimpressed by Debs' logic but admired his flair for the dramatic. "Debs has a face that looks like a death's head. . . . As the arch 'Red' talked he was bent at the hips like an old, old man, his eerie face peering up and out at the audience like an old necromancer reading a charm."⁴⁰ Others in Los Angeles were anxious to have Debs depart, fearing that his words would fall on fertile ground, however doubtful his logic. "He teaches [people] and teaches them wrong—possibly with malice; possibly because he too is a dreamer," wrote one *Times* staff member.⁴¹

Farther north Debs was refused the use of Stanford University's famous chapel, which did not surprise him when he reflected on the manner in which Leland Stanford had accumulated his fortune.⁴² In Berkeley, he spoke in the Greek Theatre on the campus of the University of California. Since the theater had already been used by one minor party candidate, the university administration raised no objection.⁴³ The university officials would not allow the Socialists to charge admission, however, so large dinner pails were set up at the entrances and exits into which the audience dropped contributions. Debs entered to the strains of the *Marseillaise* and delivered a rousing speech to the assembled students and curiosity seekers. After the speech, the president of the university, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, shook hands with Debs.⁴⁴

Debs spoke to a large crowd in the railroad station at Ashland, Oregon. Later that evening he addressed an esti-

³⁹ New York *Socialist*, September 19, 1908.

⁴⁰ Los Angeles *Times*, September 11, 1908.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, September 13, 1908.

⁴² Floy Ruth Painter, *That Man Debs and His Life Work* (Bloomington, Ind., 1929), 96; Karsner, *Debs*, 197.

⁴³ Berkeley *Gazette*, September 9, 1908.

⁴⁴ [Berkeley] *Daily Californian*, September 14, 1908.

mated two thousand people at Medford and moved on to Portland, where he was refused the use of the city armory for a rally.⁴⁵ In Spokane, Washington, three thousand people were waiting for him at the railroad station and a larger number paid admission that night to hear him speak.⁴⁶

By this time the party on the Red Special had run out of funds and the train was threatened with being stranded on the West Coast. Debs called a meeting and decided that they would somehow have to continue. Edward Lewis of Portland offered to make a quick trip selling literature and guaranteed a return of eight hundred dollars. Appeals to the rank and file brought a flood of nickels and dimes into the national headquarters. Contributions were taken at the larger rallies and support from a few wealthy sympathizers in the East saved the day. The Red Special was able to continue its journey.⁴⁷

Debs' throat, a major cause of concern among those around him, began to bother him more and more. The incessant speaking kept his throat raw; and the pressure of greetings, tours, and appearances, plus the fact that he often got out of bed in the middle of the night to greet crowds, drained his strength and prevented his recuperation. Sometimes his voice failed him completely in the middle of a speech, and the audience waited patiently while one of the Red Special crew carried on until Debs could finish hoarsely. At many of the smaller stops, Debs' younger brother Theodore, who resembled him a great deal, secretly substituted for the exhausted candidate. The relief afforded by these and other measures restored much of Debs' strength and he was able to finish the western tour on schedule.⁴⁸

The Red Special left the West Coast and rolled toward the Midwest, facing an ambitious schedule in the population centers east of the Mississippi. Late in September the train was back in Chicago, its western tour completed. Debs had travelled 9,000 miles, made 187 speeches in 25 days in the Far West, and had spoken in every western state and territory.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1908.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, September 16, 1908; Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 276-277.

⁴⁷ Karsner, *Debs*, 197; Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs*, 245.

⁴⁸ Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs*, 246.

⁴⁹ "The Socialist Party's Campaign," *The Public*, XI (October 2, 1908), 635.

He had addressed an estimated 275,000 people.⁵⁰ On September 28, the train was met by a crowd in Toledo, Ohio. Mayor Brand Whitlock, close friend of many reformers of the day and a famous municipal reformer himself, was in the crowd and seemed delighted to see Debs. He dropped five dollars into the collection hat as it passed him. He marched with Debs later in a labor parade. Later that evening, 2,000 spectators heard Debs lambast the masters of capital.⁵¹

Increased interest of the farmer in Socialist politics had been noted and as the campaign developed in the Midwest and Southwest, Debs tailored more and more of his speeches for farm audiences. The Red Special combined the virtues of glamour, novelty, and practicality which appealed greatly to isolated farm families. As the train pulled into a rural station or paused momentarily at a country crossroads lined with buggies and wagons, red flags were put out, the band began to play a rousing Socialist song, and members of the crew circulated in the crowd selling pictures, buttons, flags, and literature.⁵² The whole idea, from the train itself to the glamour and publicity that accompanied its progress, was "trump" and had been partly designed to appeal to the spectacle loving, isolated farm families who might be inclined to support Debs. The whole Socialist campaign of 1908 revealed a growing understanding of mass psychology and campaign techniques.

Socialist organizers in the South and Midwest had prepared a special program for the farmers, the farm encampment. Tent villages were set up and farmers from the surrounding countryside were invited to attend a combination Sunday school, picnic, revival meeting, and Socialist indoctrination course. The farmers drove into the encampments in their buggies and wagons, each flying a red flag from the whip holder, and participated in meetings that lasted for days and often weeks. Local merchants, anticipating increased business, sometimes helped finance such encampments. When Oscar Ameringer, veteran Socialist organizer and newspaper-

⁵⁰ *Appeal to Reason*, October 10, 1908.

⁵¹ Brand Whitlock to Bernard Dailey, September 28, 1908, in Allan Nevins (ed.), *The Letters of Brand Whitlock* (New York, 1936), 96; Karsner, *Debs*, 197.

⁵² See the photograph on page 295 in *The Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*.

man, and his three sons were available, culture invaded the encampments in the form of a brass quartet (two trumpets, a tuba, and a French horn) that played the music of Bach, Mozart, Wagner, and Stephen Foster, after short talks on the pleasures of music delivered by Ameringer. Debs spoke at many such encampments during the campaign of 1908 and was often reunited with former members of the American Railway Union who had turned to farming after being black-listed when the union was broken after the Pullman strike.⁵³

Debs and the Red Special moved east. In Boston he marched at the head of a ten block long parade to Faneuil Hall, which was packed with an expectant crowd. An overflow meeting was conducted on the sidewalks outside the hall to accommodate those who could not get in.⁵⁴ In Providence, Rhode Island, Debs spoke to 3,000 people in Infantry Hall and, after reviewing a labor parade, spoke again that night. In Haverhill, Massachusetts, scene of early Socialist victories, he addressed several thousand people in the town square. The speech followed a parade of more than 2,000 people which disrupted traffic for hours. While 12,000 troops paraded in honor of the dedication of a new bridge in Hartford, Connecticut, Debs drew several thousand from the line of march to a nearby park where he lectured them on the evils of capitalism.⁵⁵

Though the speeches elsewhere had been impressive, the most spectacular meeting was held in the Hippodrome in New York City. When the Red Special pulled into the railroad station thousands of eager men, women, and children surged forward, "eager to touch even so much as the hem of his garment."⁵⁶ Almost 7,500 people paid admission for the Hippodrome speech and waited patiently for Debs to arrive, while 2,500 who could not get in awaited him in a nearby hall.⁵⁷ The campaign managers had procured a great quantity of red cloth, small squares of which were sold at the door for a nickel. When Debs made a point that the crowd liked, the

⁵³ Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken*, 255, 266-267; Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 269-270.

⁵⁴ "The Surprising Campaign of Mr. Debs," *Current Literature*, XLV (November, 1908), 481.

⁵⁵ *New York World*, October 17, 1908.

⁵⁶ "The Surprising Campaign of Mr. Debs," *Current Literature*, XLV (November, 1908), 481-482.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 482.

huge room became a sea of red as the listeners waved their flags in agreement.⁵⁸ Backed by a rostrum of Socialist dignitaries and officials, Debs gave the Hippodrome audience a long, earnest exposition of his reasons for opposing capitalism and for supporting socialism. When he hurriedly left the hall after the exhausting speech, in an effort to avoid further tiring ceremonies, the crowd surged outside and tried to carry his automobile to his hotel. Later that evening at a dinner held in his honor, several women donated their jewels to the Red Special fund. They were added to the six hundred dollars already collected that day.⁵⁹

Socialist plans for a giant rally in Philadelphia were thwarted when the management of the Opera House decided that they could not permit a Socialist rally without police permission, which was not forthcoming. Consequently, Debs spoke twice on the same night in two smaller halls in the City of Brotherly Love.⁶⁰

No speech passed without a biting attack on the old parties and their candidates, for Debs was always anxious to expose what he considered the hollowness of the regular party platforms. Debs spoke in Evansville, Indiana, on the same night that William Howard Taft spoke there, and a great many people who could have gone to hear Taft free preferred to pay to hear Debs.⁶¹ Mr. Taft had no great admiration for the Socialist presidential candidate. Eugene Debs, he said, was a socialist "who would uproot existing institutions, destroy the right to private property and institute a new regime."⁶² Debs would have heartily agreed to most of the charge.

President Roosevelt, very much alive to Socialist influence among liberals, was irritated by Debs' campaign. The amazing energy of the Red Special tour showed that the Socialists might take many liberal votes from both Bryan and Taft. Good politician that he was, Roosevelt did not underestimate the Socialists and recognized them as a potentially powerful

⁵⁸ "Mr. Debs' Appeal," *Outlook*, XC (October 17, 1908), 323-324.

⁵⁹ "The Surprising Campaign of Mr. Debs," *Current Literature*, XLV (November, 1908), 481-485; Karsner, *Debs*, 200-204.

⁶⁰ Karsner, *Debs*, 198.

⁶¹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1908; Karsner, *Debs*, 204.

⁶² Quoted in Pringle, *Life and Times of William Howard Taft*, I, 367.

political force, despite his public dislike of their program.⁶³ He agreed that capitalism could stand a little reforming but labeled talk about wage slavery "absurd."⁶⁴ He was aware of the influence of the Socialist press, especially of the *Appeal to Reason*, which he thought appealed more to hate than to reason.⁶⁵ And he thought that Debs was destructive rather than constructive. He had never forgotten Debs' part in the Pullman strike and could not quite accept him as anything more than "an undesirable citizen." "To praise and champion Debs, to condone his faults, is precisely like praising and championing Tweed and condoning Tweed's faults," he wrote a friend. He accused Debs' followers of "mushy morality" and labeled Debs' speeches "mere pieces of the literature of criminal violence."⁶⁶

But the sword of criticism was double-edged and Debs was always ready with a quick reply. He called Roosevelt the "high priest of capitalism"⁶⁷ and insisted that he was merely another vessel containing the acids of capitalistic society and a willing tool for the financial interests who ran the government.⁶⁸ As for Bryan, his claim of representing both labor and capital was as impossible to Debs as riding two horses in opposite directions at the same time.⁶⁹ Bryan had cautiously advocated public ownership of the railroads when he came home from his world tour in 1906, but this was hardly any answer to society's ills as far as Debs was concerned. To him it was still a half measure, designed to bolster rather than to destroy capitalism. Throughout the campaign he aimed a steady fire of criticism at his opponents. When Taft

⁶³ Henry Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1931), 367-368.

⁶⁴ Roosevelt distrusted what he called the "lunatic fringe" of the Socialist movement more than socialism as such, and at times he privately showed some sympathy with some of the Socialist program. Publicly he insisted that his reforms had saved the country from socialism. When the election of 1908 showed that the Socialists seemed to be on the decline, he wrote that not all of their works were bad and some of their program could be adapted to the American scene. Theodore Roosevelt, "Where We Can Work With Socialists," *Outlook*, XCI (March 27, 1909), 662-664; Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt*, 543.

⁶⁵ Theodore Roosevelt to Lyman Abbott, June 17, 1908, in Elting Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (8 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1951-1954), VI, 1080.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1080-1081.

⁶⁷ Socialist Party, *Socialist (Perpetual) Campaign Book* (Chicago, 1908), 7.

⁶⁸ *Appeal to Reason*, September 5, 1908.

⁶⁹ Painter, *That Man Debs*, 98.

declined to debate the issues of the campaign with him, Debs excoriated him as a worthy tool for the capitalists.⁷⁰

Debs especially disliked Roosevelt because he feared the President's political influence with the "parlor socialists" and because he honestly believed that the President was not progressive. He ridiculed Taft's progressive pretensions by reading his judicial record and generally referred to him as "Injunction Bill Taft." In reality, Debs had no sympathy with mere reformers, however sincere and well meant their efforts might be. Given his belief that capitalism was the root of all evil, he could accept no program that improved the system by reform. His sincere belief that there was a class struggle in America led him to demand the abolition of the entire capitalistic system as the only way to change society for the better. He opposed the conservative Socialists in their desire for public office and evolutionary change because he felt that such a program did not move beyond reform and would merely, in the end, serve the best interests of the capitalists.

The campaign also brought sharp exchanges between Debs and President Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor. Debs had quarreled with Gompers before, but seldom with such intensity as in 1908. Long before the campaign began, he attacked Gompers for his cooperation with management.

President Gompers believes that the interests of labor and capital are identical or mutual. We do not. He believes that these interests can be harmonized and justice done to both. We do not. We believe that labor is entitled to all its produces and that labor must organize politically as well as economically to abolish the existing order⁷¹

Gompers, irritated by Debs' whole attitude and especially by his association with the I.W.W.,⁷² was not long in answering; before the campaign was scarcely under way, the break between the two men seemed final. Debs attacked Gompers for "pleading" with management for a more lenient labor policy and demanded that the A.F. of L. leader turn the labor vote to the Socialists.⁷³ Gompers in turn denounced Debs as the

⁷⁰ *Appeal to Reason*, October 31, 1908.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, January 18, 1908.

⁷² Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (2 vols., New York, 1925), I, 424-427.

⁷³ Socialist Party, *Socialist (Perpetual) Campaign Book*, 9.

"Apostle of Failure" in the pages of the official A.F. of L. publication. He charged that Debs had never done anything for organized labor but give it a black eye and echoed a rumor set afloat in the press that the Republicans were secretly financing the Red Special to frighten the voters into "playing safe" with Taft.⁷⁴ When Debs angrily offered to debate the campaign issues with Gompers, the latter curtly refused.⁷⁵

Debs was angered enough by Gompers' support of Bryan and by his continued defense of craft unionism and collective bargaining, but he was stung most by the charges that the Republicans were secretly financing the Red Special. Debs knew only too well that nickels and dimes from the rank and file were paying for the train and for the whole Socialist campaign. Furthermore, he had made it clear at the beginning of the campaign that the party would publish all its campaign receipts and expenditures.⁷⁶ In a presidential campaign in which one of the chief issues turned out to be the question of campaign contributions, not even the Socialists were spared having their sources of financial support questioned. After Gompers made his charge, the party's national headquarters published the names of all those who had contributed to the campaign fund, together with the amount of their contribution. The press then charged that the party was dominated by foreign-born elements. To answer this the party published its membership rolls, revealing that 70 per cent of the members had been born in the United States.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Samuel Gompers, "Debs—the Apostle of Failure," *American Federationist*, XV (September, 1908), 736-740.

⁷⁵ Painter, *That Man Debs*, 98. In after years, Gompers delivered a harsh judgement of Debs. He attributed much of Debs' radicalism to sentimentality and emotion, all of which, in Gompers' view, detracted from his success in the labor movement. "When Debs began to discount his judgement in favor of his emotions," Gompers wrote, "he ceased to play a constructive part in the labor movement." Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, I, 406. The A.F. of L. leader was fond of calling Debs a "perpetual leader of lost causes"; he felt that Debs' whole mentality had been warped by his confinement in prison after the Pullman strike. Gompers said of Debs, "He came out of jail a changed man. He had lost all faith in the power of constructive work and became the advocate of revolt. As he had lost faith, he had lost his usefulness and became the apostle of failure and later of secession. Debs was emotionally intellectual. He had high ideals, but was without the practical or constructive mind to put even the least of them into effect." *Ibid.*, I, 415-416.

⁷⁶ Karsner, *Debs*, 190.

⁷⁷ Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States 1828-1928* (New York, 1928), 324.

Debs and Gompers had followed different labor philosophies since the beginnings of their careers. Debs' old American Railway Union had been an industrial union and he always favored that form of unionization. He insisted that organized labor should support the Socialist party in local and national politics, since that party was the only one which represented labor's needs and wishes. Debs had helped found the I.W.W. in part to start a political union, but he had been disappointed in the Wobblies' lack of emphasis on politics. That action had further alienated him from other labor leaders and had widened the breach between him and the conservative Socialists, who feared that Wobbly violence would boomerang on the whole party. Debs still insisted that labor would have to support political candidates pledged to its cause in order to achieve real freedom.

The progress of the Red Special could not be overlooked by the regular press and for the first time the Socialists found themselves in the pages of some of the country's major newspapers. The size of the crowds that greeted Debs and the vigor of the whole Socialist campaign aroused fears in conservative circles that the Socialists would poll a vastly increased vote.⁷⁸ Ex-President Grover Cleveland, who died before the election, warned his countrymen that the Socialists would poll a million votes.⁷⁹ The regular press could not afford to ignore the news value of the Debs campaign, and at the same time it could not afford to add to the publicity attending the campaign. A nice compromise was struck in the back pages of many newspapers. The Socialist press continued its impressive showing on behalf of Debs.⁸⁰

Arguments with Roosevelt and Gompers took second place in Debs' mind to the necessity of advertising socialism in the campaign. Throughout October he continued his speaking tour through the East and Midwest. Stephen Reynolds' campaign biography of Debs sold hundreds of copies along the route; the money from this and other literature sales helped support the Red Special. In Duluth, members

⁷⁸ Cf. "Minor Parties," *Nation*, LXXXVII (August 20, 1908), 152-153.

⁷⁹ "The Red Campaign," *Current Literature*, XLV (October, 1908), 366.

⁸⁰ The *Appeal to Reason* alone distributed more than 22,000,000 copies of its regular and special issues in 1908. George England, *The Story of the Appeal* (Girard, Kan., 1912), 282.

of the staff tried to deposit the money in a bank but could find none that would accept a Socialist deposit. The men carried the money, contained in several heavy canvas bags, all over town and finally brought it all back to the Red Special, much to Debs' amusement.⁸¹

Debs made a special appeal for the Negro vote and couched his appeal in terms he thought the Negro could understand. Neither he nor the Socialist party as a whole ever formulated a special program for the alleviation of the Negro problem but tended rather to treat it in the broader framework of worker versus master, poor versus rich. Debs' attitude was considerably more lenient than that of many other Socialists, and he insisted that the Negro was entitled to the full products of his labor; with economic equality, social equality would come.⁸² The Red Special stopped at Harper's Ferry where Debs saw the monument to John Brown, one of his heroes. He took the occasion to urge the Negro to vote for the Socialists. "The Socialist Party is carrying on the work begun by John Brown," he said when asked for a statement.⁸³

Toward the end of the campaign Debs returned to Woodstock, Illinois, where he had been imprisoned after the Pullman strike. His former jailer was among the five hundred well-wishers who greeted him at the jailhouse steps. Debs spoke briefly and went through the jail. A large crowd greeted him at Janesville, Wisconsin. The schools in the area had been closed and the railroad station was full of children of all ages, many of whom carried red flags. They were delighted by a handshake with Debs and a quick tour through the Red Special.⁸⁴

The campaign was drawing to a close and Debs was glad, for the strain imposed upon him by the innumerable speeches, handshakes, and public appearances had been great. He gave his last speech from the Red Special to students at the University of Wisconsin. The campaign had added fifty thousand new names to the *Appeal to Reason's* subscription lists; and

⁸¹ Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 278-279.

⁸² Karsner, *Debs*, 194; Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro in the Class Struggle," reprinted in *Writings and Speeches*, 63-66; and Eugene V. Debs, "The Negro and His Nemesis," reprinted in *Ibid.*, 66-73.

⁸³ Quoted in Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 282.

⁸⁴ *Appeal to Reason*, November 7, 1908.

the Saint Louis *Mirror* predicted that Debs would poll a million and a half votes.⁸⁵

On November 3, Debs and Bill Haywood marched at the head of a labor parade that extended more than two miles through Chicago's streets. Sixteen thousand people heard Debs speak that night and the air was alive with red flags and choruses of approval. Despite intense fatigue, he drew on his last reserves of energy and delivered a rousing speech, appealing one final time for the vote of organized labor. Again with Haywood, he made his last speech of the campaign to his neighbors in Terre Haute and went home to await the election results.⁸⁶ He did not doubt that the campaign had greatly strengthened socialism across the country.

The arch-conservative Chicago *Tribune* expected Debs to poll at least a million votes.⁸⁷ The *International Socialist Review* predicted 676,500 votes for Debs.⁸⁸ But as the election returns ticked in, Socialist hopes sank and the final tally was a bitter pill. Neither Berger's confident prediction of a million and half votes for Debs,⁸⁹ nor Debs' own hopeful call for a million votes was realized.⁹⁰ The final total gave the Socialists a vote of 420,793, an increase of only 20,000 over that for 1904. The Socialists retained their place as the third party of American politics, showing their greatest strength in the Far West and Midwest. Oklahoma, where farm encampments and hard work had brought increased publicity to the Socialist cause, and Pennsylvania, where the party had many sympathizers among the coal miners, reported slight increases over their 1904 totals. A few other states reported such increases.⁹¹ Milwaukee, Berger's home town, elected six Socialist candidates to the Wisconsin legislature,⁹² but the bright spots were few and far between.

⁸⁵ Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 282-283.

⁸⁶ Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs*, 248; Karsner, *Debs*, 205; Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 283.

⁸⁷ Chicago *Tribune*, October 15, 1908.

⁸⁸ "The Presidential Election," *The Public*, XI (November 13, 1908), 779.

⁸⁹ Robert Hunter, "The Socialist Party in the Present Campaign," *American Review of Reviews*, XXXVIII (September, 1908), 293-299.

⁹⁰ Socialist Party, *Socialist (Perpetual) Campaign Book*, 5-10.

⁹¹ Cf. the figures in Socialist Party, *Socialist Congressional Campaign Book 1914* (Chicago, 1914), 19.

⁹² "Interesting Election Results," *Current Literature*, XLV (December, 1908), 588.

What had happened? Why had the Socialist total remained almost stationary despite the vigorous national campaign? Debs' appeal to the masses of sympathetic voters was obvious; great quantities of Socialist literature had flooded promising areas; and hundreds of party members and workers had followed in Debs' wake, preaching, teaching, exhorting the voters for Debs. Why had the vote increased so little?

One of the basic Socialist miscalculations was reliance on the results of the election of 1904 as a yardstick to Socialist strength in 1908. In the former year, many Democrats, faced with the distasteful alternatives of Alton B. Parker and Theodore Roosevelt, had undoubtedly voted for Debs. These voters had returned to Bryan in 1908.⁹³ Thus Debs argued that every Socialist vote in 1908 was a pure Socialist vote and the seemingly small total was in fact a considerable gain in Socialist strength. Taft's ample figure had apparently fitted the mantle of progressivism passed on to him by Roosevelt and the President's support had helped him greatly throughout the campaign.⁹⁴

An economic upswing had turned many voters to the Republicans, who used the prosperity issue freely.⁹⁵ The Socialists were never able to overcome the American workers' fear of panaceas and experimentation in times of economic dislocation, and this fear was never better illustrated than in 1908 when the Socialists should logically have benefited more from unemployment and labor unrest. The fate of most American third parties has been to stimulate the older parties rather than to succeed to national power themselves. Such was the case with the Socialists in 1908.

Bryan had captured the liberal Democratic vote; Taft had won the progressive Republican vote; Samuel Gompers had been unable to turn the labor vote to Bryan but had made sure that as little of it as possible went to Debs.⁹⁶ In addition, many workers had lost their right to vote by leaving their

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 588; "The Socialist Showing," *Nation*, LXXXVII (December 3, 1908), 540-541.

⁹⁴ "Progress of the World," *American Review of Reviews*, XXXVIII (December, 1908), 643-656.

⁹⁵ "The Election Interpreted," *Outlook*, XC (November 7, 1908), 519-520.

⁹⁶ Robert Hoxie, "President Gompers and the Labor Vote," *Journal of Political Economy*, XVI (December, 1908), 693-700.

precincts in search of work.⁹⁷ Such at least were the official Socialist reasons for the small increase in their vote.

Whatever his comrades said or thought about the election results, Eugene Debs had little to regret. Glad as he was to be back in the peace and quiet of Terre Haute, he did not regret his tremendous effort. He looked back across the preceding months with the conviction that the whole Socialist campaign had been a job well worth the effort and well done. His primary aim throughout the campaign had been to agitate for socialism and he had succeeded in this. There would be other campaigns and other speaking tours, countless opportunities in the years ahead to preach the coming socialist revolution. His stand in favor of socialism and his faith in the goodness of the common man remained unshaken and undiminished. At the moment he was too tired to reflect on the deeper meanings of the election results. Before the votes were counted he said that the campaign had "expressed the true spirit of socialist comradeship, which is the making of our movement, and which will sustain it through every ordeal until it is finally triumphant."⁹⁸ There is no reason to believe that he changed his mind after the votes were counted.

⁹⁷ Socialist Party, *Proceedings of the First National Congress, 1910* (Chicago, 1910), 30; Morris Hillquit, *History Of Socialism in the United States* (New York, 1910), 348-349.

⁹⁸ Karsner, *Debs*, 206.