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Eugene V. Debs: Conservative Labor Editor

David A. Shannon*

Just eleven years before the great American Railway Union strike of 1894, which established Eugene V. Debs as America's most militant and radical labor leader, Debs had written, "Strikes are the knives with which laborers cut their own throats."¹ A few years after the ARU strike Debs was to sign his letters "Yours for the Revolution"; in the early 1880's he signed them, "Yours in Benevolence, Sobriety, and Industry." Indeed, had enemies of the militant Socialist investigated his early trade union background, they could have found in Debs's own writing an abundance of conservative arguments to be used against him.

When Debs became editor of the *Locomotive Firemen's Monthly Magazine*, official journal of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, in July, 1880, there was little to suggest that the twenty-five-year-old editor would be America's most famous radical within a few years. The ambitious, hard-working young editor turned out a magazine that fitted well the Brotherhood's conservative purposes, which were summarized in its motto "Benevolence, Sobriety, and Industry." In its early days the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was more of a fraternal lodge and a mutual insurance company than a trade union. The hazardous duties of locomotive firemen prevented commercial insurance companies from issuing policies to firemen at premiums they could afford. To meet this situation, locomotive firemen established their Brotherhood, which levied a periodic assessment on the members to build a death and disability benefit fund.² The other parts of the motto, sobriety and industry, were part of the organization's personal uplift program, designed

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¹ *Firemen's Magazine* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1873-), VII (1883), 74. The title of this periodical varied. It is cited throughout this article as the *Firemen's Magazine*. In 1880 the title was *The Locomotive Firemen's Monthly Magazine*. This was shortened to *The Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* in 1881 and to *The Firemen's Magazine* in 1882. In 1886 the title again became *The Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* and did not change again until after Debs left the editorship in 1894. When Debs was editor, it was published in Terre Haute.

² *Ibid.*, IV (1880), 178. This editorial was evidently written by William N. Sayre of Indianapolis, who was the editor until Debs took over with the August, 1880, issue.

to assist the members' ambitions to be promoted to engineer or "move to the right-hand side." In the early days of his editorship, Debs took every opportunity to impress his readers with the importance and worthiness of these purposes and to disparage more radical aims.

When Debs became editor of the *Magazine* in 1880 he also assumed the duties of Grand Secretary-Treasurer, and it was a proud young officer who announced seventeen months later that the death benefit of the order was increased to a thousand dollars, nearly double the amount of the old benefit. The Brotherhood would ever "extend the hand of charity to the home of . . . widow[s] and little ones," and any "lukewarm communicants" in the order who could see no personal benefits from aiding the widows and orphans of brother firemen were "soulless individuals" who were not wanted.³ Such members lacking in benevolence were few, but there were many who needed strengthening in their sobriety and industry. And the young Debs, who believed firmly in the doctrine of the self-made man, was eager to further sobriety and industry and thereby start young firemen on their way to success.

"Rails" of the late nineteenth century had a reputation of being hard-bitten, hard-drinking toughs. Debs and the Brotherhood did their utmost to reform the firemen and make them respectable. "The very irregular life of this calling," Debs wrote, "caused men to fall into bad habits, and in place of spending their time in improving themselves and in the interest of their families, they would, when not on the road, 'take the town in with the boys,' as it is vulgarly termed, and so the profession fell into disrepute." Debs was merciless in his attacks upon drunkenness among the brothers. No locomotive fireman had "the right to allow himself to become intoxicated under any circumstance, or at any time. If he does so, he forfeits his membership in our Order." He urged railroad managers to close their depot saloons to remove temptation from their employees. Debs thought, probably with too much optimism, the temperance campaign yielded results. When O. S. Lyford, superintendent of the C. & E. I., told Debs he had not had to fire any men because of drunkenness for two years, Debs attributed the record to the activities of the

³ *Ibid.*, VI (1882), 17, 18; IV, 341.

Brotherhood. And Debs painted rosy pictures of the new non-alcoholic regime: "Instead of drunken rowdies . . . we now see dutiful sons, loving husbands and kind fathers, who, when they have finished their day's work, go to their homes . . . to caress their bright-eyed children and to kiss and make glad the companions of their heart."⁴ But temperance was only part of the program of uplift; hard work, honesty, self-sacrifice, and "mental improvement" were also necessary to make a self-made man of a fireman.

After Debs became radical, he exhorted his listeners to be loyal to their class, to work for the elevation of their class. But in the early 1880's, in his adulation of the self-made man, there was the inarticulate basic premise that one should rise from, rather than with, one's class. Debs himself had been moderately successful as a result of following the lift-yourself-by-your-own-bootstraps philosophy. Forced to quit school at the age of fourteen, he had gone to work on the Vandalia Railroad. Four years later he left railroad work to attend a Terre Haute business college. After completion of his course, he became a billing clerk for Hulman & Cox of Terre Haute, a large wholesale grocery company. He used his first wages as a clerk to buy an encyclopedia, certainly in the best tradition of self-made men. After helping found a debating society for young men, he went into politics and never lost in election as a Democrat. The voters of Terre Haute twice elected him city clerk and once as their representative in the legislature.⁵ Hard work and self-education had worked for Debs, and he urged his brothers in the order to follow a similar course.

In the first editorial Debs wrote for the *Magazine* he suggested that Brotherhood locals collect libraries in their meeting rooms for their "mental improvement." Master mechanics, Debs told his readers, would not promote "the lazy, greasy one, who stands around and finds fault . . .," but the fireman "who

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 340; VIII (1884), 472, 151-153; V (1881), 73, 361; VI, 365-366; VII, 455-456.

⁵ Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1949), 11, 18, 25, 28-31, 41-43; Clipping from Kate Debs Scrapbooks which are in the possession of the writer. The account, probably from a Terre Haute newspaper, is based on an interview of Frank Roderus of Terre Haute, who was a friend of Debs when they were youths. The clipping is pasted among the Debs obituaries, indicating that the probable date was 1926. That Debs had this commercial training has not been recognized by his biographers.

is prompt, respectful and trustworthy, is sure to reap a reward. . . ." He reviewed the careers of successful railroad officials and pointed out the moral for young firemen: "Let no day go by without doing something that will fit you to accept a position better than the present one, whatever that may be. Strive for excellence in all things. If all known duties are honestly and conscientiously done, the reward will come." Wasting time, drinking, "all those things that are usually called bad habits, do not *pay*, in a business sense," and should therefore, be avoided. Even after his disastrous experience in the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy strike in 1888, the first in a series of events that broke Debs from many of his earlier conservative ideas, he still reminded his readers that never in the history of the world had conditions been so favorable for ambitious young men who "regarded 'time as money' and [who] . . . husbanded it with miserly care," a view he reaffirmed even early in the panic of 1893.⁶

Debs could put his emphasis on individual self-help, on personal uplift, rather than on the usual demands of trade union leaders, because he saw no economic conflict between capital and labor. The American Federation of Labor unions, for example, in making their demands for job control and better wages, hours, and working conditions, assumed a conflict between themselves and their employers and assumed a show of labor strength was necessary to wrest concessions. Debs did not come around to this point of view until the late 1880's and then reluctantly. Until then, contrary even to the teachings of Adam Smith, he held the interests of labor and capital to be harmonious. "One of our fundamental doctrines is that labor and capital are brothers." "Steadily we have inculcated the doctrine that labor and capital are friends. . . ." But, of course, even among friendly brothers, differences will sometimes arise. Such differences could and should be settled by reasonable and peaceful means, rather than by strikes or violence, in the manner of brothers rather than in the manner of economic rivals.

From the founding of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1873 until July, 1887, when the firemen struck the Brooklyn Elevated Railroad, the organization had never

⁶ *Firemen's Magazine*, IV, 241-242; VI, 212, 364, 365; XIII (1889), 202; XVII (1893), 267-271.

⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII, 617; VII, 546.

authorized a strike, and Debs was proud of it. In the violent railroad strikes of 1877 one of the Grand Officers had "usurped" power and authorized some of the eastern locals to strike, but "as an organization the Brotherhood had nothing to do with the origin or development of that strike nor any other. . . . They have never destroyed one dollar's worth of property, nor struck one blow at a railroad company. On the contrary they have always counseled moderation and in many instances carefully guarded the property of their corporations." Over and over, Debs repeated that strikes were wrong and unnecessary, that they brought only grief to labor, that "no good has ever or can ever come from resorting to violence and bloodshed," and that conciliation and compromise could settle whatever differences might arise between railroaders and their employers.⁸

Alert railroad officials were quick to see the wisdom of befriending the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and its young editor. Railroads furnished annual passes to the Brotherhood officers, and many railroad managers wrote Debs letters in which they spoke of the organization "in the kindest terms." William H. Vanderbilt of the New York Central was "greatly pleased to notice the rapid development of the organization." William Riley McKeen, president of the Vandalia and a Terre Haute banker, was one of the signers of the bond Debs posted when he began to handle the Brotherhood's funds. When the firemen met in convention, the management of the railroads granted the delegates free transportation, and when the Chicago delegation made the long journey to Denver for the convention in 1883, they made the trip in comfort, thanks to the generosity of the Pullman Palace Car Company.⁹

The young editor of the firemen's journal did not let such kindnesses go unheeded. Railroad officials, from presidents down to master mechanics, received editorial bouquets from Debs. Riley McKeen was the subject of the most filio-pietistic biographical sketches Debs wrote for the *Magazine*, but other railroad managers did not go wanting. Debs's readers found that the careers of J. W. Lutterall, master mechanic of the Cincinnati Short Line, and Henry C. Lord,

⁸ *Ibid.*, XI (1887), 513; V, 169; IV, 337, 273, 337; VII, 254-255, 455-456, 546; VIII, 279, 616-618.

⁹ *Ibid.*, V, 169; VI, 499, 458; IV, 347-348; VII, 492-493.

president and superintendent of the Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Lafayette, were worthy of emulation. Debs also opened his columns to Lord, and for six consecutive issues readers of the *Magazine* were privileged to read the words of a railroad president. Debs could even find kind things to say about Jay Gould. In an obituary of Gould, Debs admitted the robber baron was a stock waterer and a ruthless speculator, but by the standard of ethics of his colleagues, Debs thought, Gould stood rather well. Furthermore, Gould never ordered his employees not to join unions and never hired Pinkertons.¹⁰

Debs's view of the relations of management and labor was an eminently conservative one, recognizing no basic conflict between the two and disparaging the strike. Yet there was a Christian demand for justice and a frontier spirit of social equality in Debs's thought that did not sit well with the most autocratic of railroad officials. Debs's desideratum was one of peace and co-operation between labor and capital, but he expected management to treat labor with respect, honor, and social equality. "We want to be friendly with our employers, and serve them faithfully. We want to become intelligent and respectable enough to merit their sympathy and confidence. We want to have it so that if any difference or difficulty exists between us, we can stand before them upon a perfect social equality, and state our grievances like men." A railroad employee should "show proper respect for . . . superiors" and go to his employer "with an olive branch in his hand," but he should do so as a man. "American working men are not serfs—they will not wear the collar of railway superintendents. . . . They are not cringing, fawning, lick-spittles, who approach railway superintendents on their bellies in the dust." Debs roundly condemned railroad managers who used "spotters" to test the honesty of their conductors because such a practice indicated these managers doubted the integrity of their employees. However, until the strike on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, Debs had faith that only a small "fossilized class of railroad managers" did not share his view of the ideal in labor relations. "When we are fully qualified to receive our rights, they will always be accorded us."¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, 253-254, 121-122, 124-126, 164-167, 214-218, 256-258, 307-310, 351-354; VI, 364; VIII, 339-342; XVII, 103-108.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, IV, 273; VI, 212, 366; IX (1885), 159; VIII, 403-405; VII, 254-255; V, 169.

With such views of society it was logical for Debs to have much the same attitude toward radicals as conservatives later had about him. Radicals, Debs held, retarded the advancement of labor's interests because the general public mistook their unpopular opinions for the beliefs of the workmen of the country. "The wild utterances of blatherskites have been the texts upon which the press has commented as voicing the aims of the great body of laboring men. . . ." These radicals, Debs charged, motivated by selfish interest, continually attempted to create disturbances between labor and capital so that they could ride to political power on the wave of artificially stimulated discontent. Such demagogues should be ignored. They should be ignored, but Debs disagreed with those who thought radicals should be silenced. The anarchists convicted in the Haymarket case in Chicago in 1886 were as odious to Debs as they were to Judge Joseph E. Gary—Debs called them "cranks" making "insane harangues"—but he defended their right to hold and preach such mistaken doctrines. Socialists did not fare much better with Debs than did the anarchists. As late as just a few months before the great Pullman strike he could denounce the goals of socialists as "castles of moonshine" and charge that socialism would dwarf the individual out of sight and create an absolutist state.¹²

There was discernible in Debs's early social thought the seeds of ideas that would in time germinate into the most potent anticapitalism the United States has ever had. For example, he shared with a great many western agrarians the labor-cost theory of value, not to be confused with the Marxian theory of surplus value. He shared the democratic distrust of large standing armies, and he called professional army officers "insufferable snobs" and "gold-lace parasites." He leaned toward silver as against gold, but so had such

¹² *Ibid.*, VIII, 468, 617; XI, 11-13. Debs did not, however, go so far as to advocate free speech to all. When the *New York Herald* in 1891 said, "free speech, even when it gives vent to disgusting nonsense, should be tolerated," Debs disagreed. He would have denied free speech to advocates of "free love" and Mormon polygamists. "This *Magazine* believes in free speech and a free press—but with limitations. It would have no free speech Satans in American Eden homes; no square foot of American soil defiled by the advocates of polygamy; no brothel beasts, advocating free love; no Sodoms, inviting Heaven's wrath in storms of fire. In a word, certain forms of free speech are crimes against humanity and should be suppressed and will be suppressed." *Ibid.*, XV (1891), 306-307. *Ibid.*, XVII, 743; XVIII (1894), 468-470.

immaculate conservatives as William McKinley and Colonel Dick Thompson. But these theories and attitudes were not central to Debs's thought, and he was not on his way to radicalism until 1888 when the strike on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy jolted him into a slow revision of his views. Until then no one suspected the young editor might in time describe himself as "a flaming revolutionist." On the contrary, a reasonable prophet of the early 1880's would have predicted Debs would continue to watch labor and capital, "the corner stone of our grand structure" and the "twin sisters of civilization," walking "Hand in hand . . . along the highway of success. . . ."¹³

¹³ *Ibid.*, VII, 162-163, 349; VIII, 467-469; IX, 611-613, 471-473, 91-95; James Ford Rhodes, *The McKinley and Roosevelt Administrations, 1897-1909* (New York, 1923), 13-16; Charles Roll, *Colonel Dick Thompson: The Persistent Whig* (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1948), 228-229; Ginger, *Eugene Victor Debs*, 387. For a good discussion of the labor-cost theory of value see Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865-1901: Essays and Documents* (New London, Connecticut, 1946), 25-27.