

Debs, Eugene Victor (5 Nov. 1855–20 Oct. 1926), labor organizer and presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America, was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, the son of Marguerite Bettrich and Daniel Debs, Alsatian immigrants and retail grocers. Following the completion of ninth grade, Debs left school to work as a paint scraper on the Terre Haute and Vandalia Railroad. Within a year he rose to locomotive fireman but was laid off in the sustained economic depression of the mid-1870s. Searching for work in St. Louis in 1874, he encountered extensive urban poverty for the first time.

When Debs returned to Terre Haute, he took a position as a clerk in Herman Hulman's wholesale grocery, but he retained an intense attachment to railroad work and railroad workers. When the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF) organized a local lodge in 1875, Debs became a charter member and was elected recording secretary. The BLF was less a trade union than a benevolent society that provided accident and death benefits. The organization accepted management's right to determine the nature of the workday and sought to encourage among its members responsible conduct and a harmonious feeling toward employers. This perspective, with its belief in individual effort, potential social mobility, and the absence of permanent class divisions, proved attractive to the young Debs.

At first glance, the outbreak of a nationwide railroad strike in the summer of 1877--the first national strike in American history--threatened those expectations. Although state and federal troops were called out in numerous cities, the strike in Terre Haute proved anything but violent, and Debs's role in it was anything but incendiary. In contrast with workers in some of the larger railroad centers, railroad workers in Terre Haute largely exempted their employer, William Riley McKeen, from attack. These workers did occupy the local rail depot, but they explicitly focused their anger at the corporate owners of the larger railroads, such as Thomas Scott, president of the Pennsylvania line. Scott's concentrated economic power, the strikers argued, forced their employer to follow his lead in instituting the wage cuts. Terre Haute's workers asserted a communality of interest between themselves and their employer and categorically rejected the advice of coal miners from a neighboring county to call a general strike.

Yet for the 22-year-old Debs, even a strike proclaimed for these ends proved too threatening to support. Although a leader of the local BLF lodge, Debs took no known position on the strike during July 1877, even as his fellow lodge officers were actively involved. The following September, however, at the brotherhood's annual convention, Debs clearly articulated his position in a long and well-received speech to the delegates who had just witnessed the strike's near total failure. "Does the Brotherhood encourage strikes?" he asked. "To this question we most emphatically answer, No, Brothers. To disregard the laws which govern the land? To destroy the last vestige of order? We again say No, a thousand times No."

In an important fashion, then, the 1877 strike did not immediately threaten Debs's expectations for social harmony and its attendant promise of social mobility. Indeed, following his speech at the convention, Debs was the only officer of the Terre Haute lodge returned to office, and he achieved even greater prominence within the national organization as well. By 1880 this young man who had only worked for the railroad a brief time had become the grand secretary treasurer of the brotherhood and the editor of its monthly, the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*. As the holder of the two most important positions within the brotherhood, he became a figure of some note nationally, as what many called "the labor question" demanded more and more public attention.

In other ways as well Debs found that his response to the 1877 strike increased rather than diminished his standing. In 1879 he ran for city clerk as a Democrat, and the nature of the electoral coalition that led to his decisive victory over both Republican and Labor party candidates indicated the depth of his appeal. He received public support from former employers, including McKeen, a lifelong Republican, and won a clear plurality in the traditionally Republican Second Ward, the abode of many of the city's wealthier citizens. He also carried the wards with heavy concentrations of railroad and other working people by more than a 3 to 1 margin over his opponents' combined total.

Little occurred to threaten this experience of social harmony over the next five years. Debs became firmly entrenched as the national leader of the brotherhood, and he greatly expanded the group's organizing efforts with his incessant travels, crisscrossing the country time and again to attend local lodge meetings and to build the organization. Simultaneously, he easily won reelection as city clerk in 1881, and the same multiclass electoral coalition brought Debs the Democratic nomination and election to the Indiana Assembly in 1884. In 1885 he married Katherine Metzel. They would have no children. From a middle-class German immigrant family that owned a local drugstore, Katherine shared many of her husband's expectations of continued mobility and social prominence.

Debs's emphasis on harmony and cooperation as the key to industrial peace continued into 1886. He joined other brotherhood officials in urging members not to honor the strike of the Knights of Labor against [Jay Gould's](#) railways, and he remained publicly silent when the American Federation of Labor organized that December. Debs remained wary of strikes and confrontations with employers. Precisely because he came to these ideas honestly, as a reflection of his personal and social experience over the decade and a half since he entered the workforce, he could change his ideas in response to new circumstances. Indeed, by 1886 Debs had already begun to question his positions in private, even as he maintained, for the moment, a consistent public pattern. At the core of his thought was a commitment to the idea of an independent citizen living within a community of relative equals where acknowledged economic differences never weakened the common bond of citizenship nor allowed the emergence of permanent divisions within society. Increasingly, the actions of the nation's corporate employers and of the smaller businessmen who followed their lead caused Debs to question whether many of them retained their commitment to that reciprocal expectation of both worker and owner as expressed in the phrase "a fair day's work demands a fair day's pay."

The year-long strike against the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad that began early in 1888 deepened Debs's concerns. The company's refusal to negotiate with the railroad brotherhoods influenced him to write in his editorials in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* a critique of Burlington officials and of others like them throughout American industry. Their actions, Debs stated repeatedly, threatened to destroy the proclaimed equality of all citizens and thus undermine the very foundation of American life. He also argued that the failure of the strike was in part the fault of the brotherhoods themselves. Their organizational structures emphasized craft distinctions, encouraged internecine warfare among the different brotherhoods, and made difficult a common purpose among working people.

The fact that Debs now accepted as social fact the distinction between employers and working people suggests something of the political distance he had traveled since 1886. His actions soon followed. Although he remained editor of the BLF magazine until 1894, he resigned his position as secretary treasurer in 1893 in order to devote more time to a new organization he helped establish, the American Railway Union (ARU). An industrial union, the ARU sought to enlist all railroad workers, regardless of the craft or level of skill, into one organization to more effectively confront employers. "The spirit of fraternity [is] abroad in the land," Debs exulted, and he worked feverishly to build the new organization.

The major test of the ARU came in 1894, when workers struck [George Pullman's](#) railroad car shops just outside of Chicago. As Pullman officials refused to negotiate, Debs and other strike leaders called for a national boycott of all Pullman cars, demanding that other railroads separate the famous Pullman sleeper car from their trains or face an immediate walkout by workers. The Pullman Company resisted the ARU as a member of the General Managers Association, an organization of executives from the twenty-four railroads with terminals in Chicago. The association orchestrated the employer response to the boycott, including arranging for the U.S. Department of Justice to appoint one of their own lawyers, Edwin Walker, as the government attorney with jurisdiction over the strike. By 4 July, using the interruption of the mail as justification, the leaders of the association succeeded in convincing President [Grover Cleveland](#) to send in federal troops to break the strike.

Faced with the direct power of the government, both in the form of troops and in a series of injunctions against strike activity by federal judges, the strike quickly collapsed. Debs and other ARU leaders were arrested on conspiracy charges and for contempt of court for disregarding the injunctions. Debs was sentenced to a six-month jail sentence in the Woodstock (Ill.) jail.

This prison experience established the central mythic image of Debs's public self. As he told it some years later, before Pullman "I had heard but little of Socialism," but during the strike, "in the gleam of every bayonet and in the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*." In this mood, Debs continued, he received a visit at Woodstock from [Victor Berger](#), the Milwaukee Socialist leader, who bore as gifts the three volumes of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867). That set "the wires humming in my system," Debs averred. Drawing on the archetype of Saul on the road to Damascus, Debs offered himself as one who, in a moment of blinding insight, had understood the systematic problems with capitalism and the promise of socialism. He emerged from jail a changed and charged man.

To accept this account at face value, however, strains credulity. The Pullman experience certainly affected Debs, but he did not jettison the democratic political ideology that had so informed his earlier career. Upon his release from jail, he delivered a speech to a crowd of over 100,000 in Chicago in November 1895 that was a paean to traditional concepts of American liberty. As he would for much of his future career, Debs portrayed himself as one seeking both to conserve the best of the American experience and to reinterpret it for his generation, and he pointed to the nation's industrialists as the real revolutionaries, whose actions would debase the meaning and the power of the idea of citizenship. He supported the People's Party ticket in 1896. The slow, circuitous path he traveled from the 1877 strike to public identification as a Socialist in 1897--a path he traveled by touch and feel rather than through theoretical discussions--explains Debs's particular merging of class realities with democratic belief. It also explains much about the appeal of this native son to Americans of his generation.

As a Socialist, Debs's continued emphasis on industrial unionism led him to fiercely critique the established craft unions; their national organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL); and the AFL founding president, [Samuel Gompers](#). Not surprisingly, in 1905 Debs welcomed the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a syndicalist industrial union dedicated to the workers' control of government and industry. However, by 1908 he had quietly allowed his membership to lapse, as he reacted to the IWW's rhetorical excesses and limited practicality. By 1913 he had publicly labeled IWW leader [William "Big Bill" Haywood](#)'s call for sabotage and direct action "reactionary, not revolutionary," and he warned workers of the danger of being "most basely betrayed . . . and treacherously delivered to their enemies by the IWW Judases."

Although Debs remained an advocate of industrial unionism, his major effort in his speeches as he incessantly toured the country was to urge working people to vote for a democratic economic system by supporting the Socialist Party of America (SPA). In 1900 he represented the young and inexperienced SPA in the presidential campaign, receiving just under 100,000 votes. Four years later Debs's national total was more than four times that figure, and a growing number of Socialist candidates won election in local and state races. Expectations ran quite high in 1908, and the SPA leased a special railroad train, immediately dubbed "the Red Special," to carry presidential candidate Debs and his entourage into thirty-three states. The returns, however, barely matched the 1904 results. Debs and his supporters thought the various reform efforts had detracted from their tally but took comfort from the belief, a maxim of Socialist faith, that when reform ultimately proved inadequate in alleviating capitalism's exploitation, socialism would attract the voters. In 1910 Victor Berger's election to the U.S. Congress, as nearly 100 Socialists also won election to local and state offices, buoyed these hopes as well. Debs was nominated for the fourth consecutive time in 1912, and in a four-way race that included incumbent Republican [William Howard Taft](#), Democratic challenger and eventual winner [Woodrow Wilson](#), and independent candidate and former president [Theodore Roosevelt](#), his results seemed to confirm Socialist belief. With nearly one million votes, representing some 6 percent of the total, and with impressive local gains as well, Socialists looked forward to the coming electoral revolution.

Yet the 1912 results proved to be the high-water mark of SPA strength. Despite the attraction of many working people to Debs as a speaker and public figure, the overwhelming majority of workers simply would not vote for him. Contrary to Socialist belief, reform proved rather appealing as a practical solution to their needs, and the pull of the traditional parties, often grounded in ethnic and religious networks, remained dominant. Also, Socialist agitation addressed working Americans primarily as workers, an economic identity the majority simply did not accord a singular primacy in their lives. Debs suffered two collapses after 1912, and in 1916 he was too physically weakened to mount a national campaign. SPA loyalist Allan Benson ran a lackluster race instead. Debs did run that year as a candidate for Congress from Indiana's Fifth District. The campaign possessed an odd personal note for the 61-year-old Socialist leader, as he sought votes in the same district that, some thirty years earlier, had so applauded him for his more conventional Democratic politics. He finished a distant second to the Republican candidate.

Debs was confined to his sickbed, recuperating from severe physical exhaustion and psychological stress, during the tumultuous months of the American entry into World War One; a government-directed repression of Socialists, IWW members, unionists, and other dissidents; and the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917. Dismayed by his inactivity in the face of his comrades' suffering, Debs rose from his bed in June 1918 to deliver a series of antiwar speeches. Following a speech at Canton, Ohio, federal agents arrested him under the Espionage Act of 1917, charging him with impeding the war effort. Sentenced to ten years, Debs reported for jail in April 1919, traveling from Cleveland to Moundsville, West Virginia, on a train staffed by union men in the various railroad brotherhoods he had organized almost forty years earlier. Shortly transferred to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, Debs conducted his fifth and final presidential campaign from his jail cell in 1920. Federal prisoner 9653 received nearly a million votes, approximately 3 percent of the total.

In a surprise move, President [Warren G. Harding](#) released Debs and twenty-three other political prisoners on Christmas Day 1921, and the Socialist leader returned to Terre Haute. His remaining years were framed by a personal and political despondency. The Socialist movement he had led for so long had largely disintegrated, and he found his own prescriptions increasingly ignored in postwar American cultural and political life. Following a trip to Bermuda with his wife in 1926, he grew progressively weaker. Debs died at the Lindlahr Sanitarium just outside Chicago.

Although he never led a successful Socialist movement, Debs's public life was nonetheless significant and important. More forcefully than most in his era, he pressed Americans to recognize that their valued political traditions were themselves threatened, in a time of industrial expansion and concentration, unless the nation could expand its democratic sentiments into the economic realm. In this fashion Debs's career influenced progressives in his generation and in succeeding ones who raised, within a liberal political tradition, quite similar issues.

Bibliography

The major Debs archive is in the Cunningham Library, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, and it is now available on microfilm. Other significant collections are in the Tamiment Institute, Bobst Library, New York University; the Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.; and the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington. A useful three-volume edition of Debs's correspondence is *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine (1990). The most comprehensive biography is Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982). Older works still of interest are McAlister Coleman, *Eugene V. Debs, A Man Unafraid* (1930), and Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (1949). An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 21 Oct. 1926.

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