
Eugene V. Debs is Dead But His Spirit Still Lives

by James Oneal

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If there were one outstanding characteristic of Eugene V. Debs' career as a Socialist agitator it was his fundamental confidence in the proletarian character of the Socialist movement. This aspect of his life and work stands out in everything he said and wrote. He live and thought and worked in terms of a proletarian class which he believed had revolutionary potentialities that no other class can have under the capitalist system.

The talk we hear so much of today regarding "liberalism" and "progressivism" would have not only amused him but would have aroused his wrath. In the pre-war period there was the occasional "liberal" who was also a "Socialist too" and Debs obtained some amusement by quoting that "Socialist too," but there was always an ironic wrath in his voice when he quoted the phrase. Knowing him intimately in the old days in Terre Haute, I am certain that his proletarian perspective would be especially pronounced if he were alive in these days of confused thought and over-valuation of "liberalism" and "progressivism."

It was precisely because Debs so thoroughly incarnated the proletarian ideals of the Socialist movement that he incurred the respect and the fear of the capitalist enemy. That enemy knew that Debs could not be moved from his position by any prospect of office, adulation, or malicious criticism. Because of his unswerving devotion to the proletariat Debs throughout his life was the target for bitter criticism by the capitalist press, but that same press feared him — and respected him. He was the stormy

petrel of revolutionary Socialist agitation and he inspired millions of workers with confidence in themselves as a class.

Was Debs a Marxist? He was. In many conversations with him he again and again paid his tribute to the work of Marx and Engels. It was from their writings that he derived his proletarian philosophy. However, he never participated in theoretical discussions of Marxism although he took a keen interest in them. He was first and foremost an agitator.

As a rule Debs did not participate in the discussion of principles and issues within the party. Occasionally, however, he expressed himself forcefully after a long period of discussion when decisions were to be made.

One recalls his clear statement when the syndicalists under the leadership of William D. Haywood had obtained considerable influence in the party. The issue came to a head in the national convention of the party in 1912 [Indianapolis, May 12-18].

Debs spoke out in no uncertain terms. He said that he was for independent political action by the working class and that if he accepted the syndicalist view he would be consistent, resign from the party, and join the anarchists. Because of his long friendship with Haywood, the latter's supporters had expected Debs to be either neutral or to support them; but they did not know Debs.

With a growing Socialist Party the proletarian spirit and philosophy of Eugene V. Debs is needed as never before. With a movement frankly based upon the claims and interests of the working class it can grow and expand; without that perspective in every aspect of its agitation, program, policies, and philosophy it will fail to measure up to the requirements of a Socialist movement.

Eugene V. Debs has passed on but his life and work are a rich heritage. To the extent that we live up to his proletarian ideals will American Socialism merit the confidence and support of the toiling masses.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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