
An Open Letter to Eugene V. Debs: Issued by the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of America. [circa May 1919]

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DEAR COMRADE DEBS:—

A year ago you were taken from our midst by the enemies of the working class and thrust into Atlanta Penitentiary — with head unbowed — hurling defiance at the Capitalist Government — the very incarnation of the proletarian revolution in America.

All through the war, while the leaders and officials of the Socialist Party were betraying the class struggle and making a hollow mockery of the “St. Louis Resolution,” you stood like a rock for International Socialism and against the capitalist-imperialist world war. Later, when the Bolsheviki conquered power in Russia and set up a dictatorship of the workers and peasants, you, Comrade Debs, came out for them in ringing words — while the officials and leaders of the Socialist Party were busy discrediting the idea of proletarian dictatorship as a means of overthrowing capitalism. You also came out openly for the Liebknecht-Luxemburg-Spartacan revolt against the Ebert-Scheidemann bourgeois government while the official Socialist Party was, and is, defending those traitors and their government as “Socialist.”

All your life you had championed the cause of the working class — all your life you had espoused the class struggle and the principles of International Socialism. Not without reason did the Communist Party of Russia (Bolsheviki) in issuing the call for the formation of a New International, invite “the left elements of the Socialist Party of America under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs” to send delegates to Moscow.

Before the prison gates closed upon you, you

must have known of the long list of compromises and betrayals of which the leaders and officials of the Socialist Party had been guilty in the past. You must have known of the growing resentment of the rank and file within the party, which smouldered fiercely for two years and eventually burst forth into a conscious revolt against the official machine.

Your article in the February 1919 *Class Struggle*, one of the organs of the Left Wing of which you were one of the editors — “The Day of the People” — was one of the factors aiding this revolt. We shall quote the last part of it in order to refresh your memory:

“The reign of capitalism and militarism has made of all the peoples inflammable material. They are ripe and ready for the change, the great change which means the rise and triumph of the workers, the end of exploitation, of war and plunder, and the emancipation of the race. Let it come! Let us help its coming and pave the way for it by organizing industrially and politically to conquer capitalism and usher in the day of the people. In Russian and Germany our valiant comrades are leading the proletarian revolution, which knows no race, no color, no sex, and no boundary lines. They are setting the heroic example for worldwide emulation. **Let us, like they, scorn and repudiate the cowardly compromisers within our own ranks**, challenge and defy the robber-class power, and fight it out on that line to victory or death! From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet I am a Bolshevik, and proud of it. The Day of the People has arrived!”

Thus spoke the man whom the capitalist class place behind prison bars last year!

Today, after a long tomblike-silence, comes the announcement of your acceptance as presidential candidate on the corrupt Socialist Party ticket! †

†- Debs was nominated for President by the 1920 Socialist Party National Convention, held May 8-14 in New York City. A telegram sent from the convention by NY State Secretary Walter M. Cook on May 13, 1920, first notified Debs of the nomination, which was followed by a May 29 delegation to Atlanta headed by James Oneal to give formal notice. This group included VP nominee Seymour Stedman, SP Executive Secretary Otto Branstetter, Julius Gerber, William M. Feigenbaum, and Madge Patton Stephens. This open letter was written in protest of Debs' decision to accept the nomination.

We presume, Comrade Debs, that you are ignorant of the facts and unacquainted with all that transpired within the Socialist movement this last year, else you might not have accepted a nomination which can only lead to a parting of the ways between the class-conscious revolutionary workers and yourself, their one-time leader.

What made you accept the nomination we know not. We can only infer that the “political charlatans,” the “cowardly compromisers,” who have not hesitated to lie to you in the past, have done so again.

We address this open letter to you because we desire to place the facts squarely before you. Your life-long devotion in the cause of the working class, your attitude towards Bolshevism and the heroic Communist leaders, Lenin and Trotsky in Russia, Liebknecht and Luxemburg in Germany — your scorn and repudiation of the betrayers of Socialism and the class-struggle, make it imperative that we acquaint you with the type of party and men you, in your ignorance, are aligning yourself with.

During this eventful year, while you have been kept behind prison bars, without chance of intercommunication, the Communist International has extended itself to every part of the world. During this year, revolutionary Socialists of practically all countries have decisively cut themselves off from association with the old parties of the Second International and have formed new Communist parties. In this country the rank and file revolt led to the formation of a Left Wing movement within the Socialist Party, which culminated in September of last year at Chicago in the creation of a Communist Party of America. Together with the Communist Labor Party, these two parties absorbed all the really revolutionary elements in the old party. Not more than one-fourth remained in the Socialist Party, notably the large Finnish Federation.

The Finnish Communists have not yet split off from the Finnish Socialist Federation. The betrayers of Socialism, “the cowardly compromisers,” as you call them, remained in the Socialist Party, and even now lead and shape its policies and tactics. Fortunately, we do not have to go further back into the history of the Socialist Party in order to realize what that party now represents in the United States.

In the recent hearings on the ouster of the five

Socialist Assemblymen at Albany, we have the last word of the highest Socialist Party spokesmen on just what the party stands for, and just how it intends to attain its aim. The entire defense of the Socialist Party at Albany was constitutional regularity as the limit of party purposes and actions. They accepted unreservedly the existing form of capitalist government, based upon the constitution of the United States, as the form upon which to build the future society. They insisted that the Socialist Party did and always would conform to the State and National Constitution and laws. Not the least mention was made of the class struggle. Instead, patriotism and loyalty was painfully and somewhat ludicrously stressed. The class character of the American Government could hardly be mentioned since the Socialist Party boastfully proclaimed itself the arch-defender of “representative democracy” and of “constitutional integrity.”

The St. Louis Platform, upon which you and others were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms, was brushed aside as “a scrap of paper” and as of no moment. Whatever was vital and revolutionary in it, even though moderately expressed, was twisted and distorted to rob it of its meaning and significance, and the witnesses all insisted upon their exemplary “loyalty” and “patriotism” during the war. In several other respects, in which the party declarations might seem to have offended bourgeois “respectability,” the defense was that the party never *did* anything of the kind, no matter what it *said*. Control of legislative representatives by compulsory resignations, required by the party constitution, was declared a dead letter. The obligation not to vote for military appropriations was repudiated. Instead of insisting upon the propriety of alien membership in a working class political party, the Socialist Party introduced false figures to prove the “Americanism” of the party membership.

In spite of the achievements of the Russian Communists, in spite of the impending Communist revolutions in other European countries, the chief spokesman of the Socialist Party at Albany characterized the Communist International as “scarcely more than an idea or a name.” There was much insistence upon sympathy for Soviet Russia, but that is quite different from adherence to the principles and tactics of International Socialism as expressed in the manifesto of the Third International.

There was no one at the Albany “fiasco” who did not disavow Bolshevism. Nay, more, Morris Hillquit even went so far as to answer a hypothetical question to the effect that the Socialists would shoulder arms and defend America and American institutions from invasion by the Bolsheviki, should the latter declare war on this country. While another Socialist lawyer at Albany, Seymour Stedman, former member of the NEC and next choice of the Socialist Party after yourself for the presidential nomination, branded the Communist Party as criminals in the capitalist courts in order to steal from them their meeting hall in Detroit.

Never before did the Socialist Party of America revel in such orgies of “respectability,” “loyalty,” and “patriotism.” With such men as Judge Hughes and Attorney-General Palmer to rally to their defense, surely the Socialist Party has purged itself of every taint and suspicion of revolutionary Socialism! We need only cite the comment of the man responsible for the thousands of deportations and nationwide raids upon the Communist organizations, Attorney-General Palmer:

“The Socialist Party in America has cast out the radicals and forced them to organized the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party. The Socialists are loyal and patriotic men though radical. Their aim is to change the Government by lawful means, while the ‘Reds’ Would destroy lawful authority.”

Never was there a more glaring climax of political irony than the publication, during the Albany affairs, of the Socialist Party membership referendum vote in favor of allegiance to the Communist International — 3,475 to 1,444 in favor of allegiance *without acceptance of its program and tactics*, while openly repudiating every principle of Socialism for the sake of retaining a few seats in a capitalist legislature!

In striking contrast with the corrupt Socialist Party, which deceives the workers with the hope of a “peaceful (!) social revolution” along the lines of parliamentary reforms, the Communist Party enters the parliamentary campaign for *revolutionary propaganda and agitation only*. Our slogan is: “Down with the Parliament! Long live the Soviets!” The Communist Party utilizes parliaments in the same manner as did the Bolsheviki in the Tsarist Duma, as Karl Liebknecht did in the German Reichstag — to assist in destroying the bourgeois parliamentary system. Since our object

is the destruction of capitalism, and carrying out the will of the capitalist class...is, in fact, the only function of executive officials, the Communist Party, in keeping with this general principle, has abolished all executive offices from its ticket. From President down to Governor, Mayor, and Judges, the Communist Party places no candidates in the field. In other words, the Communist Party is for the full utilization of the bourgeois parliament for our Communist work — as long as we are not yet strong enough to overthrow the parliament — and not for social reforms and other palliative measures.

The Communist Party is waging the class struggle mainly through extra-parliamentary channels — mass action of the working class through general political strikes, mass demonstrations, etc. And in order to carry on the struggle effectively we call upon the working class to conquer the power of the state, establish the dictatorship of the working class in the form of Soviets or Councils of Workers’ Deputies, and to break the resistance of the bourgeoisie.

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In January the Government staged a series of nationwide raids upon the Communist Party with the express purpose of crushing it in its infancy. The very existence of a Communist movement is a serious menace to capitalism, and they know it. BUT THEY DID NOT SUCCEED. The Communist Party of America cannot be crushed, neither by the Iron Heel of capitalist democracy, nor by the cunning stealth of the servile capitalist tools, the Socialist Party of America. They did succeed, however, in driving the Communist Party underground, where, coming directly in contact with the workers in the shops, mills, factories, and mines, it receives now reserves of energy with which to carry on the class struggle to its final and inevitable outcome, the Socialist revolution — the overthrow of the capitalist state — the establishment of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and through it the Communist Society.

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Between the Communist Party and the Socialist Party there can be no compromise. The latter is the

most dangerous enemy of the working class and as such, we shall wage a bitter struggle against it. Their attempt to use your name in order to fool the masses will avail them of nothing. Their betrayal of Socialism has been too complete and too cowardly. Not even your name can hide their counterrevolutionary tendency. The class-conscious workers of America are through with the stinking carcass that calls itself the Socialist Party of America.

As for their hypocritical act of seeking admission to membership in the Third International without first accepting its principles and tactics — that is too palpable a fraud to warrant any serious consideration. They cannot be admitted so long as they repudiate, by words or deeds, mass action, proletarian dictatorship, and Soviet Power.

Your alignment with the Socialist Party, whether you will it or not, is an alignment against the Communist Movement of America — against the Communist International — against the world-proletarian revolution toward which our heroic comrades in Russia are looking for their salvation. It is against your

own inspiring efforts for the working class in the past.

COMRADE DEBS, we have placed the facts before you. It is yours to choose. The comrades and the class-conscious workers everywhere believe that the shameful record of the Socialist Party since your imprisonment is as yet unknown to you. But if, after you have read this statement, which goes not only to you, but in leaflet form by the million to the workers of this country, you still adhere to the Socialist Party, we shall conclude that you have cast your lot with the “cowardly compromisers,” as you have called them, with the betrayers of the working class, with the betrayers of the class-struggle, with the betrayers of Socialism — and we shall announce the fact to the working class.

The eyes of the revolutionary class-conscious workers of America are focused upon you at this moment. Can you remain a candidate on the Socialist Party ticket with these facts before you — realizing the significance of your candidacy in relation to your own life work and the International Communist Movement?

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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