
Eugene V. Debs and the Revolutionary Labor Movement

by C.E. Ruthenberg

Published in *The Daily Worker* [Chicago], vol. 3, no. 252 (November 6, 1926), pg. 6.

The Socialist press is very much aroused and alarmed because the Workers (Communist) Party is paying tribute to the work of Eugene V. Debs in the struggle against capitalism by participating in memorial meetings in honor of the memory of Debs.

The Socialists do not care to be reminded of the many times that Eugene V. Debs disagreed with the reformist and reactionary position taken by the Socialist Party. They wish to make the tradition of Debs' work in the revolutionary labor movement part of the background of the utterly bankrupt Socialist Party and hide it with the mantle of non-class struggle reformism, which is the policy of the Socialist Party today.

The memory of the work of Eugene V. Debs in the American labor movement is something which every revolutionary worker can cherish. The history of the Socialist Party in the United States does not begin with 1919. Debs worked in the Socialist Party for nearly two decades prior to 1919. He supported inside of the Socialist Party, while the struggle was still going on between yellow reformism and class-conscious revolutionary action, not the Hillquits, Bergers, and Oneals, but the "reds," the left wing of the Socialist Party.

Debs can still speak for himself. His eloquent voice is hushed by his death, but the many flaming words of denunciation he wrote against those who turned the Socialist Party from a class struggle, revolutionary policy still speaks for him against the Hillquits, Bergers, and Oneals.

It is only possible here to cite a few incidents showing how Debs differed with the right wing, reformist leadership of the So-

cialist Party. These, however, will suffice to indicate that Debs did not belong to yellow reformism.

Debs on Immigration.

In the 1910 convention of the Socialist Party a report was made by a committee on immigration which adopted the reactionary AF of L position to bar orientals from the United States. Debs could not accept such a version of internationalism. In the July 1910 number of *The International Socialist Review* he wrote about this brand of internationalism, which the official leadership of the Socialist Party was trying to force upon the party, as follows:

Have just read the majority report of the committee on immigration. It is utterly unsocialistic, reactionary, and in truth outrageous.... Let us stand square on our revolutionary working class principles and make our fight openly and uncompromisingly against all our enemies.

The Attempt to Liquidate the Socialist Party.

In 1910 a movement developed within the Socialist Party, led by A.M. Simons, for the merging of the Socialist Party into a labor party. The proposal was not that a united front organization consisting of delegates from various labor unions and workers' organizations should be organized and the Socialist Party should affiliate with such a party, but rather that the Socialist Party should cease to exist, merging itself completely into a labor party. This, of course, was quite a different proposal than the present day movement supported by the Workers (Communist) Party for the formation of a labor party with which the Workers (Communist) Party would affiliate, maintaining at the same time its separate organization and its revolutionary program.

The movement in 1910 would have resulted in the liquidation in the United States of the Socialist Party as a party having its objective the abolition of capitalism, within which there was the left wing, which stood for a revolutionary class struggle.

Debs wrote about this proposal in the January 1910 issue of *The International Socialist Review* as follows:

The revolutionary character of our party and our movement must be preserved in all its integrity at all costs, for if that be compromised it had better cease to exist.

It would be well for the Hillquits, Bergers, and Oneals, who have stripped the Socialist Party of any claim that it has a revolutionary character, to again read these words of Eugene V. Debs.

The Struggle Between the “Yellows” and “Reds.”

In the year 1912 there was a bitter struggle within the Socialist Party between the right and left wings, termed at that time the “yellows” and the “reds,” over the question of how the workers would achieve power. Debs at that time placed himself squarely on record against the idea that the workers could achieve their emancipation by participation in the election campaigns only.

William D. Haywood, together with Frank Bohn, had written a pamphlet in which the following declaration appeared:

When the worker, either through experience or study of socialism, comes to know this truth, he acts accordingly. He retains absolutely no respect for the “property” rights of the profit takers. He will use any weapon which will win his fight.

In *The International Socialist Review*, Debs wrote in regard to this statement:

I agree with them that in the fight against capitalism the workers have the right to use any weapon that will help them win.

Debs repudiated, as every Marxist must, the idea of the use of sabotage as the means of establishing the workers’ power and winning their emancipation, but Debs would not permit himself to be bound by the interpretation of the method of the workers’ struggle which the right wing leaders of the Socialist Party endeavored to make.

The struggle in 1912 had its climax in the national convention of the Socialist Party of that year, through which the Hillquits, Bergers, etc., wrote into the constitution of the Socialist

Party a criminal syndicalist law 7 years before any of the states thought of enacting such a law.

This criminal syndicalist law was in the form of a section of the constitution known as Article 2, Section 6, which sought to define political action as participation in election campaigns and in the work of the capitalist legislative body, and prohibited any person who advocated sabotage or violence as a method of the class struggle from becoming a member of the Socialist Party.

In March 1914, Debs wrote in *The International Socialist Review* in regard to this constitutional provision as follows:

I want to say that in my opinion Section 6 of Article 2 ought to be stricken from the Socialist Party constitution.

I am opposed to restricting free speech under any pretense whatsoever, and quite as decidedly opposed to our party seeking favor in the bourgeois eyes by protesting that it does not countenance violence and is not a criminal organization.

Article 2, Section 6, which Debs thus condemned, was stricken from the constitution of the Socialist Party on the motion of the writer of this article at the St. Louis convention in 1917, where the left wing of the Socialist Party was in control.

Debs and the War.

The manifesto against the entry of the United States into the World War adopted at the St. Louis convention in 1917 was accepted as the statement of the principles of the Socialist Party under the pressure of the left wing of the party, which dominated the St. Louis Convention. Hillquit and [Algernon] Lee represented a center group in the convention which, while it wished to declare against the war, did not wish to make an aggressive struggle such as the left wing insisted upon.

The left wing made the mistake at the St. Louis convention of permitting the formal rule that the National Election Committee be elected by referendum to stand in its way in securing a National Executive Committee which stood on the St. Louis platform. The consequence of this error soon became apparent in the fact that it was only where the left wing was in control of the So-

cialist Party organizations that an actual struggle to carry the St. Louis program into effect was carried on.

By the spring of 1918 a strong movement had developed in the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party for revision of the St. Louis program and its strong denunciation and program of action against the war, and for a policy that the Socialist Party should accommodate itself to the existing situation and, if not becoming pro-war, at least carrying on no struggle against the war. It was under these conditions that Debs made his speech in Nimasilla Park, Canton, Ohio, opposite the Stark County Workhouse, in which Alfred Wagenknecht, Charles Baker, and the writer were confined for actually giving life to the St. Louis manifesto against the war by an intensive struggle against the war in all its forms, carried out in the city of Cleveland and the state of Ohio. Debs thus made his flaming denunciation of the war at a time when the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party, dominated by the present leaders of the Socialist Party, were ready to take a step backward and make a compromise in regard to the stand in relation to the war.

Debs and the Russian Revolution.

Debs' reaction to the Russian Revolution, as he expressed in the year 1919 before he went to prison, was that of enthusiastic support. In the last speech which Debs made before going to Atlanta prison, which was delivered in the West Side Turner Hall, Cleveland, Ohio, under the auspices of the local of the Socialist Party, which at that time had already declared itself a supporter of the Left Wing movement which later developed into the Communist Party, Debs declared:

I am a Bolshevik from the top of my head to the sole of my feet.

In his statement after the Supreme Court affirmed his conviction for the Canton speech, Debs issued a statement in which he said:

The decision just rendered places the United States where old Russia under the tsar left off. It is good for at least a million Bolshevik recruits in this country.

Debs was not a Bolshevik in understanding and conscious support of Bolshevik principles — that is, Communist principles — but his reaction to the Russian Revolution was in the same spirit that he showed in regard to all the workers' struggles, support of a militant class struggle against capitalism.

Debs and the Communists.

Debs was not a Communist. He remained in the Socialist Party after the split of 1919, when those with whom he had been associated in past struggles within the Socialist Party were compelled to leave it and form the Communist Party because the Socialist Party leadership, in spite of the support of the overwhelming membership of the party given to the Left Wing, betrayed the revolutionary principle which the Russian Revolution showed must guide the revolutionary labor movement in its struggle.

The issue on which the Left Wing which formed the Communist Party and Debs parted company was the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Debs was in the Atlanta prison at the time the split took place in the Socialist Party. Naturally, he was not informed as to the phases of the struggle and could not express himself in relation to the struggle.

In June 1920, the writer visited Debs in the federal prison at Atlanta to present to him the question of his future affiliation. The point in the program of the Communist Party which Debs did not accept was the declaration that the workers' and farmers' government which would be established as the result of a class struggle must of necessity be a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Debs' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat was that of a dictatorship exercised by an individual, such a dictatorship as that exercised by the first Napoleon or the Tsar of Russia during the period of unlimited autocracy, or the Mussolini dictatorship in Italy at the present time.

Debs did not understand the dictatorship in the form in which it is supported by the Communists. That is, the dictatorship of a class against class. He did not grasp that in the transition period from capitalism to Communism it was necessary that the workers use the governmental power to suppress the capitalists and the remaining vestiges of the capitalist system in the same

manner that the capitalists today use the governmental power to suppress the struggles of the workers for a new social order.

Why the Communists Honor the Memory of Debs.

Although Debs did not clearly grasp the principles underlying the class struggle and their implications, he was a revolutionary fighter who instinctively took his stand on the side of the worker in every battle. In every great struggle in American labor history Debs spoke out his flaming words in support of the workers. When Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone were in danger of their lives, it was Debs who, in flaming words, called upon the workers to rally to their support. In the struggle at Lawrence, Massachusetts; the massacre at Ludlow, Colorado; the great struggle in the West Virginia coal fields more than a decade ago, it was Debs who took his stand always for the workers and who called upon the whole working class to fight with them. Even after 1919, when the Socialist Party held itself aloof and even denounced the struggle in support of workers' fights, Debs still maintained the same position and supported every fight for the workers or in defense of the victims of the class struggle. Thus Debs became a member of the Labor Defense Council for the defense of the Communists arrested at Bridgman, Michigan. He later joined the International Labor Defense and became a member of its National Committee. He raised his voice to call the working class in defense of the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Supporting the principle of industrial unionism which he had advocated for a quarter of a century, he spoke in favor of the Trade Union Educational League and its policy.

The above discussion of the policy supported by Debs shows that he was continually in opposition to the official leadership of the Socialist Party, made up in the past, as now, of the Hillquits and Bergers. He stood for and supported a militant class struggle policy under all conditions.

The present day leaders of the decrepit Socialist Party endeavor to claim Debs as their own, in order to capitalize his name and win the workers for the yellow reformism which the Socialist Party and its leadership stands for today. The present policies of the Socialist Party and its present leadership are alien to the whole

spirit of Debs' part in the labor movement of this country. Debs and the memory of his work are part of the traditions of the Left Wing of the Socialist Party which has become the Communist Party.

It is because Debs' work in the American labor movement was carried on in the spirit of a militant class struggle, because Debs denounced injustice, stirred hatred of the system of exploitation and ever stood on the side of the workers, that the Workers (Communist) Party and its members honor the memory of Eugene V. Debs. It is because the spirit in which Debs fought the class struggle is the spirit of the Workers (Communist) Party today that it will do honor to him and his work as part of the best traditions of the revolutionary American labor movement.

The Workers (Communist) Party not only carried on the work of fighting the workers' battles in the spirit that Debs fought them, but translates that spirit into action guided by Leninist policies which will lead the American workers to victory in the struggle against capitalism.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2014 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.