
Debs' Busy Life in Jail: Imprisoned Labor Leader Devotes His Time to Study: Economic Questions Debated By His Associates in Turn

Published in *Chicago Chronicle*, June 19, 1895.
Copy in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm collection, reel 9, pg. 205.

"I intend to use all my influence, and it is very little, toward the cooperative commonwealth and against monopolistic ownership. I have given my liberty for my convictions and I am ready to give my life for them."

As he spoke these words yesterday [June 18, 1895] Eugene V. Debs glanced quietly at the little group seated around him in the McHenry County jail at Woodstock. Seated beside the famous labor leader, with his dark eyes fixed on the tier of cells in front of him, was S. W. Rogers. On a rude barber chair William E. Burns stretched his length, puffing at a pipe, and giving serious attention to the words of his chief. Sylvester Keliher, James Hogan, M.J. Elliott, and R.M. Goodwin, the other directors of the American Railway Union undergoing sentence for contempt of court, lounged about the cellroom in lazy attitudes and listened.

"There will be no more prosperity in this country until the money power, that great force which is combining and centralizing capital in every branch of industry, is supplanted by a commonwealth where every man will receive the full product of his brain and hands," went on Mr. Debs, in his firm, convincing way.

Mr. Debs is a trifle thinner than he was a few weeks ago, but indoor life has not yet begun to tell on his ruddy cheek. He was comfortably attired in negligee costume, as were all the other prisoners. Rogers alone seems to show the effects of confinement, as his face is overspread by a sickly pallor which is heightened by a stubble growth of beard.

Comforts for Prisoners.

The room in which the seven prisoners sat talking is about 30 feet long and 10 feet wide. A flood of light and air is admitted by three large windows and here the world famous officers of the American Railway Union study, write, and talk. At the west end of the room, close under a barred window, is a pine table, piled high with books and writing materials. The north wall is composed of a lattice-work of steel and beyond that are the ten cells of the McHenry County jail.

Life in the prison is not irksome to Debs and his companions, for every moment is occupied. All are deeply interested in the study of economic questions and the books are constantly in use. On the south wall is pinned a code of rules, drawn by a committee of the prisoners. Here they are:

Rise, 6 am.

Study hours, 8:30 to 1030 am.

Recess, 10:45 to 12:15 pm.

DINNER.

Study hours, 2 to 3:30 pm.

Recess, 3:45 to 5 pm.

Drill, 5 sharp.

SUPPER.

Debate, 7:30 to 9 pm.

Retire at 10 pm.

Positively no talking or leaving bed after the lights go out.

Entire silence must be preserved during study hours.

All interruptions by reading aloud or talking aloud or asking questions of any kind are strictly prohibited.

Visitors — During visits rules are suspended, but are instantly in force when visitor departs.

Each man shall be turnkey one day at a time, and if he neglects his duty he shall serve an additional day.

Cells must be inspected and kept clean; all beds to be made during morning session.

Live Up to Rules.

“There are our rules,” said Mr. Debs, with a sweep of his arm toward them, “and we live up to them. Inspector Elliott, there, will allow no trifling. At five minutes to 10 he gives the signal for bed, and

every man is allowed five minutes to get into his cell, undress, and become quiet. At 10 o'clock, biff goes the light and not a loud breath is allowed after that."

Mr. Elliott grinned good-naturedly at this recital of his capabilities as a martinet, and Burns, lazily rolling over in the barber-chair, observed that a variation of five minutes in some of the watches the night before almost caused a riot.

"Have you seen our gymnasium?" asked Mr. Debs. "You must not miss the punching bag. Stay for the big show," and he led the way into the cell room where a punching bag is rigged up. "There is where we get our magnificent proportions," said Mr. Debs, giving the bag a lusty jab, "and here is our military branch," he said, as he produced an old army musket from a corner. "Colonel Hogan, there, puts us through the manual with this to limber us up, and all the boys are well drilled except me. Then we march up and down here and do the arm movements, so you see we can keep down the weight."

Time Profitably Occupied.

As he ceased his banter and again seated himself with his chair tilted back against the steel bars, Mr. Debs took a graver tone, and said:

"Every minute here is profitably occupied. During study hour you could hear a pin drop. Here are some of our books," and he lifted a copy of Kidd's *Social Evolution*. "Here is *The Coming Climax*, Richard Ely's *Political Economy, Freeland — A Social Anticipation*, by Professor Hertzka, Lawrence Gronlund's *Cooperative Commonwealth, Live Questions*, by Altgeld, and all the new books on the silver question. So you see we keep ourselves busy. Every night we have a debate or speeches. Here is the program for this evening," and the studious-looking prisoner picked up a sheet of paper on which was written:

Tuesday evening, 7:30 to 9 o'clock.

Resolved, That a sincere belief in any religion helps, rather than retards, the reform movement.

Affirmative, Burns; negative, Hogan.

Time rule — Affirmative, 15 minutes; negative 15 minutes; audience, 7 minutes each; negative concludes in 10 minutes, affirmative concludes in 10 minutes; statement next subject and remarks, 5 minutes; adjourn.

“Tomorrow evening will be given up to speeches,” went on Mr. Debs, “and Brother Rogers has arranged this little program:”

Ten-minute speeches on special subjects:

Goodwin: “Abuse of Natural Law and Its Consequences.”

Debs: “What Monopolies Should First Be Destroyed, and Why.”

Keliher: “Gymnastic Development and Its Benefits.”

Elliott: “The Effects of Importing Foreign Labor.”

Rogers: “Outline Lessons in Science We Should Understand.”

Hogan: “Use and Abuse of Military Power.”

Burns: “Power of Corporation Lobbies in ‘Reform Legislatures.’”

Two minute speeches on the subject just discussed permitted between the 10-minute speeches.

Official Letter Writing.

“As for myself, in addition to taking part in these little interchanges of thought, I am keeping up all my necessary correspondence on behalf of the American Railway Union and I am writing for a number of labor papers. I expect before long to get into the magazines. I have been invited to contribute to the *North American Review* and to *The Arena*. A book might be written on this experience of ours, but the trouble would be to know where to stop. The case stands without precedent in this country and is worth of being preserved in book form.

“As for the future, I am not worrying. I think when this sentence is served there will not be another one to follow. Judge Woods agreed to make the records show that the sentences were concurrent, and I think he will do it. When I get out of here I will take up the threads where they were laid down and do my best to help the dawn of day we are all hoping for, when the poor man will have a show. As it is, he has none. The trend of the times is toward capitalization, toward centralization of everything, and when each branch of industry is controlled by a trust that monopoly doles out such wages as it pleases. All this is wrong, and only a cooperative commonwealth can right it.

“In this country we have no longer a republic, no longer a Congress. If the Congress places upon the statute books a law inimical to the interests of the allied money power, of capital, it is wiped out by the Supreme Court. What is the Supreme Court? Nine gentlemen who owe their appointments to corporation influence, seven of whom are corporation lawyers, men whose lives have been spent in service of

corporations, whose affiliations and sympathies are all with the corporations. Is there the slightest chance that they would decide any question in favor of the workingman, in favor of a class from which they turn with disgust, and which might as well be on another planet for all they know of its struggles and ambitions? Events have proven that such hope is futile and that the money power, capital which is daily and hourly growing more centralized, already supersedes every department of the government and has the country by the throat.

Is Not an Anarchist.

“All this may be termed buncombe and anarchistic, but we are American citizens, we are not anarchists. Had we been, we would be free today, for we would be on the other side of the question. The time will never again come in this country when there will be enough work to go around. Every day more men are forced out of work by machinery. The machinery produces what they formerly did, but the men remain to be provided for, and every year it is growing worse. Just so long as all that machinery and everything it produces is controlled by monopoly the workingman will stand begging for employment at the door of the trust. The country has outgrown the wage system. That is the sum and substance of it. The system which was in vogue 25 and 30 years ago is still in force, but conditions are entirely revolutionized. When I was a boy every man who worked for another hoped someday to be his own employer, to set up his own business. The blacksmith’s apprentice worked a few years and then started his own shop. Nowadays all the horseshoe nails and nearly all the horseshoes are made by trusts. The printer learned his trade, and what use is it to him? Ten years from now a hand compositor will be a rarity. They have been driven out by machines. But the men are still here, clamoring for the work which machinery deprives them of, and capital, controlling the machinery and its product, holds the upper hand. The way out is a question too large for me to handle. But toward the cooperative commonwealth, the solution of this problem of the day, all my energies shall be directed.”

Treatment by the Sheriff.

Sheriff Eckert, who rules the prisoners with so light a hand, is a genial, hearty gentleman who has a deep respect for Mr. Debs and his

fellow prisoners. The men eat every meal in the dining room of the sheriff's residence, and the fare is the same as that of Mr. Eckert's family.

"I make no distinction in the matter of feeding the boys," said Sheriff Eckert. "They eat the same food my family does, and I buy the best I can afford. To prepare their meals and serve them in the cells would be too much work for my family, so I just gave orders that the boys should eat in my dining room. I guess they are satisfied."

The cells of the labor leaders are scrupulously clean. Mr. Debs sleeps alone in a 6x4 cell, but the others bunk two in a cell. A narrow iron bunk is hung from the wall by chains and on this is a mattress, pillow, and bed-clothing. When the men are in their cells three heavy barred doors are between them and the outer world.

There are five other prisoners in the jail at present, and they seem to enjoy almost as many privileges as the Debs party. Sheriff Eckert does not see the wisdom or necessity of locking prisoners in a narrow cell all day. The five men are free in the corridor to smoke punch the bag, or sleep, as fancy may dictate. All of the prisoners declared they were well and as happy as could be expected of seven strong men with locks on every side and a glimpse of the world obtained only by gazing through steel bars.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.