
Eugene V. Debs at Home in Terre Haute:
An Interview with the *St. Louis Chronicle* ¹
(August 29, 1900)

Eugene V. Debs, social democracy's Presidential candidate, has just risen from a sick bed. Since his liberation from Woodstock Jail, five years ago, he has worked like a dozen men rolled into one. He lectured in every nook and corner in the country, trying to earn money with which to pay off the debts of the defunct ARU.

For 77 days before his breakdown he did not average more than three hours of the 24 in bed. Pullmans being boycotted, he made his journeys at night in day coaches. He was able to finish out his engagements and to get home a nervous wreck in the middle of June [1900]. For three weeks he was confined to his room. He is now in as good health as he has ever enjoyed, and is ready to begin the campaign.

The National Committee meets soon to formulate plans.

"I shall not begin the active canvass until the hot weather ends," Debs said, "as I should run a risk of collapse. I expect to get away about the first week in September.

"I am not making any estimate on the vote. But the prospects are encouraging, and I think that when the vote is counted the figures will come as a revelation to the country. We expect to get our largest support from New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Texas, and Washington. Other states will give us considerable aid."

Debs will probably use a Pullman car on his travels in the campaign. He has ended his five-year boycott. On his way from San Francisco to Los Angeles to lecture [Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 1899] he was told at a junction point the day coach was dropped and the train from that point on was made up wholly of sleepers.

"I had to disappoint an audience or ride in a Pullman," said Debs. "I thought a five-year boycott was enough, and I rode in a Pullman."

Party Born in Prison.

Debs relates that the Social Democracy was born during his confinement in Woodstock Jail.

“I had plenty of time while there for reading and thought,” Deb said. “I convinced myself that there had to be some other way than strikes. Thoroughly organized as we could ever hope to be, with United States Deputy Marshals under capitalistic control, I saw that it was possible for the foes of labor to annihilate us. At this time I began to study the merits of socialism. I soon developed socialistic tendencies. On January 1, '97, in an open letter, I avowed myself a socialist.”²

At this time the Social Democratic candidate for the Presidency says he had only a vague notion of the organization finally formed. He felt that the time had past for trusting wholly in trades unionism. He arrived at the conclusion that the only possible remedy for the ills which afflict the workingman is a complete change of economic system from private ownership for private profit for the few to collective ownership of all industry and its operation for the good of all.

“Competitive industry,” says Debs, “results in the crushing out of the weaker and culminates in a concentration of all industry in the hands of the stronger, thereby making them the rulers of the people. For they own and control the means upon which the people depend for employment. Without employment the worker can not live, and the corporation that controls the employment of the worker has him absolutely at its mercy.”

No halfway measures meet this condition, Debs believes, so he will not admit that the other parties, though they were to live up to their platforms, would be able to bring about betterments.

“The reforms needed can only come,” said Debs, “when the reins of government are seized, for a complete change is involved, which will not admit of a shadow of compromise. It is a matter of social and economic evolution. Sometimes revolution is evolution. Sometimes revolution is peaceable and evolution is bloody. We are not interested in votes, or majorities, or offices. We expect to develop only in proportion as economic conditions necessitate changes.”

Self-interest, the mainspring of human action, is counted on by the social democracy to do for the masses what it is doing for the classes. Resistance to the change, already in process, is expected, but Debs says it will be in vain. He sees concentrated capital already in the last ditch.

Trusts Behind Expansion.

The war in China³ is to me more than a mere struggle between Christianity and heathenism,” says Debs. “We have been selling the East machinery, and it is a law of economics that you can not sell a country both machinery and manufactured goods. China has been one of our best buyers of manufactured stuffs, but she is beginning to be a competitor of ours in the markets of the world. We are forced to conquest to be able to provide markets for the products of concentrated capital. Back of expansion is the trust.

“Capital has a way of stamping the word ‘moral’ on whatever condition will benefit it, and of condemning as immoral the same condition when it has ceased to serve. The world began by one set of barbarians killing another. Then the idea obtained in the mind of the first monopolist that it would be wiser to employ the vanquished in the service of the victor. Feudal serfdom became the end of this system, and out of it grew the slavery of the South.

“Freemen in the North and in the old countries were working as skilled mechanics with tools costing at most only a few dollars. They had their little shops, and were independent and respected. No man could preempt another’s means of making a living, for the other, with small investment, could himself be his own employer. Wages were good and treatment fair. Then the manufacturer, who was introducing machinery, found that the slavery of the South and the serfdom of Europe was immoral. It was placing the bondman in competition with the free. He said, just as he is now saying, we need protection from cheap labor. He turned the slave and serf loose from the estates to be competitors at the machine with the man with the hand tool. Soon the man with the hand tool, getting only a fair day’s pay for the production of his wares before the machine came, found that the machine owner was able to sell so low that he could no longer meet the price offered and live. He had no money with which to buy machinery and he became the slave of the man who had but recently found the slavery of the South immoral.

Thousands Made Idle.

Thousands upon thousands of people are being displaced by the new methods and processes, and the number is bound to increase,” says the socialist leader, “and it is only a question of time until the economic

system, out of which it grows, will become intolerable to a majority of the people, and then the change we look forward to will take place. No man can bring it about. No man can hold it back.

Supremacy of capital is becoming greater and more complete. The capitalist who owns the tool (the machine) with which the workman toils is absolute master of the workman, for he can live only through access to the tool. That is why the capitalist is in political control of the workman. The capitalist does not need to house and own and feed and clothe the man if he can simply own the tool of production.”

The Debs theory is that the workman can not buy the \$100,000 or the \$1 million plant of modern centralization of capital, but he can not work without it. He can not compete against it with his bare hands, so he goes to capital and sells his labor at whatever price the capitalist can buy it for. It is like any other raw material in the open market. The wage represents but a small share of the product of labor.

“I have 5,000 men working for me,” said Debs. “I extract a profit from the labor of each. That is why my millions swell, while the workmen remain in poverty. The economic interests of capital and labor are diametrically opposed. To illustrate: The St. Louis Transit Company wants profit. The employees demand wages. The greater the profit of the company on given receipts, the smaller the wages of the men. What is good for the one is bad for the other, and this is what has developed the modern class struggle which finds expression in strikes, boycotts, and lockouts, and these will continue until the system of private ownership is supplanted by collective ownership for the good of all. What proportion of the profits belong to capital and what to labor may never be arrived at, so the easy adjustment is based on the conclusion that all belongs to labor — to the man who produces all.”

In many departments Socialism is not possible now, Debs admits, and he says he would not precipitate it by a single hour. He says there are many employers who would like to pay their men more wages, but they can not. Other employers cut their men down so low that to compete the good employer must cut wages or do business at a loss. Many capitalists, Debs insists, are not in accord with the present system.

Aided by Rockefeller.

“Rockefeller,” says Debs, “is doing more for socialism than any man in America. I would not have half the chance to reach people and preach economic truth if Rockefeller had not prepared them for me. He tempered their mood to the gospel of socialism. The middle class is suffering fearfully in this advanced stage of competition, for, with their limited capital, their limited credit and resources, they can not successfully compete with the trusts, the syndicates, the department stores, and other forms of concentrated enterprise. They are engaged in an unequal struggle, and they are losing ground day by day. More than 1,000 of them are being forced into bankruptcy every month.

“The day of small production and distribution is passing, never to return. The middle class is being forced down into the working class. Then this economic fact appears. The workers are steadily increasing in numbers, machinery having made women and children the equal competitors of men. While, upon the other hand, as machinery becomes more perfect, the opportunity to work for wages becomes more limited, and hence competition among the workers is intensified to a point where literally hundreds of thousands of them are forced into an existence of wretchedness and misery beyond the power of human language to describe.

“There is not,” Debs continued, warming up to his subject, “a city in this boasted republic, in what is said to be its most prosperous era, which does not supply for the contemplation of the economic student a grand army of *Les Misérables*. They who deny this painfully palpable fact do so at so much per week. Like the poor wage-worker, they are subject to the interest of the capitalist class.

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No notifying committee has come to Terre Haute to inform Eugene Victor Debs that he is the candidate for President of the social democracy. He found it out the day he was nominated in Indianapolis [March 9, 1900], when, after trying his best he could to avoid the honor, his sense of duty forced him to accompany the committee to the convention hall and accept the responsibility forced upon him.

There is no picket fence about the Debs lawn on North 8th Street. “We did not have the fence removed in anticipation of souvenir hunters,” said Debs laughingly. Not even Bryan has a finer front porch.

There are eight rooms in the nominee's snuggery, and there is no lopsidedness in literary taste. Debs is a great admirer of Victor Hugo, for whom he bears his second name. No author of note is absent from the mahogany cases.

Shakespeare is well worn. The poets and Debs are fast friends. The workers of [James Whitcomb] Riley and Eugene Field, and all who touch the human heartstrings harmoniously, are held in reverence.

Up in the Debs den, the sanctuary of sociology, there are reference books on top of a desk which, in a few volumes, combine the gist of all that has been said and done in the ages past. There is a more elaborate reference library close at hand at the end of the room, if detail is wanted.

In the den Debs told me the story of his life.

Had Famous Ancestors.

Debs comes from a line of French revolutionists on both sides. In the drawing room of his father's house are old pictures showing deeds of ancestors on the battlefield, the glories of which are sung in French volumes that fill the shelves.

Among the treasured letters of the elder Debs are those from his old friend [Frédéric August] Bartholdi, who designed the Statue of Liberty, praising the poetry of Debs, the elder, and advising Debs the younger to keep out of politics.

It seems that the elder Debs, living on his own property in Cohnal, Alsace, grew tired of the country after it had been ceded to Germany, and determined to see what America was like.

He located in New York, where he married. Then he moved to Terre Haute, and went into the grocery business in a building he still owns.

Inspired by His Parents.

It is in the old Debs corner that the socialist democrat has his office. Every morning when he comes to work he calls on the old people.

"From them I receive the inspiration of the day," he says. "In all my struggles and troubles no one ever had stronger supporters than father and mother. I have been in perfect sympathetic relations with them ever since I first saw the light of day."

Eugene Debs was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, November 5, 1855. In May 1870 he began work in the shops of the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad as an apprentice painter. He worked there until December 1871. Then he began firing on a yard engine. He worked at the furnace door until the latter part of 1874.

“I left firing,” Debs said, “because a chum of mine fell under an engine and was killed. My mother asked me to leave the road, and I did.” His father got him a clerkship in the now great wholesale grocery house of Herman Hulman & Co. On the engine he had studied and kept up with his classes, going to school afternoons. He got one year in the high school, and a touch of commercial instruction, giving him the rudiments of bookkeeping. So he was fairly well equipped for his new work. But he did not like it.

Debs was in the store five years. Then he was elected City Clerk, and held the office for two terms, until '83, but in '80 he was made Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and editor of their monthly, the Locomotive Firemen's Magazine. It was as editor of this publication that the country found out that Debs could use the English language to convey thought.

Formed Trainmen's Union.

In 1885 Debs formed the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen.⁴ In 1885 he put in a term in the Indiana legislature. He held the office of Secretary-Treasurer of the brotherhood until the Cincinnati convention, in 1892, when he declined reelection. He continued to conduct the magazine until September '94, running its circulation up to 30,000. In June 1893, in spite of protests and offers of \$10,000 a year,⁵ he gave up the magazine...and began the formation of the American Railway Union.

“I saw there was power in unity,” said Debs. “The new organization included every class of railway employee. While City Clerk I took a hand in the great cooper strike, and from that time on I had a hand in every strike going. In '94 the ARU got its first great strike on with the Great Northern. There were 9,000 men involved. There was a signal victory for the men and an increase of wages of from 30 to 60 percent.”

The Pullman fight came on June 26, 1894. Debs was arrested and tried and imprisoned first on July 10.⁶ He got out July 16.⁷ Hundreds of

injunctions were issued all over New York and Ohio, and as far west as California.

“I was the most enjoined man in the world,” said Debs. “Injunctions were issued simultaneously all over the country.”

Sent to Woodstock Jail.

In December 1894, Debs began his great journey to Woodstock Jail for a term of imprisonment. He and his fellows had been indicted on charges of intent to incite riots, conspiracy against the public peace, arson, interference with the United States mails, etc.⁸

“When we began to outline on the stand our evidence,” said Debs, “showing the causes of the fires and the riots with an army of witnesses the court was alarmed and a jurymen was taken suddenly sick. That jurymen is not well yet. His illness ended the trial. We would have fixed absolute responsibility for the whole thing with the railway company and the deputies if they had not stopped that trial. We have continually demanded a reopening, but have never been able to get it.

Wanted the Minutes.

“We not only had a great array of witnesses, including Chicago policemen, to testify about fires and riots, but we called for printed proceedings of the General Managers’ Association. Only one copy for each General Manager is printed. Each is kept in a safe. When those proceedings were called for the jurymen got sick, and he got sick quick.

“We wanted to go in with eleven, or put on a new juror. When the eleven walked out they walked over to me and said, as they grasped me by the hand, one by one, ‘Sorry; we meant to have acquitted you.’

“Up to the time I got on the stand and told things that have been hidden, those jurors would have sent me to the penitentiary.

“The railroads could have kept us in jail forever, but for the display of public opinion which was shown while we were at Woodstock,” said Debs. “That was their first intention. There were hundreds of indictments in all the federal courts. One after another could have been tried. I was advised to call on John Harland, son of Chief Justice Harland, and retain him to aid Clarence Darrow, Judge Gregory, and W.W. Erwin, now of St. Louis. We all called on Harland. When we told him our mission he looked

surprised. He said he would have to take the matter under advisement. We called next morning to get his decision. He gave the opinion that I would be tried on the same theory upon which the Chicago Anarchists were tried, and with the same result. He declined to come into the case. He freely expressed the opinion that I would be hanged.”

Pays ARU Debts.

For five years Debs has been paying the debts of the American Railway Union. When the strike ended the railway companies followed Debs with detectives, and made organization impossible. The trials had cost \$40,000.⁹ The organization was bankrupt and deeply involved in debt. For the past five years most of the money from Debs’s lecturing tours has been used in lifting the load. It is nearly all paid off.

The ARU at the June convention in 1897 [June 15-21, 1897] departed from the old lines and became the Social Democracy. In June 1897, at Chicago, it became international, and The Railway Times was changed in name to The Social Democrat. It started with 30,000 subscribers.¹⁰ In 1898, a year later, the Social Democratic Party split. The political wing withdrew. It nominated Debs for President at Indianapolis in March [1900].

Since becoming a socialist, Debs has spoken from the pulpits of the Terre Haute First Baptist Church and the Methodist Church.

Rev. Dr. Holmes Park, the Baptist pastor, who introduced Debs, said: “It is two years since I met the man who is to address you. The occasion was the reception after the Great Northern strike.¹¹ I went to hear him that night with great prejudice. I remember that there was not an innuendo or a single fling at the men who had been his enemies. I said that he was a born leader, and I never have taken it back.”

I asked Carl Stohl, of the clothing manufacturing firm of Stohl, Urber & Co., Terre Haute, what he as a businessman thought of Debs and his theories.

“I am not able to judge of his theories,” he said. “Debs believes in them. But he also believed in Populism and before that he was a Democrat. There could be no better citizen than Eugene. We all call him Eugene here. None is more respected. None is more deeply beloved. The children all look upon him as an elder brother. He is a splendid man. I never did agree

with his theories. I guess he'll get a good vote here. He ran like a deer when he was elected City Clerk."

His Domestic Relations.

"My domestic relations are as beautiful as those of any man living," said Debs. "I have always been a busy man, and I was not married until I was 30. I had four sisters, to whom I was strongly attached. I had seen in my time so many girls marry men unworthy of them that I made up my mind that no sister of mine should so wed. So my brother and I agreed not to marry until our sisters were married. Three married and the fourth was engaged before I married. I met my wife two years before, and it was almost a case of love at first sight. The friendship very rapidly matured into love, and we married June 9, 1885, and that was the happiest day of my life. My wife has been the source of my inspiration. She has been a good right hand to me, and in every bit of work I've done and in all the trouble and adversity she stood loyally by my side and shared it all. We have no children; I spend much of my time with children. I love them, especially if they are not yet old enough to have acquired the deceits and other ignoble qualities incident to maturer years. I may be getting on myself, but, as has been said, there are no wrinkles in my heart."

Published as "Social Democracy was Born in Jail" and "The Most Enjoined Man in the World" in the *St. Louis Chronicle*, Aug. 29 and Sept. 1, 1900, unspecified pages. Copies preserved in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 9.

¹ This interview was conducted by W.A. Carpenter.

² This letter was actually written prior to January 1, 1897 and postdated, first appearing in print on December 31, 1896. See: "The Issue is Socialism vs. Capitalism: Open Letter to the ARU," *Selected Writings of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 2*.

³ Allusion is to the Battle of Peking fought on August 14-15, 1900, in which a British military force intervened to relieve multiple foreign diplomatic corps that had been besieged since June by anti-colonial and anti-Christian rebels as part of the so-called Boxer Rebellion.

⁴ The Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen was actually the same organization, with the brotherhood of Brakemen moving to the latter name in 1889. It is an exaggeration to say that Debs started this brotherhood although he was instrumental in its formation, helping the new organization gain a line of credit and helping to organize some of its initial lodges.

⁵ There is no evidence that such a sum was ever offered to Debs.

⁶ Debs was arrested (but not tried) on this date on a warrant issued by a grand jury on allegations of conspiracy to “by force to prevent, hinder or delay the execution of any law of the United States, or by force to seize, take or possess any property of the United States.”

⁷ Debs and his fellow arrested ARU officers G.W. Howard, Sylvester Keliher, and L.W. Rogers were released on \$10,000 bonds the same day as their arrest, July 10.

⁸ Debs and other ARU officers were actually jailed for contempt of court for failure to comply with an injunction issued July 2.

⁹ An effort by the American Federation of Labor to raise funds from its member unions for the ARU’s legal defense generated just \$630 of this amount by June 1895. See: *American Federationist*, June 1895, pg. 76. The ARU was no doubt successful in raising some funds towards this expense on its own behalf.

¹⁰ This apparently substitutes in an optimistic circulation figure for *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine*. Neither *The Railway Times* nor *The Social Democrat* had remotely close to this circulation; both circulated fewer than 5,000 copies.

¹¹ On May 3, 1894, following victory in the Great Northern strike, Debs received a hero’s welcome at Terre Haute, with thousands crowding the railway station to meet his arrival, and a triumphant procession to a local park for a speech, accompanied by a brass band.