

Splits Are Not Always Bad:
Letter to Frederic Heath
(April 26, 1905)

Terre Haute, Ind., April 26th, 1905

My dear Heath:—

Your note is received. I will try to have the article for you for next issue as requested. The suggestion you make is a good one and I will be glad to write in accordance with it.¹

Have just written Berger that I speak at Racine on Saturday night, asking him to, if possible, meet me there on Saturday afternoon. The same to yourself. I shall not be able to reach Milwaukee but perhaps you or Berger, or, better still, both of you may be able to run down to Racine.² The comrades, I am sure, would be delighted to see you besides the opportunity we would have of a heart to heart talk over the situation.

So Berger thinks, after his last meeting with the [National Executive Committee] that there is apt to be a party split on account of the trade union question. If that is true, then let it come. There was a time when I was seriously perturbed by a threatened split. Not so anymore. If the party can be split upon the trade union or any other question then it ought to split and the quicker the better. I have learned that splits are not always bad. Corpses don't split. Of course, I would regret to separate from my comrades, but if the movement demands it, I will have to stand it. The movement is bigger than the party and bigger than the trade unions and the movement may demand a shaking up of both party and unions to readjust itself to fundamental principles. I belong to no labor union at present. There is none for me to join. There will be soon, I hope and believe.

There is as liable to be a split about Wisconsin as about anything I know. If it is true that Wisconsin has refused a charter from the national organization and if it is true that Wisconsin refuses to furnish the national office with a list of local unions, then there is going to be trouble and I would not be at all surprised to see Wisconsin compelled to conform to the national constitution or expelled from the national party.³ I cannot understand why these things should be and yet they are and are being very warmly discussed all over the country. Besides, there is trouble brewing

against the present order of things right in Wisconsin and even in Milwaukee. There are a good many of your members who are stirred up over your attitude in the judgeship matter which I am sure was a grave mistake and may yet have grave consequences, possibly amounting to a split, for which, should it come, the new trade union movement can hardly be charged with the responsibility.⁴

That was another great fizzle at Chicago the other day, proving the utter impotency of craft unionism in the presence of existing combinations of capital. The teamsters and tailors fell out with each other, the strike was lost, and now the teamsters, according to reports, are quarreling among themselves while the employers' association is after them red hot, has them on the run, and is determined to put them to rout. Thus will it always be with craft-divided unions up against a solid array of capitalist power. the industrial union is bound to come and the quicker it comes the better it will be for the Socialist Party and if a temporary split is necessary it will serve a good purpose in the long run.

Then again, the mistake of the national convention of the Socialist Party in May last in taking an unnecessary slap at the ALU and the WF of M in the interest of Gompers and the AF of L is coming back for settlement.

The June meeting in Chicago is going to be a big thing.⁵ Many of the best trade unionists in the country and from every part of the country will be there and I have faith in the outcome of the meeting.

Yours always,

E. V. Debs.

Typed letter on personal letterhead in *Victor L. Berger Papers, 1862-1980*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, microfilm edition, reel 14, frames 45-46. Not published in Constantine (ed.), *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 1, 1874-1912*.

¹ Reference is apparently to the Debs article "Growth of the Injunction," revisiting the December 1893 injunction barring Northern Pacific workers from striking for higher wages issued by retiring federal judge James Graham Jenkins (1834-1931). See: *Social Democratic Herald*, vol. 8, no. 1, whole no. 353 (May 6, 1905), p. 1. This would be the penultimate original article of the decade written by Debs for the *Herald*.

² Both Heath and Berger were able to make the 30 mile trip to Racine, located directly south of Milwaukee, where they met with Debs following his evening speech.

³ As a pointed means of reinforcing the doctrine of state autonomy, the Wisconsin State Committee of the Social Democratic Party long refused to accept a charter from the national office of the Socialist Party of America, even though it continued to pay dues for support of the national organization.

⁴ In a tangent to the 1905 union debate, Missouri socialist and future secretary of the IWW William Trautmann preferred charges against NEC member Victor Berger and the Milwaukee party organization for their tacit endorsement of a progressive over a reactionary old party judge in a November 1904 race in which the Social Democratic Party declined to field a candidate. This action of Berger and the Milwaukee organization was regarded as an act of “political fusion” — a serious violation of party law.

⁵ Debs refers to the June 27 convocation of the Industrial Union Congress, the gathering which founded the Industrial Workers of the World.