

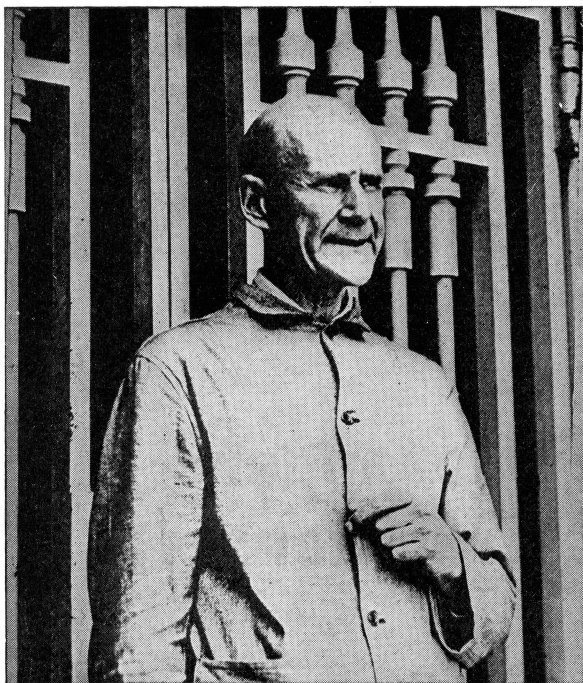
No.10

The
HERITAGE
of
GENE DEBS

by
Alexander
Trachtenberg

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CONVICT No. 9653

Eugene Victor Debs, at the age of 65, candidate for President of the United States in 1920, while a prisoner in the Federal Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia.

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THE HERITAGE OF GENE DEBS

By ALEXANDER TRACHTENBERG

I. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Eugene Victor Debs was born on November 5, 1855, in Terre Haute, Indiana, originally a French settlement on the left bank of the Wabash. In his childhood he heard the din of the Civil War: his youth was spent in the very midst of the industrial expansion that followed it. Terre Haute at that time still had many of the aspects of the pioneer West; but it was already a railway center and of rising importance in the meat manufacturing industry. Debs' parents were Alsatian immigrants. From them he had an acquaintance with two European languages and a taste for literature which his father particularly cultivated in him.

The Debs family was large and when Eugene was fourteen years of age he went into the local railway-repair shop as a laborer. Two years later he was firing a freight locomotive and was a member of the Brotherhood of Firemen and Enginemen, one of the labor organizations that was growing up in this period of expansion. He showed here both interest and ability; and within a few years he was secretary of the Brotherhood and editor of its official journal. A simultaneous building of labor unions on a national scale ensued. Debs contributed a great deal of his energy in promoting the organization of the workers employed on the railways.

Years of Struggle and Organization

But even in this period of unprecedented expansion the inevitable cyclical economic crisis came in 1873. This, which lasted for several years, was perhaps the severest panic in the history of the country. Over three millions of workers—a vast proportion of the population at the time—were thrown out of

work. Whole families perished daily of starvation. The unionization movement of the sixties faced a terrific offensive from the bosses. The struggle lasted until the end of the decade. In the railway strike of 1877, Federal troops were for the first time called into a labor struggle, and the courts gave expression to their conception of a union as a "malicious conspiracy." In 1875 the struggle in the Pennsylvania anthracite fields came to a climax with the execution of a score or more leaders as "Molly Maguires." On January 13, 1874, police charged into the Tompkins Square unemployment demonstration in New York City and made of it a bloody struggle. This was the country's greatest mass outpouring since the Civil War draft riots.

Many of the national unions were destroyed. Yet labor came out of the period with an increased solidarity and strengthened class consciousness. The movement for an eight-hour day and the struggles in its behalf in the middle eighties, which are responsible for the origin of May 1 as an international labor holiday, showed the revival of organization and the will to struggle on the part of the workers. In 1893 Debs was instrumental in forming the American Railway Union as an industrial union of workers of all crafts employed on railroads. He left the narrow craft organization of the Firemen and Enginemen and became the leader of the new organization. In the year of its formation, the A. R. U. became involved in a successful struggle against the Great Northern Railroad and joined in a sympathetic strike in defense of the Pullman workers who had struck against a wage cut and the intolerable conditions in the company-owned "model town" of Pullman, Illinois. The struggle was a bitter one. Federal troops were sent by President Cleveland to help the railroads break the strike that was paralyzing them. The strike was lost and Debs was sent to jail for six months on charges of conspiracy and contempt of court for continuing to struggle in the face of a sweeping injunction issued by the court against him and other leaders.

The Sherman Anti-Trust Law of 1890, the last stand of the

petty-bourgeoisie against monopoly capital, became a factor in the class struggle on the side of the very corporate wealth against which it was supposedly aimed.

It was during his imprisonment in the Woodstock, Illinois, jail that Debs began to see gleams of the political implications of the A. R. U. and Pullman struggles and defeats. He was not new to politics. In 1878, the year in which he became editor of the *Firemen's Journal*, he had been offered a congressional nomination by the Democrats of Terre Haute: under the prevailing array of political forces such a nomination was equivalent to election. Debs had declined the nomination because of his absorption in the building of the union. In 1885 he was elected by the Democratic Party to the Indiana State Legislature, but he served only one term.

Debs Becomes a Socialist

Debs came out of the Woodstock jail in 1895 shaken, but not completely detached from his capitalist party moorings. The next year he followed William Jennings Bryan who, as Democratic presidential candidate had gathered about him the country's petty-bourgeois reform elements, including the Populists. But the lessons learned from the A. R. U. strike were crystallizing in Debs' mind; and in 1897 he addressed to the members of the A. R. U. a political letter in which he declared that "the issue is Socialism versus capitalism." He himself made it clear that he was brought to Socialism through the Pullman strike and imprisonment when he said, in the account he gave to the court during his trial for leadership in the Pullman struggle: "I was baptized in Socialism in the roar of conflict."

In 1897, together with his followers in the A. R. U., whose numbers had greatly declined after the Pullman strike, and representatives of Middle Western Socialist groups, Debs organized the Social Democracy of America, which undertook as its chief task the organization of Socialist colonies—a Utopian scheme which had already met with failure in America some fifty years before when the United States was a gath-

ering place for adherents of the Owenite and Fourierist schemes. A year later, in 1898, Debs, with Victor Berger, organized a split at the convention of the Social Democracy and formed the Social Democratic Party of America. This was to be built on the pattern of the European Socialist political parties. In 1900 the Social Democratic Party joined forces with a faction which had broken off from the Socialist Labor Party, to form the Socialist Party.

Debs was the first presidential nominee of the united groups: as such he polled about 100,000 votes. He was again a candidate in 1904, 1908, and 1912, polling first 402,000, then 420,000 and finally 897,000 votes. He declined to be a candidate in 1916. That year, with Allen Benson, a journalist, as presidential nominee, the Socialist Party vote dropped to 585,000. In 1918 Debs made his famous Canton speech against the War for which he was tried and convicted. In 1920, while in prison, Debs was again a candidate and received 920,000 votes.

Besides participating in the national elections as standard bearer of the party, Debs traveled extensively throughout the country on agitation tours for the party and subscription drives for the various publications with which he was connected, such as the *Appeal to Reason*, the *Rip Saw*, and others. He also contributed to the *International Socialist Review*, a Left-Wing organ within the Socialist Party. Debs was always in demand as a speaker at various political demonstrations, strikes, free-speech fights, defense cases and similar struggles.

Debs' writings and reported speeches are mostly fugitive. Besides an early collection of his utterances and the sentimental vaporings of a would-be Boswell, there is a collection of his wartime speeches issued by the National Committee of the Socialist Party, in which his attitude on war is deleted from his speeches to the jury and to the court during his Cleveland trial. The excuse given by the Socialist Party for the elimination was that the Supreme Court was reviewing the case. However, an edition has been published containing material dated 1925, and not only are references to his war stand deleted but also his remarks concerning the Bolsheviks and

the Russian Revolution are expurgated. A recent biography of Debs by a Socialist Party journalist continues the practice of the party of omitting reference to Debs' revolutionary utterances on important political issues.

In the following pages the writer attempts to give a critical estimate of Debs' place in the American revolutionary movement. It is based on personal observation of his activities during a period of twenty years. The attitude of Debs on the trade unions and the Socialist Party, as well as his stand on the World War and the Russian Revolution, were the only questions which could be considered in the space allotted here. The writer believes, however, that the true character of Debs is mirrored in his utterances quoted in these pages.*

II. DEBS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

Debs was a revolutionary trade unionist. His whole experience in the labor movement had taught him that only a trade union based on a militant class program can cope with the offensive of the employers and serve the workers properly in their everyday struggles. His revolutionary conception of the rôle of the trade unions, as well as his experience with craft unions, led him to adopt the idea of revolutionary industrial unionism. These two motivating forces caused him to sponsor the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905.

As a Socialist Debs did not believe in the neutrality policy advocated by the Socialist Party before the World War. According to this policy the A. F. of L. and its component unions, were to tackle only the everyday economic demands of the workers, while the Socialist Party would busy itself with the political phases of the labor movement. This meant, of course, leaving the unions to the complete control of the reactionary leaders. Unlike the "pure and simple" trade unionist, Debs knew that there could be no absolute separation between the political and economic phases of the labor movement. In 1912,

* For a more extensive selection of Debs' speeches and writings on the above mentioned subjects, see *Eugene V. Debs*, "Voices of Revolt," Vol. X, International Publishers, New York.

when the Socialist Party was at the height of its strength in membership and influence, he wrote: "The S. P. cannot be neutral on the union question. It is compelled to declare itself by the logic of evolution, and *as a revolutionary party it cannot commit itself to the principles of reactionary trade unionism.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.)

Debs stood for the permeation of the existing unions by the Socialists, advocating the policy of "boring from within." As a matter of fact, this tactic was enunciated at the very inception of the Socialist Party as against the policy of deserting the existing unions and leaving them to the reactionary leaders. Debs never failed to emphasize the need of the organization of the unorganized,—another policy which is stressed to-day only by the Communists and the revolutionary unions under the leadership of the Trade Union Unity League. Neither did Debs recoil from the idea of organizing the unorganized into *new unions* in view of the failure of the official labor movement to pay any attention to the hosts of workers left outside the labor organizations. He wrote in 1912: "*I would encourage industrial independent organization, especially among the millions who have not been organized at all, and I would also encourage the 'boring from within' for all that can be accomplished by the industrial unionists in the craft unions.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.) Even prior to that, in 1910, in a letter to Tom Mann, the English militant trade unionist, he wrote: "*We must bore from within and without.*"

Debs and the A. F. of L.

Debs hated class collaboration with all his being and he frequently used his invectives against Samuel Gompers, who for twoscore years was at the head of the A. F. of L. and who more than any one else personified this policy. Gompers' connections with the Civic Federation always came in for scathing criticism from Debs. "For the very reason Gompers was glorified by Wall Street, Bill Haywood is despised by Wall Street," he thus compared the two outstanding figures who represented the opposite poles in the labor movement.

Although many prominent Socialists were active in the leadership of various unions, the A. F. of L. was always considered by Debs as the bulwark of reaction and its affiliation with the Civic Federation was for Debs a sufficient indication of its hopeless class collaborationist policy. Gompers was for many years vice-president of the Civic Federation, Mathew Woll inheriting this worthy post after his death.

Debs knew well that when a labor organization collaborates with an employers' organization it is the latter that will exert the influence, secure the benefit of such collaboration, and completely demoralize and annul the very purposes for which the union was organized.

Although fully recognizing the reactionary character of the A. F. of L. and never failing to attack its leaders for their class collaborationist policies and their open betrayals of the workers in numerous struggles, Debs, however, failed organizationally to challenge Gompers' leadership and call upon his party to solidify the large numbers of organized workers who followed the party into an organized opposition within the A. F. of L. on the platform of the class struggle vs. class collaboration. He wrote in 1911: "The A. F. of L., as an organization, with its Civic Federation to determine its attitude and control its course, is deadly hostile to the S. P. and to any and every revolutionary movement of the working class. *To kow-tow to this organization and to join hands with its leaders to secure political favor can only result in compromising our principles and bringing disaster to the party.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.) How prophetic these words sound to-day when we observe the support which the S. P. leaders now extend to the Greens, the Wolls, the Schlesingers and the Hillmans in their fight against the militant rank and file in the labor unions. The S. P. has indeed brought disaster upon itself through its policy of making common cause with the reactionary leaders of the A. F. of L. and with other enemies of labor.

The Gompers policy of "No politics in the unions" always amused Debs who knew that Gompers himself was a Democratic politician and that his lieutenants worked for either the

Republican or Democratic parties in consideration for favors or jobs. The policy of the A. F. of L. of petitioning Congress and otherwise depending upon government bodies was repulsive to Debs. "Can they not see that we have a capitalist class Congress and capitalist class legislatures and that it is the very height of folly and depth of humiliation for a committee of the working class to beg the representatives of the capitalist class to legislate in the interest of the working class?"

This virile class conscious language is not the language of the S. P. leaders. There can be no question that Debs would stamp as treasonable the recent appeal of the S. P. to the Governor of N. Y. for an investigation of the rampant graft in judicial appointments. "If this suspicion (purchase of judicial nominations) is unjust," the S. P. appeal reads, "*It should be removed in the interest of good government and confidence in the courts.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.) The "good government" the S. P. is worrying about is the same capitalist state government that sends troops to break strikes, and the "courts" the Socialists are concerned with are those which issue ferocious injunctions and jail struggling workers to help the bosses to crush their resistance.

That the defense of the existing capitalist system and capitalist government is the main consideration of the S. P. at the present time can be gleaned from another official appeal to the N. Y. Tammany governor by the S. P. gubernatorial candidate in the 1930 elections who, in recommending the calling of a special session of the N. Y. Legislature to consider the question of unemployment insurance, motivated his appeal in typical S. P. fashion: "The importance of such a recommendation lies in the fact that *it would encourage and convince the workers of our state at this critical hour that the government is not remiss in its duty and that grave social wrongs can be remedied through democratic (read: capitalist) means.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.)

This is, of course, nothing else but an attempt to sow illusions among the workers so that they may believe that they can get real relief from the ravages of the present economic

crisis and attendant unemployment from the capitalist state government of New York.

Debs Stands for Revolutionary Class Unionism

From the very beginning of his acceptance of Socialism as his guiding philosophy, Debs understood that the only *real* labor union is the *class union*. He never failed to drive home this lesson. The old union—by which he meant the union which Gompers helped to develop through class collaboration and which was founded on the policy of a “fair day’s work for a fair day’s wage”—he considered as entirely opposed to the interests of the workers. He maintained that this union is “organized on the basis of identity of interests between the capitalists and the wage workers, and spends its time and devotes its energies to harmonizing these two classes; and it is a main and hopeless task. When this interest can be even temporarily harmonized it is always in the interest of the capitalist class and at the expense of the working class.”

Debs became a convinced industrial unionist as a result of his experience with the unions on the railroads. This is why he helped to form the American Railway Union as an industrial union of the workers employed on the railroads. He witnessed the jurisdictional disputes which were sapping the vitality of the craft unions from the inside, and he saw that the bosses’ ability to defeat the workers was increased by craft divisions. The reactionary character of the craft union, according to Debs, lay also in the fact that its persistence was atavistic, as it was not keeping in touch with the development of industry.

Debs understood the nature of the class struggle. He saw the array of class forces in every fight the workers waged. This can be observed in all his utterances. He also knew the power and the rôle of the state in class conflicts. He himself experienced it many times during the struggles in which he was engaged. He saw the A. R. U. strike broken by the military force of the capitalist government and when he later described it he wrote that “in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed.”

The trade unions which stand squarely and uncompromisingly on the platform of the class struggle and which are built on the basis of revolutionary industrial unionism for which Debs stood, are to-day found under the leadership of the Trade Union Unity League. The T. U. U. L. with its affiliated unions and revolutionary groupings in various trades are the only organizations on the trade union field which are waging a fearless struggle against the bosses' offensive, are organizing the unorganized, are exposing the treachery of the reactionary union bureaucracy and are rallying the workers into new fighting unions to battle against exploitation and capitalist class rule.

III. DEBS AND THE SOCIALIST PARTY

On many occasions Debs was in open conflict with the S. P. leadership. Although considered as such, Debs really was never the political leader of the party. He represented perhaps the greatest peculiarity in the American Socialist movement. Considered by the rank and file as the personification of the fighting spirit of Socialism and looked upon by the outside world as the outstanding personality in the American Socialist movement, Debs never sat on the executive committee of the party, except for the last two or three years of his life, when he was brought in chiefly for window dressing, never was sent as a delegate to a national convention or an international congress, never participated in the councils of the party to formulate policies and work out tactics. The leadership of the S. P. studiously avoided bringing Debs into the organization. He was kept on the platform where his eloquence was capitalized, or he was allowed to write mainly in fugitive and privately owned Socialist journals, rather than in the official organs of the party.

The S. P. leadership feared Debs' revolutionary attitude on the burning questions which agitated the membership of the party. They knew his uncompromising stand on many questions and they preferred not to have any quarrels with him. He spoke his mind from time to time, but being organiza-

tionally removed from the membership he could not exercise the influence over them which otherwise would have been his.

Debs should have never permitted himself to be placed in such a position by the S. P. leaders. His place was among the proletarian members, guarding the party against the reformist leaders and guiding the membership in his own spirit of militancy. He should have been the political leader of the party instead of letting that leadership fall into the hands of lawyers and preachers.

Debs Warns Against Reformers

During the years 1910-12 the S. P. grew in membership, reaching the highest number in its history (over 120,000). Debs saw the entrance of elements into the party who were joining it not as a revolutionary Socialist party but as a third bourgeois party. While in other countries there were liberal parties which petty-bourgeois elements, disillusioned with conservative parties, could join, America had two equally reactionary parties from which these elements sought to escape. The S. P. was the only available political home for all those who favored reforms which the two main parties opposed. Advocates of woman's suffrage, direct election of senators, abolition of child labor, protective labor legislation, municipal ownership and agrarian reforms, joined the Socialist Party through which they hoped to promote these reforms, without bothering about the ultimate aims which were written into the program of the party. In this manner the proletarian and revolutionary sections in the party were permeated by altogether alien elements.

With his revolutionary instinct Debs felt the danger to the Socialist Party lurking in the admission of such elements. These were the years of "trust busting" campaigns, of muck-raking and the offering of all sorts of panaceas against the encroachments of corporate wealth. The petty bourgeoisie was beginning to feel the solidification of American capital and it was looking to reforms to help it out of the difficulty. These elements were finding their way into the Socialist Party, and the well known among them, particularly the writers and jour-

nalists, were immediately acclaimed as leaders. Charles Edward Russell, Allen Benson, and their like became overnight, spokesmen of the party. These were the forerunners of the Heywood Browns of to-day. They were elected to executive committees and designated as standard bearers in elections.

Writing in 1911 under the title "Danger Ahead," Debs warned the party against the degeneration which was sure to set in as a result of the admixture of elements entirely foreign to its program and its aims. He wrote: "*It [the S. P.] may become permeated and corrupted with the spirit of bourgeois reform to an extent that will practically destroy its virility and efficiency as a revolutionary organization. . . . The working class character and the revolutionary character of the S. P. are of first importance. All the votes of the people would do us no good if we cease to be a revolutionary party.*" (Italics mine—A. T.)

Lincoln Steffens, the eminent journalist, once interviewed Debs during his presidential campaign of 1908 in the presence of Victor Berger, one of the real bosses of the S. P. He was asking many questions and Debs was replying to them much to the discomfort of Berger, who claimed to have been the ideological father of Debs. Steffens wanted to know how Debs proposed to deal with the trusts. "Would you pay for or just take them," asked Steffens. "Take them," came the quick and sure reply of the revolutionist Debs. "No, you wouldn't," cried the reformist Berger, "not if I was there, and I answer that we would offer to pay." Debs would *confiscate* the capitalist trusts, he would *fight his way* to Socialism. Berger would *negotiate*, he would *pay his way*. What chasm between the two attitudes! One is that of a militant fighter, the other, that of a petty-bourgeois reformer!

To many in the Socialist Party the essence of Socialism was public ownership of public utilities. To-day it is one of the central reforms advocated by the S. P. To these advocates Debs addressed himself in his characteristic manner: "Government ownership of public utilities means nothing [read: is of no benefit—A. T.] for labor under capitalist ownership of government." Debs knew of the breaking of strikes

in government-owned industries by the use of the military forces and the prohibition of unionization of these industries.

Debs for Free Immigration

Debs crossed swords with the S. P. leaders when they advocated the A. F. of L. policy of excluding immigrants. In a letter to a delegate to the 1910 convention, which adopted a resolution dealing with immigration, he wrote: "I have just read the majority report of the committee on immigration. It is utterly unsocialistic, reactionary and in truth outrageous, and I hope you will oppose it with all your power. The idea that certain races are to be excluded because of tactical expediency would be entirely consistent in a bourgeois convention of self-seekers, but should have no place in a proletarian gathering under the auspices of an international movement that is calling on the oppressed and exploited workers of all the world to unite for their emancipation."

To Debs such a stand favoring the exclusion of workers from other countries meant forsaking the principle of international solidarity and he called upon the members "to stand squarely on our revolutionary working-class principles and make our fight openly and uncompromisingly against all our enemies, adopting no cowardly tactics and holding out no false hopes."

Debs Attacks S. P. Leaders

At the time of the Left-Wing split from the S. P., Debs was in prison. Only partial information could reach him regarding the political controversy in the party which preceded this split. While Debs was bound by many ties to the Socialist Party, he did not fully agree with its leadership. During the 1919 convention the remaining Left-Wing elements succeeded under pressure of the split in forcing a resolution which would insure Debs the nomination for the presidency at the 1920 convention, where the question of candidates was to be dealt with. The leaders did not wish to have Debs, who was then in prison, nominated as a candidate. They feared that the size of the vote might be affected and did not want to flaunt before

the country a presidential candidate who was in prison. When he was finally nominated in 1920 and a committee consisting of Steadman, Oneal and others was sent to visit him in prison to notify him officially of the nomination, he surprised the committee with a devastating criticism of the party.

Regarding the platform adopted at the convention which nominated him, he said: "I wish I might say that it had my unqualified approval," modifying it by saying that platforms are not so important, as "we can breathe the breath of revolution into any platform." He emphasized, however, that "Socialist platforms are not made to catch votes" and that "*we are in politics not to get votes but to develop power to emancipate the working class.*" [Italics mine.—A. T.] It was also significant that on that occasion he expressed regret "that the convention did not see its way clear to affiliate with the Third International without qualifications." Debs, therefore, allied himself with the third of the delegates of the 1920 Convention which favored the acceptance of the twenty-one points of admission to the Communist International and was opposed to Hillquit's fake proposal for affiliation with reservations. To the S. P. leaders who were present he addressed himself point blank with the following rebuke: "*There is a tendency in the party to become a party of politicians, instead of a party of the workers.*" [Italics mine.—A. T.]

Removed from the outside world by his incarceration, Debs, perhaps, could not see sufficiently that this was no longer a *tendency*, but a *fact*. The process of degeneration, beginning with the struggle against the Left Wing, was fast being completed and Debs, having recognized that the S. P. was becoming "a party of politicians instead of a party of workers," should have definitely broken with the politicians and joined with the revolutionary workers who left or were leaving the S. P. in large numbers. Although in prison, Debs should have put himself at the head of the militant elements who were deserting the reformist party and were being organized under the leadership of the Communist International, instead of allowing the importunities of his friends to convince him to

reserve final judgment until he was released. Debs knew enough about the party to realize that it no longer was the party he had visioned in 1908: a "class-conscious, revolutionary, Socialist party which is pledged to abolish the capitalist system, class rule and wage slavery, a party which does not compromise or fuse, but, preserving inviolate the principles which quickened it into life and now give it vitality and force, moves forward with dauntless determination to the goal of economic freedom."

Debs Fails to Draw Proper Conclusions

Debs made the mistake which many others have made. At the beginning of the Third International some revolutionary leaders emphasized the principle of unity more than the unity of principle. "About the time we get in shape to do something," Debs wrote then, "we have to split up and waste our energy in factional strife. We preach unity everlastingly, but we ourselves keep splitting apart."

Debs failed to understand that what was then taking place was the separation of the wheat from the chaff, the freeing of the revolutionary elements of the party from the very politicians which he himself saw in the party leadership. The "factional strife" which he deprecated was nothing but the hammering out of a clear-cut policy based on revolutionary Marxism which the party had polluted with all sorts of reformist nostrums. The class struggle was carried from the shops right into the party and the division which followed was based on class lines. Later history proved that to the hilt.

Unlike Lenin on an international scale, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, and Ruthenberg in this country, who not only criticized the reformist leaders but fought them and organized against them, Debs remained only the critic. When he was released from prison he allowed the same leaders whom he held responsible for ruining the party, to use him as a shield to cover their alliances with the trade-union bureaucracy and capitalist politicians. Beginning under his "chairmanship," the leaders have completed the transforma-

tion of the Socialist Party into a party of social fascism, so that now it fits snugly into the capitalist state machine.

In 1905 Debs wrote on the place of the class struggle in the program of the labor movement, to say nothing, of a Socialist party: "*We* insist that there *is* a class struggle; that the working class must recognize it; that they must organize economically and politically upon the basis of that struggle; and that when they do so organize they will then have the power to free themselves and put an end to that struggle forever."

Having already lost every other vestige of Socialism or semblance to a workingclass party, the S. P. decided at a recent convention also to delete from its membership application blank the clause dealing with adherence to the principle of the class struggle. The class-conscious workers know that the S. P. has not thereby removed itself from participation in the class struggle. It is simply fighting on the other side, the side of bosses. To enable it to parade as a party, it needs members. Since the workers are learning more and more of its true character, the S. P. now offers itself as a political haven to all and sundry liberals, trade-union bureaucrats, small and big business men and deserters from the class struggle of all hues, including renegades from Communism.

Debs saw this degeneration coming. It was, therefore, his historic mistake not to break with the moribund organization and join the party of the proletarian class struggle—the Communist Party.

IV. DEBS AND THE WORLD WAR

Debs was an uncompromising opponent of capitalist wars and as such he was imprisoned in 1918. Although he knew the economic causes of wars, he did not fully comprehend the nature of modern imperialism. Unlike Ruthenberg, who understood the rôle of American Imperialism and was among the first to be imprisoned during the war, Debs was guided in his anti-war stand mainly by his loyalty to the principle of international solidarity of Socialism. He denounced the European Socialists who turned social patriots, and with the

Socialists who voted war credits in mind he wrote: "If I were in Congress I would be shot before I would vote a dollar for such a war." Although probably not acquainted with Lenin's teachings of turning the imperialist war into a civil war, he expressed in a crude way the tactics of fighting the imperialist war and the capitalists of various countries with workingclass action. "When capitalists declare war, it is then for us to declare war on them, paralyze industry by the strike and fight every battle for the overthrow of the ruling class."

Debs for the War of Social Revolution

Some of Debs' utterances betray pacifist notions and repugnance to violence. "When I think of a cold, glittering, steel bayonet being plunged into the white, quivering flesh of a human being, I recoil with horror," he declared in his Canton speech. We find sufficient proof, however, that Debs was not opposed to war *in general*, but only to *capitalist* wars.

In 1915, when America began to prepare for war, Debs wrote an article for an anti-Preparedness issue of the *Appeal to Reason* in which he derided those who would enlist in the army. There were many expressions in that article which did not harmonize with his known convictions. He was, however, accused of harboring pacifist illusions. In a reply in another issue of the paper Debs came back with a declaration of his position which should cause his self-appointed successor, Norman Thomas, to renounce his memory forever! "*No, I am not opposed to all wars, nor am I opposed to fighting under all circumstances, and any declaration to the contrary would disqualify me as a revolutionist.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.) This was a statement dictated by Debs' revolutionary class consciousness.

Debs reiterated that he was "only opposed to ruling class war," and that he refused "to obey any command to fight for the ruling class, but will not wait to be commanded to fight for the working class."

Debs felt that, since the question was raised, he must answer it categorically and completely. He wrote further: "*I am*

opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul and that is the world-wide war of the social revolution. In that war I am prepared to fight in any way the ruling class may make it necessary, even to barricades." He concluded: "There is where I stand and where I believe the Socialist Party stands, or ought to stand on the question of war." With the support of the League of Nations, which the S. P. once declared was the Capitalist Black International, the World Court and other imperialist instruments among their articles of faith, is it any wonder that the S. P. leaders are forsaking Debs' memory as they ignored his opinions when he was alive.

Debs took the anti-War resolution adopted at the party convention at St. Louis immediately upon the declaration of war by the United States, in April 1917, seriously. In the light of Lenin's teachings the St. Louis resolution can be considered only as a centrist document with a goodly admixture of pacifism. Considering, however, the provincialism of the American movement and the existence of a reformist leadership which looked upon the S. P. merely as a parliamentary machine, the resolution must be viewed as a militant instrument which could have been used advantageously for revolutionary purposes. It was, in fact, the revolutionary swan song of the Socialist Party. Although adopted by the referendum vote of an overwhelming majority of the members, the resolution soon became a mere scrap of paper. The leaders who voted for it at the convention because of the pressure of the rank and file proletarian members, sabotaged its execution and completely nullified the provisions calling for militant action, which were contained in it.

At the Ohio state convention of the party at Canton Debs again expressed what he had said before America's entrance into the imperialist war. Ruthenberg, the leader of the party in Ohio, was already in prison and Debs took the cause of his imprisonment as the text for his address to the convention. The Government convicted Debs and tried to make his conviction and imprisonment an example of the same kind, as

the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, which was to serve as a warning to militant workers in the present period. Because of the nationwide agitation which followed his imprisonment, Debs was later offered his freedom. But he would not leave prison except on his own terms. On December 25, 1921, after almost three years of incarceration in one of America's bastiles, the 68-year-old revolutionist walked out of the prison doors broken in health, which he never regained till his death five years later, October 20, 1926.

V. DEBS AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

In Debs the Russian Revolution found an immediate and sympathetic response. It must be noted, however, that although he considered the November Revolution "the greatest in point of historic significance and far-reaching influence in the annals of the race," he did not grasp its full meaning to the world revolutionary movement of the workers. Debs sensed the difference between the compromising Mensheviks who supported Kerensky and all he stood for and the indomitable Bolsheviks, who forged ahead toward the proletarian revolution. In addressing himself to the Russian Bolsheviks on the First Anniversary of the November Revolution in 1918 he wrote: "The achieved glory of your revolutionary triumph is that you have preserved inviolate the fundamental principles of international Socialism and refused to compromise. It will be to your everlasting honor that you would rather have seen the Revolution perish and the Soviet with it than to prostitute either one by betraying the worker to alleged progressive reforms, which would mean to them an extension of their servitude under a fresh aggregation of exploiters and parasites." When the name Bolshevik was spoken with derision among his party friends, Debs declared publicly: "I am a Bolshevik from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes." To the jury he defiantly declared: "I have been accused of expressing sympathy with the Bolsheviks of Russia. I plead guilty to the charge."

Debs was not clear on proletarian dictatorship as he was

not clear on several fundamental problems, especially on the concept of the state as taught by Marx and Lenin. He spoke about the "unfortunate phrase" and stated that "dictatorship is autocracy." But he immediately explained that "there is no autocracy in the rule of the masses." The experienced revolutionist in him, even if only by instinct, led him also to the conclusion that "during the transition period the revolution must protect itself." To those of the Socialist leaders who were "for" the Russian Revolution, but "did not like certain features of it," Debs openly declared, in speaking to the S. P. committee which came to Atlanta Penitentiary to notify him of his nomination for the presidency in 1920: "I heartily support the Russian Revolution without reservations."

The S. P. has indeed very serious reservations regarding the Russian Revolution. Speaking at a public S. P. function under the auspices of its central organ, Morris Hillquit declared for his party that *the establishment of the Soviet government was the greatest calamity for the workers of the world*. To be sure, the establishment thirteen years ago of workers' and peasants' Soviets which gave the factories to the workers and the land to the peasants *was* the greatest calamity to the capitalists and land-owners and their henchmen in the labor movement. The Socialist Party in the United States and its brother parties of the Second International, translate their reservations into open conspiracies with the tsarist emigrés and the imperialist powers to overthrow the first workers' republic—the Soviet Union, which already covers one-sixth of the earth's surface. The workers of the world and the oppressed colonial peoples who draw inspiration for their struggles against capitalism and imperialism from the stupendous achievements of the Soviet Government under the leadership of the Communist Party, know the true rôle of the Socialist parties and their counter-revolutionary utterances.

VI. DEBS THE ORATOR

The fact that Debs was the most eloquent speaker the American labor movement has produced contributed a great

deal to his being kept on the platform. American history abounds with names of great orators who flourished in the legislative halls and the pulpits. Daniel Webster and Wendell Phillips are probably the most illustrious representatives of these types of American oratory. Debs was much impressed with the published orations which he read, and in his youth trained himself in the art of public speaking. The atheistic exhortations of Robert Ingersoll and the eloquent but empty denunciations of "the interests" by Bryan in his early campaigns had probably a more direct influence on Debs' flair for public speaking.

There was not that intellectual force that was behind Lassalle's oratory, nor did he become the public tribune as did Jaures. Debs on the platform was more the evangelist. He appealed to his audience rather than reasoned with it. He always tried to convert, and his speaking pose betrayed his deep earnestness. His figures of speech were apt and poetic. He often grew lyrical and his rhythmic body responded to the rhythm of his utterances. He kept his audience in raptures and he often appeared to those near him as though he was in an ecstasy.

His writings were of the same pattern as his speeches. He probably dictated most of his published articles. They read like impassioned orations. They particularly suited a paper like the *Appeal to Reason*, which was perhaps the best agitational medium the American labor movement ever produced.

With his eloquent voice and trenchant pen, Debs stirred the imagination of large sections of the American working class. His appearance in a struggle was sure to result in the revival of militancy, for he knew how to describe to the workers their life under capitalism and to inspire them with hope for ultimate victory.

Berger once said about him: "Debs with the soft heart—Debs is the orator." What he meant by it was that Debs was only to be considered the platform orator and was not to be given the opportunity to participate in the real political work of the party. His "soft heart," meaning, of course, his pro-

letarian instinct, which led him to react militantly to problems arising of the class struggle, might interfere with the work of the hard-headed politicians, the Bergers and the Hillquits.

VII. DEBS—A FEARLESS REVOLUTIONIST

In the two outstanding events in Debs' life in which his class integrity was tested—the A. R. U. strike and the World War—he revealed himself a fearless revolutionist. "I would rather be a thousand times a free soul in jail than a sycophant or coward on the streets."

Thus Debs prefaced his famous anti-War speech at Canton. Knowing that there were Government agents who were gathering "evidence" against him, many in his audience felt that Debs was walking right into the jaws of the Department of Justice. He probably read on their faces their concern over his freedom. But he continued: "Do not worry over the charge of treason to your masters, but be concerned about the treason that involves yourself."

Not only during the war but in times of "peace," Debs urged revolutionary action upon the workers. When the miners in Rockefeller-owned Colorado were being beaten into submission by the hired assassins of the State and the coal companies, when the holocaust at Ludlow was demanding working-class action, Debs appealed in 1914 for a defense fund for the Miners' Union, not to hire lawyers to argue in the courts about the "inalienable rights" of workers to strike, but to "provide each member with the latest high-power rifle, the same as used by the corporation gunmen, and 500 rounds of cartridges. In addition to this, every district should purchase and equip and man enough Gatling and machine guns to match the equipment of Rockefeller's private army of assassins." Compare these revolutionary admonitions to the attack of the Socialist Party on the Gastonia strikers, who fought in self-defense against their attackers in 1929.

Throughout the trial for treason for his Canton speech which began September 9, 1918, Debs conducted himself as a revolutionist. He refused to allow witnesses for the defense and

spoke himself to the jury rather than permit his lawyers to use tricks known to the legal profession to mitigate his status before capitalist law. Debs pleaded guilty to the charges made against him by the Government and used the court as a tribune to speak to the workers of the country over the heads of the minions of the capitalist state. He refused to recant anything he had said. In his speech to the jury he repeated the substance of his Canton speech and, in fact, made it stronger. The anti-War resolution of the St. Louis Convention, which was fast becoming a mere scrap of paper, was revived. Flesh and blood was put on it when Debs spoke for two hours to the jury on that memorable September 12.

Debs Takes Conviction as Revolutionist

The jury having found Debs guilty "as charged," he was brought for sentence on September 14. Availing himself of the customary right to speak before sentence is imposed, Debs prefaced his remarks to the court as follows: "Years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest of the earth. I said then, I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." When Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone, officials of the then militant Western Federation of Miners, were on trial for their lives in 1906-7, President Roosevelt, in an attempt to influence public opinion and the jury, publicly called the three labor leaders as "undesirable citizens." Roosevelt added also Debs' name for good measure. For many years after that Debs gloried in this appellation.

Debs took his conviction of ten years' imprisonment as a revolutionist. When the U. S. Supreme Court, including the so-called liberal Justices, Holmes and Brandeis, and with Holmes writing the opinion of the court, unanimously affirmed the conviction, he declared: "The decision is perfectly consistent with the character of the Supreme Court as a ruling class tribunal."

Ten years after, Norman Thomas, the leader of the S. P., was advising a Senate Committee against the proposed nomination of Judge Parker, of the Jim Crow and Yellow-Dog Contract fame, to the Supreme Court bench on the grounds that it would dishonor the names of the great liberals, Holmes and Brandeis. As a Christian minister Thomas had forgiven the "two great liberals" for putting the old fighter Debs behind the prison bars.

On April 19, 1919, though the war was over, Debs, at the age of 65 and in delicate health, entered Moundsville (W. Va.) prison to serve his sentence. (The Federal prisons were still overcrowded, housing many political prisoners. Later Debs was removed to the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta.) To the workers of America, whose minds and hearts were turned to him, Debs declared: "I enter the prison doors a flaming revolutionist—my head erect, my spirit untamed and my soul unconquerable."

Debs began his career in the ranks of the labor movement. He reached a high position in his union and led several historic battles. When he came to the Socialist movement he was a national figure with a prison term and a record of heroic labor struggles behind him.

We have already had occasion to refer to the policy which the S. P. leadership employed to exploit Debs to recruit members, to gather subscriptions for various publications, and especially to obtain votes in national elections. In keeping with the party's "neutrality" policy with regard to the trade unions, Debs, though he was opposed to this policy, was nevertheless won away from the field of labor struggles to the narrow parliamentary and agitational fields of activity. The result was that Debs, who could organize labor unions and, through his great eloquence and inspiring appeal, move large masses into action, became a platform speaker and a presidential candidate. If it were not for the fact that Debs frequently rebelled against the position in which he was placed by the S. P. leaders and on his own initiative throw himself into struggles which flared up from time to time, thereby keep-

ing his militant spirit alive, we might have witnessed the transformation of a mountain eagle into a bird of paradise.

Low Ideological Level of S. P.

The ideological level of the S. P. was rather low. Almost no original Marxist literature was produced and whatever educational work was done among the members was in the main superficial. There was no grounding in revolutionary theory and, in building a party mainly for election purposes, there was little opportunity for revolutionary experience. The milieu in which Debs worked was not conducive to the development of his native abilities and talents as a mass leader and organizer. Nor was there an opportunity for Debs to train for real political leadership. Although the reverse is usually the case, the S. P. received from Debs more than it gave him. He lived and drew sustenance from his earlier attainments.

This condition helps to explain the absence of clarity and theoretical precision on various questions of policy and tactics as expressed in some of his utterances. His main shortcoming was that he was not always able to pass judgment upon a new situation engendered in a new period of struggle. That he was always attuned to the manifestations of the class struggle, that he was a militant and glorified revolutionary action, the material culled from his speeches and writings will bear witness. Even when he was in disagreement with persons or organizations in the labor movement, his voice and pen were always placed at the disposal of all who were engaged in struggles. Thus we see him rushing to aid the I. W. W., joining the Friends of Soviet Russia and the International Labor Defense, though the latter organizations were on the S. P. blacklist because they were led by Communists. Forgotten and unsung by the official labor movement or the S. P., the martyrdom of the Molly Maguires, and the Chicago militant labor leaders were to him golden pages in the history of the American labor movement, and the Sacco-Vanzetti campaign was always close to his heart.

Jeffersonian Democrats, Anarcho-Liberals and reformists of

all hues, who passed for Socialists and were connected with the Socialist press, used Debs for copy, particularly during the war and during his confinement in prison. They went out of their way to advertise Debs as the "great humanist," the "great libertarian," taking advantage of his good nature and friendliness to everybody. These inane appellations could not be meant for Debs who wrote that "*the most heroic word in all languages is Revolution,*" and who always wanted to be known as an unalloyed revolutionist.

Debs was a revolutionist and, with all his shortcomings, he generally eschewed any other but the revolutionary path. As such he is remembered by the present generation of American revolutionists, who will keep his memory green so that it may be passed on to future generations. Eugene Victor Debs, better known to all those who worked with him as Gene Debs, belongs to the revolutionary traditions of the American working class.

VIII. THE HERITAGE OF GENE DEBS

The United States of to-day is different from the United States which saw Debs battle in the front line trenches of the American class struggle for over two generations. When as a young boy, Debs went to work in a railway car repair shop for fifty cents a day, the country was just emerging from what Marx then called it—a colony of Europe. Within two generations of stupendous internal development and expansion, American capitalism completed the conquest of the home market and, having fattened on it, was ready to challenge the older capitalisms of Europe for markets in other parts of the world.

The United States had entered its imperialist era. At the close of the century it established its hegemony over the entire American hemisphere. The more than successful outcome of the Spanish-American War, which was not unexpected, gave the United States footholds in the wide Pacific, to be close to the base of operations in the Far East when the struggle for control breaks there.

After the Imperialist War of 1914-1918, Anglo-American rivalry increased, and the United States, having long overtaken "the workshop of the world," is girding itself for a fight to the finish against its strongest competitor. In the meantime the post-War stabilization of capitalist economy has been halted and an economic crisis of world dimensions has set in. The United States became definitely involved in it and its own severe cyclical crisis was deepened still further by the general world crisis of capitalism. Only in the Soviet Union feverish economic activity is proceeding on an unprecedented scale and the building of Socialism under the Five-Year Plan of industrialization is carried on by the zealous and enthusiastic workers and peasants who govern that vast country to-day.

During this period the workers in capitalist countries entered into a counter offensive against the attacks of the bosses. The specter of another imperialist war, the ravages of the economic crisis, widespread unemployment and wage-cuts, inhuman speed-up and rationalization broaden and deepen the struggles of the workers. *Revolutionary workingclass organization and a militant leadership armed with a fighting program are needed to cope with the conditions of the class struggle engendered in the present period.*

The A. F. of L. and the S. P.

It is evident from what has already been adduced that neither the American Federation of Labor nor the Socialist Party are the organizations to which the workers should turn for leadership in the struggles with which they are faced. Both of these organizations are part and parcel of the capitalist offensive against the workers. They are the agents of the bosses within the labor movement and as such must be exposed and fought by the workers. Gene Debs pilloried the A. F. of L. during his lifetime and continually called attention to its rôle as a misleader of labor. The Socialist Party has definitely adopted the policy of the A. F. of L. of subservience to capital, although it still uses some radical phraseology. The president of the "Socialist" Ladies' Garment Workers' Union declared

during the recent dressmakers' strike that "the interests of the legitimate manufacturers and the union are identical," and the capitalist press wrote at the same time that the strike "has the support of the most responsible employers in the industry." These fake strikes are called to delude and mislead the workers. Their purpose is to neutralize their will to struggle.

Norman Thomas wrote on October 4, 1930: "The A. F. of L. and its affiliated body, the United Textile Workers, *have wisely sought to avoid provoking strikes in hard times.*" (Italics mine.—A. T.) Just as the war-time social-patriots favored civil peace, their immediate successors, the social-fascists, now advocate class peace.

The Socialist Party joins the A. F. of L. and other reactionary elements in a crusade against the Soviet Union; in attacks against militants in the unions and the shops; in hounding Communists and their various organizations. A veritable orgy of persecutions is instituted against revolutionary workers by various governmental agencies and the S. P. leaders give aid and comfort to the persecutors. Socialist leaders are acclaimed by the capitalist press, increasing space is given to their utterances, which are featured as "sober" and "constructive." Regular adherents of the Republican and Democratic Parties also cast their votes for Socialist candidates. Norman Thomas receives a large vote in a normal Republican New York district, called "the silk-stocking district" long before the advent of rayon. Capitalist papers support Norman Thomas' election and after his defeat suggest that he be named for some public position "to make use of his great ability."

August Bebel, the pioneer leader of the German workers, once said, "When capitalists find praise for me I begin to suspect that I did something wrong." Norman Thomas has no qualms about the praise that is heaped upon him by the capitalist press and reactionary organizations. He welcomes it and glories in it. Other S. P. leaders seek and secure praise from the capitalists for their activities. The S. P. administrations of Milwaukee and Reading are welcomed by the bosses of those cities and are supported by the capitalist press.

The Socialist Party is now the third party of capitalism in America. A wide gulf separates it from the teachings of Eugene Debs, who helped to found it thirty years ago. To-day it represents the very opposite of the ideals for which Debs stood and with which he inspired great masses of American workers during his lifetime. The chasm which exists between the tradition of Debs and the reality of the S. P. is the chasm which to-day separates all class conscious workers from it and which should make all other workers shun it like a plague.

The tradition of Debs is the tradition of loyalty to the cause of workingclass emancipation, of class struggle, of militant unionism, of a revolutionary party, of the fight for power. The reality of the S. P. is the effort to turn the workers away from the class struggle, the admonition to them to defend the interests of the bosses, to meekly follow the union bureaucrats, to accept the capitalist system and wage slavery.

Who Are the True Leaders of the Workers?

White and Negro workers, women and young workers, native and foreign born, employed and unemployed—all must struggle to-day against war preparations, against the offensive of the bosses, against wage cuts, government persecution, unemployment, race discriminations and lynchings. They must defend the Soviet Union—the workers' fatherland; they must support the colonial peoples who are rising to free themselves from imperialist domination.

As an experienced revolutionist Debs taught the workers to organize and to employ militancy and revolutionary action in their struggles against the bosses and the capitalist system as a whole. Those who would follow in the spirit of militancy in the labor movement upon which Gene Debs insisted will help build the revolutionary unions organized under the leadership of the Trade Union Unity League. They will join the Communist Party which fights for the every-day needs of the workers. As a revolutionary mass party of the American workingclass it will also lead them to ultimate victory over capitalism and imperialism in the United States.

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