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# Eugene V. Debs, Prisoner No. 9653, Interviewed in Prison

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Did you ever enter the strong gates of a prison? Has your mind ever pictured the sinking heart of a man who hears those heavy iron doors clank behind him? Wife and child, perhaps, are shut from him in the outer world. And inside? The lost are there, the despairing, the destroyed. Leave hope behind, ye who enter. And yet it is not as bad as it was, some centuries ago. The harmonious and austere building at Atlanta is infinitely superior, in what happens inside of it, to the prisons of Lincoln's day. God knows it is bad enough.

Partly, it is bad because we in truth do not know what to do with certain types of dangerous depravity. Give us time, a century or two, and we may learn the alphabet of treating such aberration. Granted we are ignorant about crime — what about prisoner 9653? Why is he in this place?

To see prisoner 9653 we go only so far as a reception room, and Eugene V. Debs, four times nominee of a great party for the Presidency, now No. 9653, steps forth eagerly to meet me. How warm his grasp! How pure and sunny his smile! How his face carries the record of his 40 years of service, of forbearance, of hope of a great belief.

## **Debs' Warm Cordiality.**

We sit down on opposite sides of a long table. Debs' lawyer is there and so is the prison attendant. Neve mind; Debs doesn't mind. He leans across, his face alight, his speaking and delicate hands at play. He will not let me get in my question. His warm cordiality prevents. He knows I am not a Socialist and that I am not going to vote for him. He knows all about it. But what is that to him? I am a human being, which is

enough. But there is more. I have recently chosen the unpopular course on a great subject — Russia — and Debs knows all about that also, and pours out an over-generous appreciation until, afraid of that man at the end of the table, who is responsible for the allotment of time, I see a chance to turn the switch and I suddenly ask the most dangerous question I know.

"Mr. Debs," I broke in, "I appreciate deeply what you have said, but your last words bring me to something I want to ask you. To me it is a momentous thing, a tragic thing. Who has saved Lenin from a vast Western offensive that would have broken him down? The British Labour Party has done it. And what does Lenin do? He calls the leaders of that party a pack of traitors. It is the Third International against the Second International that I look upon as one of the greatest of our tragedies." To be sure we understand each other's terms I went on: "The Third International, of course, is the claim of the Moscow Communist Party to dictate policies to Socialist parties all over the world. The Second International stands for freedom of development for Socialism as an evolution. It was dominated by the British Labour Party and does not differ from the Fabian Socialism of Sidney Webb."

## **Debs Puzzled by Moscow Decision.**

I thought Debs would hesitate, for it is a topic that has produced much confusion in the Socialist ranks. Not he. A flash of sadness went across his happy face and he caught back at my quotation from Lenin about traitors. "I don't like the glib use of a word like 'traitors,'" he said, a little lower than his usual tone, with his eyes for a moment looking away. "I realize what Lenin has done. To me he and Trotsky are monu-

mental figures. But I have been puzzled by what he has said recently about other Socialist parties, if he is authentically reported. The British Labour Party saved him. Without that party England would have been fully in the war against him. France would have been; even we should have been in it. The British Labour Party did a great thing. It did all that in the circumstances it could do. It was right to stop where it did stop. If for me to say that is to become a traitor, then a traitor I am willing to be."

So, dear reader, you see this prisoner, No. 9653, is no more afraid of Nikolai Lenin than he is of Mitchell Palmer.

"How do you explain it," I persisted.

"I think it is probably ignorance," he replied. "I don't believe Lenin and his men around him understand anything about some other countries. They seem actually to believe that England is ready for a revolution like the one in Russia. They do not know how much it meant to challenge the hypocrisy of Lloyd George, to defy him to go to war, and they believe the Labour Party could have done much more. It would have been madness."

"And in this country," I put in, "I hear from friends of Lenin that he implies we are on the verge of revolution also."

### **Persuasion, Not Force.**

"Yes," he answered, "apparently he does. How foolish it would be! Our Communist Party in this country, with its doctrine of being prepared in advance to take control by force when the opportunity comes, is not giving strength. It is giving weakness. It is not by arming that strength comes; it is by persuasion."

Here Debs volunteered something, without any suggestion from me, that I must say startled me, as I, like everybody else, had imbibed unconsciously from the newspapers the conception of a much less reasonable man. Debs stopped, went almost out of his way, to interpolate the statement that the Constitution of the United States is so drawn that it enables the people without violence to obtain by amendment any kind of government they may desire. It would do our fire-eaters some good to compare that statement by Debs with a certain passage about amendment and revolution in Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural.

This question of force is all essential, and I wanted to drive it still nearer home. So I mentioned the bomb in Wall Street, and asked him what he would do if he were President. "What would happen if Debs were President?" is the way I put it.

"I hope," he said, "if Debs were President such a thing would not occur."

"Yes," I said, "I know what you mean; but I am talking across you to my conservative friends. I want an answer for them."

### **An Aid to Reaction.**

"Well," Debs cried willingly, "do we know who threw that bomb? Let me ask you a question; it is a reasonable one: *Who benefited? Who benefited?*"

I nodded. "You mean a plant?"

"No matter how indirect," he went on, "how remote, the sleuths benefit. Thousands of them are making a harvest today because that bomb went off. Can you trace their influence? You cannot. I know, I who tell you, I have spent a lifetime with them. There is not a union, not a local in this whole country without its spy. They are everywhere. Their business is to stir up trouble, to divide, to make discord between one element and another, and to betray us to the enemy. Once, long ago, I wanted to take a step in secret. I found it was immediately known to the enemy. So I learned that any attempt to accomplish anything in secret is folly. Nothing can be done that is of any use except what is done in the open.

"But about the bomb. I speak of the detectives because they profit by it, but other causes may be mentioned. How about the administration? How about the suppression of free speech, the imprisonments for conviction? That may be a real cause where the bomb is only a result. I have worked against violence all my life. It is not my way. But when we pay so much attention to a symptom as we pay to this explosion, we close our minds to the causes. Perhaps—"

And here Debs smiled that doubly gentle smile with which he marks the approach of a difficulty or a contradiction, and his talking hands were poised before him. "Perhaps," he said, "it all works together for good. Sometimes I think it does. The Allies attack Russia. That gives her its chance. It brings discordant elements together. If they had been let alone they would

probably have torn one another apart. So with this bomb. It is not my way.”

### **Great Socialist Revival Coming.**

Debs talked about a revival of a forward movement when this election is behind us. He thinks it is coming strong and soon, and coming through a broader party than labor and Socialism have been able to organize before. I asked him if it would in general be like the British Labour Party, and he was inclined to think it might be. He was not sure, however, that well-to-do men of radical tendencies could cooperate as much here with the labor elements as they do in England, and he rather thought the lack of cohesion in the Committee of Forty-Eight at Chicago [July 10-14, 1920] was an illustration of this difficulty.

I wish those who persecute this kindly and pleasant and broad leader of the struggling many might have heard him as he talked about the troubles that labor has in groping its way to responsibility. “Our hardest task,” he said, “is not the defeat of capitalism. That would be easy if we could first conquer ourselves, determine our course, confide in one another. Labor is wandering in a fog. Is it to be wondered at, when you remember that this is the first time in the history of the world that the masses, on a large scale, have undertaken to settle their own destiny? A laboring man is by nature distrustful. He distrusts everybody. He distrusts other laboring men. And he has good cause to distrust them.”

Here Debs again sketched the treachery, the ever-present informer and hired, secret provoker of discord and violence, and made me see afresh the terrible hidden and powerful wires that the enemy of labor is able to run through the humblest room in which working men gather together to grope their way toward the government of themselves. From this long, heartbreaking experience have emerged the guiding principles of Debs’ teaching and Debs’ life. They are these: Secret work is futile. Violence is harmful.

### **Opposed to Violence.**

The great first goal is to keep labor together, to prevent its diversion. Consequently, though Debs is opposed to violence himself he will not make an en-

emy of the man whose despair drives him to violence. He will welcome as comrades all who seek the same goal.

As to violence Debs, in spite of the greatest provocation to be discouraged with reason, says and says again things like: “I am opposed to the form of our present government; I am opposed to the social system in which we live; I believe in the change of both, but by perfectly peaceful and orderly means.”

Testifying about the Pullman strike he said: “Never in my life have I broken a law or advised others to do so.”

And again: “A man who will violate law is against the interest of labor.”

In questioning Debs so fully about his view of violence I was far from wishing to put Debs in a hole. I simply wanted to put before him what is in the mind of every frightened bourgeois in the world. Debs has over and over again made admirable answers to this line of thought when he has come into conflict with the powers that rule. When one of Grover Cleveland’s commissioners asked him whether the combination of the working people into one big union would not give them a dangerous power, Debs answered: “A little power is more dangerous than great power,” and I think he said something when he said that. I believe Debs is really in sympathy with “American institutions,” as they are called, if we carry out those institutions in good faith. Debs says: “I believe in the right of free speech in war as in peace.” Daniel Webster said precisely the same thing.

### **Imprisoned for Anti-War Views.**

Debs was put into prison this last time for opposing the war. Not for recommending violent interference with it, but for frankly avowing his disbelief in any war whatever. He wants to know why Lincoln was not put in prison for opposing the war against Mexico, and the cool answer is that they had no espionage act then. As the French say: “We have changed all that.” He takes his stand on the First Amendment to the Constitution, which says: “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.”

But although this country is no longer in any actual sense at war the gentle and peace-loving Debs is in prison for having disbelieved in war. He has pointed

out that Benjamin Franklin beat him to it when he said: "There never was a good war or a bad peace," and he has even gone so far as to argue that Jesus did not say "Kill one another."

"If it is a crime," he concludes, "under the American law, punishable by imprisonment, for being opposed to human bloodshed, I am perfectly willing to be clothed in the stripes of a convict and to end my days in a prison cell."

I have said that while Debs has won, by hard work and serious concern, a considerable degree of book education, his real education comes from what he has seen in his own life, and this is what he has seen:

"Standing here this morning, I recall my boyhood. At 14 I went to work in the railroad shops; at 16 I was firing a freight engine on a railroad. I remember all the hardships, all the privations of that earlier day, and from that time until now my heart has been with the working class. I would have been in Congress long ago; I have preferred to go to prison. The choice has been deliberately made. I could not have done otherwise. I have no regret.

"In the struggle — the unceasing struggle — between the toilers and producers and their exploiters I have tried as best I might to serve those among whom I was born, with whom I expect to share my lot until the end of my days."

#### **In the Presence of a Martyr.**

As I left the prison my heart was heavy, and yet underneath there was exultation. It was heavy that this persecution of a rare spirit, so courageous and so good, should come to pass in my country, in the full light of the 20th Century. It exulted that there are millions of men like Debs, unspoiled by luxury, unafraid; perhaps, if you like, too simple in their beliefs, who yet are fit to bring the world to a higher life, because they have known hardship and evil and seek the good. I had been in jail — yes, but in the presence of a martyr, who may die soon, but whose spirit will go marching on.

Debs stood there in the hall. He had stepped quickly and lightly from the reception room and then back a few steps toward the unseen depths of the prison. He was mingled with other men, but I saw nothing of them. His hand was uplifted, that smile was on his

face. His hand was uplifted, partly like a benediction, partly like the greeting of a soldier to a friend. To me it was in fact a benediction; in truth, a greeting from a friend.

A woman and child waiting to see some common criminal were sitting in the hall. What of the father? I left the awesome building, and the huge door swung closed behind me.

#### **Wants to Be in Fight.**

Debs is most eager to be at liberty. In moments of contempt for government, or of feeling for the wrongs done to many simple men, he may say he would rather stay in until all come out — rather die there if need be. But the other impulse conquers. He wants to be in the great fight. He longs to be free to deliver the truth, his truth, to those of his fellowmen, and face to face. He is not a man who belongs apart, in a study or in a cell. He loves men, masses of men, and wants to look into their upturned faces and pour out what is in his soul.

He is their candidate for Presidency, and the United States government, on the flimsy pretext of an outworn war-power, shuts him in a prison on the eve of an election.

Does it know what it is doing for the class war in this country? Does it know what it is doing to make common men laugh scornfully when such words as law and justice and order are spoken?

#### **Voters Who Mean to Support Debs.**

Time and again I have been astonished this summer and autumn when men and women I know well have told me they intended to vote for Debs, though they had no belief whatever in the theories of Karl Marx. They opined that Marx had been dead a good while and that a good many things had happened, and that the world would have to struggle on toward fairness by many different routes — but they were going to vote for Debs.

This tendency may not show on a big scale in this election because the majority are still drugged, but those who are free to think are the advance guard, and there is a deluge coming soon. I have reasons that seem to me good for voting with the one of the two big

parties that I prefer to have win, but even so I felt like a cowardly conservative as I listened to the stream of generous feeling and tolerant thought that flowed from the rich personality of the imprisoned candidate of a party that will sweep half the countries of Europe in the first elections that are held on real issues.

We talked of men like Webb, Angell, Brailsford, and Wedgwood, who [are leading] the Labour Party in England. Debs gave the most enthusiastic [eulogy] to Norman Angell's [analysis] of war and its consequences. Turning to the intellectual situation in America, he asked me if I knew Prof. [George] Herron. I did not. He warmed as he characterized the bitter persecution of this Socialist of the educated class and said the newspapers had killed Mrs. [Carrie Rand] Herron.

### **Hired, Secret Provokers.**

Opposition does not embitter him. Combat with him is as a contest for sweetness and light.

That is the great, fine thing about Debs. Nothing embitters him. Injustice, oppression, persecution, savagery do not embitter him. It is a stirring, an uplifting thing to find a man who has suffered so much and remains so ardent and so pure. I wish we had a Zola to do him justice; to awaken the country until it cared to insist that the persecution of him end.

Debs was in prison once before. It was in 1895, at the time of the West Pullman strike. Mr. Pullman himself was so flagrantly in contempt of court that even severely capitalistic newspapers were shocked, but he never went to jail. Debs did. They tried him for violence and dropped the case, but they got him on contempt, which often means that a judge can exercise arbitrary power to punish men he doesn't like. Debs had not been a Socialist when the Federal judge sent him to jail. He had been a Bryanite. He came out a Socialist...

I do not think he ever hated a single human being, or even advised a single act of revenge. If he spoke of "that suburb of hell called Pullman," it was not hatred of any man — it was a heart beating for misery that it knew and darkness that it understood. When

he got out of jail he said: "If all the common people united and asked for the appointment of a Federal judge, their voice would not be heeded any more than the chirp of a cricket."

### **Shut up on Technicality.**

Debs is fair, and recently he has said that there is one exception to the Supreme Court's tenderness for money. I think there are three exceptions, but that is another story. At that time, 25 years ago, he saw no bright spot on the bench and is it surprising? He had led in two successful strikes against conditions that even we conservatives now see to have been inhuman, and suddenly a judge intervened and shut him up on a technicality.

Debs said: "At this juncture there were delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes — and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed. This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though I was wholly unaware that it was called by that name."

Debs has sympathized with the IWW, and many people therefore think he sympathizes with sabotage and violence, but what he sympathizes with is the outcast in the Western lumber camps, and if well-dressed readers of these words want a scientific basis for Debs' emotion let them read the books Prof. Parker and John Graham Brooks have written about the IWW, or Brooks' new book, *Labor's Challenge to the Social Order*.

Yes, he is aching to get out and have his say before the election, but if need be he is perfectly willing, as apparently the American nation, speaking not only through its Attorney General but also through public apathy and newspaper apathy, is willing also, that he should remain in prison, while in an election a great party is deprived of its leader — a party that in England, in France, in Italy, in Germany, in Belgium, in Czecho-Slovakia, in Europe generally represents the greatest constructive effort of the world. And that party is said to number altogether 60 million souls.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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