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# Gene Debs at the Socialist Conference.

by William F. Kruse

Published in *The Young Socialists' Magazine*, v. 12, no. 9 (Sept. 1918), pp. 4, 12.

There is undoubtedly some difference of opinion regarding the position of Eugene V. Debs in American public life. To some he is a dangerous agitator whose wonderfully eloquent voice should be stifled without delay behind prison walls and bars. To many others he is the farsighted prophet of a newer day. About the time that this issue goes to press he will begin his trial in an Ohio courtroom, and perhaps the next issue will tell something about the trial and its outcome. In the indictment against him he is charged with sedition — yet some of the most brilliant men of letters and affairs in this country have freely given their testimonials as regards his sincerity, his great-heartedness, his courage, and his nobility of character.

Edwin Markham, perhaps our greatest living American poet, calls him “one of the greatest names of the century.”

Eugene Field, a poet and author that all American schoolchildren are taught to proudly call America's own, says of him: “If Debs were a priest the world would listen to his eloquence, and that gentle, musical voice and sad, sweet smile of his would soften the hardest heart.”

Jon Swinton and Rev. Frank DeWitt Talmadge, the first time they heard Debs speak were immediately struck with his likeness to Lincoln. Swinton said: “I confess that I was as much struck with the closing words of Debs' speech as I was with those of Lincoln. Lincoln spoke for man; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for right and

progress; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for freedom of labor; so spoke Debs. Lincoln was the foe of human slavery; so is Debs.”

Frederick Auguste Bartholdi, the famous sculptor who modelled the “Statue of Liberty,” whose beacon welcomes the immigrant to our shores and free institutions, says of Gene: “He is endowed with the most precious faculty to which one can aspire — the gift of language, and he uses it for the proclamation of the most beautiful and generous thoughts. His beautiful language is that of an apostle.

And finally, James Whitcomb Riley, our much beloved Hoosier poet, said: “God was feeling mighty good when he created Gene Debs and he didn't have anything else to do all day.”

Of course some of these tributes were paid many years ago, and perhaps the man of whom they were spoken has changed — but those of us who know him realize that Gene is Gene no matter how many years may come and go.

However, all this aside, Debs visited the conference of State Secretaries and Socialist Officials held last month in Chicago. He left a convalescent's chair out on a cool farm to come to the hot city, just to be present at a Party crisis. He did not mix into any tactical battles, but just lent his great influence in the interest of our loyalty to our movement. Coming before the delegates as a complete surprise, he was immediately given the floor amid a great ovation. He said in part:

This is a very hearty reception, comrades, and I thank you all. I need not assure you that I am glad to be with you this morning. We are on the eve of a very important campaign. I feel that there is urgent need for the work before us, for each and all of us, and I hope we may enter upon the work that lies before us unitedly, determined and full of enthusiasm.

The party has been passing through what may be called a fiery ordeal during the past few weeks, subjected as perhaps never before to a test of the very fiber of its being; and during all this time the party has stood and withstood all of the attacks that have been made upon it; and for myself I am sure that the party is today in a far more aggressive and determined position than ever before in all its history. It is true that there have been certain desertions, but the party has not been weakened in that account. We are indebted to the master class for at least one service, and that is for having rid us of those who do not properly belong here. Numbers do not always count. We are stronger because of the test to which we have been subjected, and for myself, I believe the outlook for the party was never more encouraging and inspiring than it is today.

I have come here to do myself the pleasure of taking you by the hand and of assuring you once more that in this trying hour I am with you heart and hand. It does not matter what befalls us as individuals; we have but to maintain inviolate the integrity of the Socialist Party. If that fails all is gone. So long as we are true to ourselves and true to the principles of international Socialism, we cannot go far astray, we cannot lose to any great extent.

Now is the time for every comrade to prove himself. Now is the time for every comrade to measure up and show to the world that he is worthy of a place in the socialist movement.

It is not for me to outline what shall be the purpose of the policy of this conference. I am here simply to visit as a comrade. I want to do what little lies in my power to aid you in the work

there is before us.

In the correspondence I have had with the members throughout the country I have not had during the last three weeks one disheartening word. On the contrary, every message I receive is fraught with the militant spirit of Socialism, and I am persuaded that when the campaign is properly opened, and our speakers enter the field, they will find our comrades, and indeed not only our comrades but the workers generally, more receptive to our message than they ever have been before.

For some little time past I have had to take an enforced rest. The hardest thing imposed on a Socialist is the necessity of resting when the world is on fire. Now is the time for action. I feel as never before that all we have is needed in this hour, and I have come to you to make my little offering this morning, to grasp hands with you, to stand side by side with you, to share in your spirit, to assure you that I am ready to do my little utmost now and as the days go by in the interest of the only cause on this earth worth living, fighting, and dying for.

ALL MY LIFE I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO PROUD OF BEING A SOCIALIST AS I AM TODAY. I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO PROUD OF MY COMRADES AS I AM TODAY.

In every hour of trial that has come they have stood staunch and true. With them I gladly share my life, and come good or ill as it may, we will not weaken, we will not compromise, we will not retreat an inch, we will stand our ground, we will fight together unitedly all along the battle line for victory for the International Socialist Movement.

Of all the speeches made at that conference, and some of them were decidedly timely and brilliant, that of our three-time standard bearer in national elections was certainly the most impressive. † Everybody shook hands and embraced Debs and when he came to greet his old time comrade, Dan Hogan, Gene just took him by the ears and shook him till we thought the big Irishman would

†- Debs had actually run for President four times at the time of this article's publication, the first time in 1900 as the joint candidate of the two Social Democratic Parties — forerunners of the Socialist Party of America, which was founded in 1901 when these two groups and a couple smaller socialist organizations amalgamated. Debs also ran as the SPA's candidate in 1904, 1908, and 1912.

lose his head. There never was such slapping on the back and all round visiting for half an hour as followed then. After the recess for lunch the conference again got down to business and the result will be one of lasting value to our movement.

One thing more. It has been the habit of almost every chairman that ever introduced our leader to an audience waiting to hear his message to refer to Gene as “our grand old man.” Take a tip — don’t do it! He doesn’t like it, because, he says, it isn’t true. Debs is a Yipsel, with the best and youngest of them. This is what he says about this matter:

There is but one personal objection I have to make. I do not wish anyone to refer to me as “the grand old man.” I am trying my best to be a man but I am neither grand nor old. I am not an “old man,” grand or otherwise. An “old man” is usually hideous; he is always pitiful. It is the crime of capitalism that it produces “old men.”

I am anything but a “grand old man.” A grand man is not old and an old man is not grand. I am not an old man and do not intend to be. I have no time to get old. The spirit within me and the soul of me, the spirit and soul of Socialism, are a sure guarantee against “old age.” I need not seek the gurgling spring of eternal youth. I have found it.

The historic struggle of the ages is rushing towards its culmination. Now is the time for every man and woman to measure up and to choose their side. The weak and cowardly will tremble and fawn, slink away and disappear, while heroic souls make history. This is the hour of action. Choose now or forever hold your peace.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

*Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2006. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.*