
My Interview with Debs in his Prison

[event of Sept. 1, 1921]

by James H. Maurer

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In August 1921, when it was pretty well known that Debs was soon to be set free, the National Executive Committee of the Socialist Party requested me to visit him in the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta. The story of that visit is told in my letter of September 8 [1921] to National Secretary Otto Branstetter, which I here quote.

For the first few hours after reaching Atlanta (I wrote) I devoted my time to hunting up some of our friends to get a line on the best method of breaking into the prison for an hour or so.

At 3:30 pm, Thursday, September 1 [1921], I entered the prison. The Warden asked me several questions and then said Debs wasn't entitled to see any more visitors during the official month as he had already seen his quota. I kept at him, however, and he finally agreed I might see Debs if Gene was willing. I assured the Warden I was content to abide by Gene's wishes.

Five minutes later Debs and I embraced, and then with a third party (not the Warden) present, we settled down for a chat that lasted an hour.

What made the greatest impression on me was Gene's mental and physical condition. He has a healthy color, looks like a farmer, tanned as though he had worked on a farm. I mentioned to him that he looked as though he was enjoying good health, and he assured me that he was feeling fine. As to his mental faculties, I can truthfully say they are as keen as ever. All this talk about his being a mental wreck is rot. Some of his visitors evidently expected to find him as crazy as they are, and because they didn't they figured he must be mentally unsound.

He gave me to understand that he does not want any demonstration in Atlanta or anywhere else, when he is released. It seems plans have been under way to make a big noise in Atlanta then. To all of this he objects. He wants no demonstration of any kind and with this idea I quite agree. He said: "I will speak in Atlanta all right, but not upon the occasion of my departure from prison. I will come back to Atlanta." He gave me to understand that he wants some time, perhaps a month, after his release to be left alone. He

doesn't mean that he doesn't want to meet his friends, but does not want to be pressed for speaking dates.

During the time of Debs' imprisonment, a great deal had happened. The Socialist movement in the United States as well as in other countries had been split wide open after the Bolshevist revolution in Russia. Some of our older comrades and many of the more recent recruits had been carried away with dreams of sudden and worldwide revolution. They organized a so-called Left Wing in the party. Failing to get control, they broke away and formed the Communist Party, or Workers Party, as it was called for a time. But many who did not actually leave the Socialist Party still had "leftish" leanings, and dissension still prevailed.

These elements hoped that they could get Debs on their side, and did not scruple to claim him while he was still in prison. This was one reason for my wishing to have an interview with him without delay, and on this matter I reported to Branstetter.

From my conversation with Gene (my letter continued) I feel sure that the "impossibilists" have not succeeded in fooling him. We talked about the much-heralded revolution which is now years overdue, and we both enjoyed a good laugh. I asked him not to commit himself to any "ism" until he had an opportunity of looking the field over after his discharge, and his answer was that I could rest easy on that point.

He was glad to know that the Executive Committee of the Socialist Party had just held such encouraging meetings. He asked about every member of the committee and many other old-time Socialists.

The prison censor allowed me to give Debs all the typewritten material I had with me, but not our printed *Socialist World*.

A year before this, when our party had made the Atlanta prisoner its Presidential candidate and the Notification Committee visited him there, he had made it clear that he was opposed to everything the Communists stood for. The Communists' reply had taken two forms. On the one hand, they insisted that Debs was in superb mental condition and the Socialists who quoted him against them were liars; almost in the same breath they declared he was a grand old man, but that the rigors of imprisonment had weakened his once great mind.

President Wilson stubbornly refused to release Debs, even when his secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty, begged him to do so as his last Presidential act. President Harding invited him to come to the White House unattended, but Debs would never tell what took place at their interview, Harding having pledged him to secrecy. It was understood that Dougherty offered Debs a pardon if he would ask for it. This he refused, saying that to do so would be an admission of wrongdoing on his part. The demand for his release became too insistent to be ignored, however, and Harding freed him, again inviting him to the White House. It was on this occasion that Dougherty called Debs to the Department of Justice and warned him to be law-abiding. Shades of Teapot Dome!

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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