
Eugene Debs and Socialist Party Policies.

by James Oneal

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About the most revolting performance of American Communists is their attempt to claim the late Eugene V. Debs as their own. Now that he is gone, they make this claim. How well they know that he would repudiate this claim if he were alive.

Two sentences appear in a circular they distributed at the Socialist memorial meeting held at Madison Square Garden, New York City. One was that Debs was “always on the left wing of the Socialist Party.” The other is that only in recent years did the Socialist Party permit Debs “to become a member of the National Executive Committee.”

How pitifully small these gentlemen become when they resort to their Communist virtue of lying. Even the memory of the dead representative of the best proletarian ethics does not inspire any regard for the truth.

The first year of Debs' connection with any Socialist movement he faced a “left wing,” and fought it till it was exterminated. This was in the year 1897. The American Railway Union dissolved that year. The delegates then met with delegates of a number of scattered organizations and organized the Social Democracy. Quite a number of Anarchists came to the convention and, because of their numerical strength, they succeeded in getting a program adopted which provided for the colonization of the state of Washington in order to capture it for Socialism.

This was the “left wing” program of that year. In the year 1898 another convention of the Social Democracy was held in Chicago, and the Socialists came there determined to ditch the “left” program. They did so, despite the fact that they knew that it meant a split in the party, which was very small and could not spare many members. The “left wing,” in

fact, had a majority of the delegates. Debs and the Socialists withdrew and organized the Social Democratic Party. The “left wing” did not survive a year.

Debs at Unity Convention.

The Unity Convention that was held in Indianapolis in 1901. The “left” at that period was represented by the Socialist Labor Party, which opposed the trade unions and was organizing the Socialist Trades and Labor Alliance. That convention repudiated the “left” position regarding the trade unions. Thus the Socialist Party was born as an opposition to the “left wing” in 1901, and Debs was heart and soul with the Socialist Party.

In 1904 the “left” repudiated all economic organizations of the working class. The “left” declared in the national convention of that year that trade unions were useless, and only “reformists” would encourage economic organization.

Will the spiritual heirs of the “lefts” of 1904 contend that Debs supported this position? Can they quote a single sentence that he ever uttered or wrote that will support it? Certainly not. Since the Communists unwittingly approve all “left” factions that have appeared, we give them the honor of supporting the palmist from Oregon and the nut from Kansas, who in the 1904 convention of the Socialist Party quoted the Communist Manifesto to prove that economic organization of the working class was utopian.

On Immediate Demands.

The next “left” position I recall reached its culmination in the convention of 1908. The “left” had

forgotten their position of 1904 on trade unions, and four years later fought for something which they had also urged in 1904. They wanted no measures of immediate relief for the workers stated in the party platforms stated in the party platforms. They were "bourgeois" and "reformist" measures, according to the "left."

Did Debs range himself with this position? Not at all. Debs realized, as any sane and intelligent Socialist would, that the moment a Socialist goes into office it was his working class duty to fight for every measure of immediate relief while keeping his vision fixed upon our ultimate aim of the complete transformation of capitalism itself. The "left" wanted the "revolution now." That is, they followed a policy which would have required elected Socialists to introduce resolutions to overthrow capitalism immediately, no matter whether one or more were in office or whether that office was that of a member of a city council, a legislature, or of Congress.

That lunacy was the "left" position for a number of years in the Socialist Party. It never triumphed. Quite a number of the leading philosophers of American Communism were also exponents of this policy. In fact, the whole Communist movement in this country returned to it in 1919. In the "Left Wing Manifesto" adopted that year and which brought the split in the Socialist Party the demand was made for the complete elimination of all immediate measures. Today they have gone to the other extreme of emphasizing immediate measures to the exclusion of ultimate aims and have thus qualified themselves as petty bourgeois liberals. Debs never was guilty of this topsy-turvy conduct.

1912, Another Change.

By the year 1912 the "left" position had undergone such a change that it was impossible to recognize the label. Whereas in 1904 the "lefts" were opposed to all economic organization of the workers, in 1912 they were overstating the power of such organizations. They had become shamefaced syndicalists. They did not fully repudiate political action but they considered a political organization of the workers merely as an agency for collecting strike funds and then kicking those in the face who contributed to the funds.

Coupled with this was the dogma of sabotage.

The "lefts" had discovered a "new" and a "revolutionary" weapon. Waiters in restaurants should drop stink pots on the floor by way of asserting their revolutionary principles. Or they should spit in the soup. Or the lumberjack should drive spikes in trees to damage saws. Raw materials and commodities should be damaged in the workshop. Above all the workers should "slow up on the job."

But the "lefts" lived in a perverse world. Above all, there were the "moderate" Socialists who were opposed to "revolutionary action." We Socialists remembered that this sabotage, whatever form it might take, was not "new." It was as old as the human struggle. It was the weapon of ignorance and desperation, used by slaves in Rome, slaves in our own Southern States, the illiterate section hands on our railroads, the proletarians who first destroyed machinery in the infant days of capitalism.

It wasn't new for us. It was for the "lefts." They were enthusiastic for it and they included many of the leaders of American Communism. Did Debs urge this "new" discovery or support it? On the contrary, he wrote that he was not a syndicalist or a force anarchist. That he was a Socialist and believed in civilized and intelligent weapons for the working class. He regarded the propagation of sabotage as folly. Even the "lefts" have now forgotten it. I do not recall having seen the word in a single Communist program.

Called Debs "Casualty."

This brings us to the next "left" phrase in this country, the propagation of civil war and underground conspiracy. It seems only yesterday that we were reading the dreadfully silly manifestos that came from the rat holes in which our "lefts" had retreated. Did Debs support this "left" phase of history? Nothing that he ever said or wrote can be quoted in support of this stupidity. The writer has often heard Debs express his opinion of the folly and sterility of such conduct.

Another item in this "left" disease a few years ago was the proper attitude in the matter of releasing political prisoners. The "lefts" had nothing but contempt for us in our policy of circulating petitions, holding protest meetings, and carrying on agitation for amnesty. And here let it never be forgotten that at first the Communists said that Debs was a "casualty of

war” and we should not be disturbed by his imprisonment.

How were they going to meet the issue of political prisoners? It was all so simple, as simple as the communists themselves. They wanted no pardons and no amnesty. It hurt their “revolutionary” feelings to suggest such “bourgeois” things. Therefore, they were going to release all political prisoners by “revolutionary mass action.” That was the program. How many did they release by the use of this bloodcurdling measure? Not one. Did they even attempt “revolutionary mass action?” Not once.

What did they do? They eventually followed our course by doing the very things for the release of prisoners which we had decided upon when the issue first confronted us. Did Debs ever at any time or anywhere support the idea of “revolutionary mass action” for the release of political prisoners? Not once. He recognized this for what it was and as we Socialists recognized it. It was another “left” stupidity.

I know of only one instance in Debs’ whole career when he was with a “left” faction in the party. This was when he helped to organize the IWW. But he was also big enough to leave it when he saw his mistake. Most of us have made occasional mistakes. The writer of this article was an impossibilist in 1902. He also lived to regret his mistake and acknowledge it. The genuine Socialist learns by experience. The mouth revolutionist never does. The habitual “left” never learns anything, and for that reason he is always ridiculous and rarely right on anything.

Debs Refused Election.

But enough of these examples. Many more could be cited to show the gross perversion of facts. Let us now consider the assertion that only in recent years did the Socialist Party permit Debs “to become a member of the National Executive Committee.” The falsehood is so easily punctured that one is amazed that the assertion was ever made.

In the first place, in all the elections for a National Committee and for a National Executive Committee Debs always received many nominations from locals all over the country, but he always declined to accept a position on an executive body of the party. Had he accepted at any time he could easily have been

elected. From the time the party was organized in 1901 Debs time after time refused to accept, even though he was urged by members all over the country.

The reason for this is known to his most intimate friends. He never liked to be burdened with administrative matters. He was primarily a propagandist and wanted to give all his attention to this phase of his work. Many times the party members would have been glad to have Debs serve on the executive, but it was his firm refusal to accept nominations which came to him in every election that kept him out of executive councils of the party. He also followed this course as a rule regarding conventions by refusing to go as a delegate.

The Communists have involved themselves in a peculiar position by making this assertion. They have said that Debs was not really with the Socialist Party in recent years. It is precisely because he was committed to the Socialist Party and its policies that he consented to go to the National Executive Committee in recent years. The fact that he took up work that he disliked and which he had avoided for more than twenty years shows that he was so convinced that the Socialist Party represented his views.

Here I may refer to an episode that occurred shortly after the release of Debs from prison. A few months later the National Executive Committee met in Terre Haute and the writer was a member at that time. It will be recalled that while Debs met with us he gave out no statement on the controversies that were still rife. He told us why he took this course, and asked us to keep his confidence. We did, although we believed that it would have been better to speak out.

Decency to the Winds.

Debs then told us that leading Communists had written him. A number had visited him personally and pleaded with him to go with them. He refused. He hoped, however, that he might do something to bring the warring factions together. We believed this to be impossible. We believed the differences were too wide to make adjustment possible. But Debs was entitled to his opinion, and we respected it. He tried. Subsequent events show that he came to our conclusion. He went so far in his effort to effect some accommodation that he was sometimes misunderstood. He, like

the rest of us, had for years worked with men and women on the other side, and it pained him to know that we were in opposite camps.

Eventually Debs gave up what proved to be a fruitless task. But in that Terre Haute meeting he told us what he thought of the talk of dictatorship, of “revolutionary mass action,” of the Communist declaration that he was “only a casualty of war,” of the silly underground adventure, of the aping of the Russian Bolsheviki, and the idea of placing the movement in the hands of that insufferable egoist, Zinoviev.

Now that Gene Debs is gone, I feel that I can tell the inside history of the Terre Haute meeting in December 1921. The performance of those who, as Debs himself told us, never lifted a hand to get him out of prison, is revolting, now that he is gone. Nothing of decency and respect is left to those guilty of this wretched conduct. They have earned oblivion and they will get what they have earned.

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