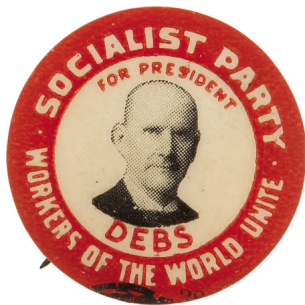


New Eugene Debs Film Does the Socialist Proud

Category: Left Politics, Socialism

written by Jason Schulman | May 8, 2018



A charismatic and militant labor leader, five-time Socialist Party presidential candidate, class-war prisoner jailed by the ostensibly liberal Woodrow Wilson administration for opposing U.S entry into World War I and a fiery, moral force in a corrupted era — Eugene Victor Debs was among the greatest orators this nation ever produced, yet no recording of his voice survives. And what a speaker he was! John Swinton, the late 19th century New York labor writer who as a young man heard Lincoln speak, likened Debs to Lincoln not just in intellect but in character. And unlike Lincoln, Debs could speak cogently to crowds for hours without notes.

Even foreign-language speakers were won over, with many testifying that Debs' mannerisms alone were magnetic, his fist smacking his palm as he offered such injunctions as "Progress is born out of agitation. It is agitation or stagnation."

To know Debs and his impact on American working-class politics as it emerged to confront the mammon of industrial and finance capital, we are ably served by his voluminous writings and by a series of fine, highly readable biographies by such writers as Ray Ginger, Nick Salvatore and Ernest Freeberg, the latter author focusing on Debs' later years as "democracy's prisoner." Add to those a plethora of histories of the old Socialist Party. Ira Kipnis's *The American Socialist Movement: 1897-1912* is likely the best, though it ends prematurely with a massive vote for Debs in the presidential race and party membership peaking at 118,000 — all before the government's full-bore assault on the left and Debs' jailing.

Fortunately two strong movies are also available that help underscore Debs' impact, including a 1979 documentary by Bernie Sanders and a new feature: *American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs*, by filmmaker Yale Strom, currently artist-in-residence and professor in the Jewish Studies Program at San Diego State University, and narrated by actor Amy Madigan. Debs' legacy is especially well served by the new production, which takes advantage not only of scholarly accounts of Debs' life and American socialist movement he rose out of but judiciously utilized the extensive Debs archives at Michigan State University-Lansing, the Debs Foundation collection in Terra Haute, Indiana and others.

So Who was Debs?

Born in 1855 and named by his immigrant parents after the French novelists Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo, Debs was slow to embrace radical politics in his hometown of Terra Haute, where the capitalists were still of the small, local variety and social mobility was not impossible for working

people. The metastasizing of monopoly capital in the area through the intrusion and consolidation of finance and industry would come soon enough. The future socialist even married a rich man's daughter and was a Democratic state office holder, if briefly.

The film makes clear that Debs, a strong railroad worker-unionist, didn't start out as a socialist; that transposition came after the Democratic administration of Grover Cleveland broke the American Railway Union strike under the mendacious claim that strikers were sabotaging mail delivery. Debs, it's president, went into prison a militant trade unionist and, courtesy of the federal evisceration of his union and a prison reading of Marx's *Capital*, came out six months later a committed revolutionary, though of a discernible American type. He would, for example, define socialism as "Christianity in action." For Debs' religiously inclined listeners, greed and the pursuit of personal wealth were presented as sin, the riches of capitalists balefully gained.

That appeal to traditional religion as a bulwark of cooperation — the essence of socialism — sparked interest in Debs' "Red Special" whistle-stop electoral campaign in areas such as Oklahoma, where, the film argues, small-farmer militancy combined with ingrained Evangelical Christianity. The strategy was less successful in the South, where we can intuit that racial division was a prime factor mitigating unified class action.

But whether addressing farmers, workers or urban intellectuals at such venues as New York's Cooper Union, Debs was in his element.

It was the Socialist Party's opposition to World War I that led to its undoing and to a five-year prison sentence for Debs. His crime: violating a Sedition Act provision against urging young men to dodge the draft.

On July 16, 1918, a year after the act's passage, Debs was in Canton, Ohio to address the Ohio Socialist Party's state convention and visit comrades jailed for speaking out against the war. He knew he was at risk of arrest himself. "I must be exceedingly careful," he told the convention delegates, "prudent as to what I say. I may not be able to say all I think, but I am not going to say anything that I do not think. I would rather a thousand times be a free soul in prison than to be a sycophant and coward in the streets. They may put those boys in jail — and some of the rest of us in jail — but they cannot put the Socialist movement in jail."

True to form, government stenographers in the crowd noted his comments selectively. Prison followed, based on the alleged danger that his remarks, those of a known "agitator," posed to troop recruitment — this just months before the Treaty of Versailles was signed.

A red scare followed the war. Foreign radicals were rounded up and deported. Native-born leftists of any stripe were imprisoned.

Running for president on the Socialist ticket in 1920 while incarcerated, Debs garnered just under 1 million votes. Even as late as 1921, on the eve of his leaving office, Wilson still refused to pardon Debs. It was the GOP's Harding who granted Debs and 23 others a Christmas commutation.

The Irony of a Humble Man Lionized

It seems odd that a movement valorizing collective action and the social context of everyday life over invidious egotism and careerist grasping would also need to anoint leaders and elevate heroes. As Debs himself put it 1906 to an audience of workers in Detroit: "I would not be a Moses to lead you into the Promised Land, because if I could lead you into it, someone else could lead you out of it. You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition."

Even allowing for the early glint of its religious trappings, his was an American variant of Marx's insistence on working-class self-activity, that the emancipation of working people was not the provenance of elites no matter how well-intentioned but a task largely of the workers alone. Debs' often quoted statement to his trial judge at his conviction for violating the Sedition Act makes much the same point.

"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 on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal class I am of it; while there is a soul in prison I am not free."

Debs' heroes were not great men and women but ordinary people who showed uncommon bravery and solidarity with one another.

A story Debs told, though not included in the film, concerns a black-balled former railroad worker in desperate straits who proudly tells Debs that he never scabbed, knowing the principled stance meant exorcism from a decent-paying job. "If I'd have been like some of them, I'd had a passenger train years ago and been saved lots of grief," he tells Debs. "But I'd rather be a broken-down old umbrella fixer without a friend than to be a scab and worth a million.... And when I cross the big divide, I can walk up to the bar of judgment and look God in the face without a flicker."

Debs' cited the man as the epitome of working-class solidarity.

"There was something peculiarly grand about the scarred old veteran of the industrial battlefield," Debs wrote in 1913. "His shabbiness was all on the outside, and he seemed transfigured to me and clad in garments of glory. He loomed before me like a forest monarch the tempests had riven and denuded of its foliage but could not lay low. He had kept the faith and had never scabbed."

Neither did Debs. See the film.

American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs is scheduled to be shown in Hudson, NY (April 26-May 13); Los Angeles and Pasadena, (May 4-10); San Diego (May 11-16), Washington, D.C., (May 22), and the Cleveland Museum of Art (June 12-15.)

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