
A Reply to Debs

by Ernest Untermann

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A letter from Comrade Debs in the July issue of the *International Socialist Review*, assailing the majority of the Committee on Immigration and its report to the national convention of the Socialist Party [National Congress, Chicago, May 15-21, 1910], has been brought to my notice but recently.

Comrade Debs calls our report “unsocialistic, reactionary, and in truth outrageous.” He claims that “the plea that certain races are to be excluded because of tactical expediency would be entirely consistent in a bourgeois convention of self-seekers.” He feels that he would take his stand “upon this vital proposition” against the world and no “specious argument of subtle and sophisticated defenders of the Civic Federation unionism, who do not hesitate to sacrifice principles for numbers and jeopardize ultimate success for immediate gain” could move him to turn his back upon the oppressed, etc., etc.

Outside of such unwarranted assertions and insinuations, the letter of Comrade Debs contains nothing and winds up with an invitation to some unnamed parties to “desert” because “we” (Debs and his fellow sentimentalists) refuse to shut the international door in the faces of their own brethren, etc., etc., in the approved oratorical style.

Comrade Debs insinuates that those who offered the majority report “have no proper place in the socialist movement while they entertain such aristocratic notions of their own assured superiority.”

And this is the whole argument: A mass of unsupported and unwarranted assumptions and personal flings, which show that he did not take the trouble to read the arguments made by the

majority in support of their report, but that he at once jumped to wild conclusions as soon as he had finished his hasty perusal of the majority report.

It seems to me that this letter of Comrade Debs is itself a pretty fair illustration of his "aristocratic notion of his own superiority." I am compelled to reply that he is not the sole judge of what is "socialistic, reactionary, and outrageous," and that the majority of the committee emphatically repudiate the charge of having acted contrary to the fundamental principles of Socialism, or of having toadied to the reactionary element in the "Civic Federation unionism."

Our report contained a number of very definite propositions. If Comrade Debs wishes to argue against our report, it is his business to refute these specific points. Mere invective and sentimental oratory will not refute facts. And it is the facts upon which we base our report that Comrade Debs has not faced.

Among the definite points made by our report are the following:

1. That international solidarity can be promoted without having the workers of all nations and all races come to America. If that is so, the policy of exclusion cannot be said to be necessarily in conflict with the principle of international solidarity.

2. That the development of capitalism in Europe, Asia, and America is so far apart in the matter of time that the European immigrants, even from the most backward parts of that continent, are easily assimilable in America in the course of a few generations, whereas the immigrants from Asia are not, as more than 50 years of experience have shown.

3. The presence of the negroes in the Southern states has already burdened us with a race problem, which makes the agitation for Socialism and the effective organization of the Socialist Party in the Southern states very difficult, so long as the race feeling between whites and negroes is a fact. The immigration of large masses of Orientals intensifies this race problem and to that extent increases the difficulties of organization for bonafide unions and for the Socialist Party.

4. Whenever an issue between capitalists and laborers arises, the presence of different races invariably leads to a race issue between the workers instead of to a class issue between the workers regardless of race on one side and capitalists on the other. This overshadowing of the class struggle by a race feeling leads to reactionary results, retards the progress toward Socialism, and helps the capitalist class.

5. The great capitalists are the principle beneficiaries of Oriental immigration, and they use it consciously as a weapon against the labor unions and against the Socialist Party. By advocating a repeal of the exclusion laws and a free immigration of Orientals, the Socialist Party would be assisting the capitalists and raising its own enemies to power.

6. the exclusion of these races gives the revolutionary workers a tactical advantage and enables them so much better to drive the capitalists from power and bring about real international solidarity of the workers.

7. Any argument which ignores the difference in the environment of European and Asiatic immigrants, any insinuation that we exclude these Asiatics ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR RACE, misses the main point of the position of the majority report.

In my capacity as chairman of the old and new Committee on Immigration, I shall be much obliged to Comrade Debs for any light which he may be able to shed on the truth or untruth of these propositions. I have a right to expect more than mere invective and oratory from Comrade Debs on this matter, and I await his arguments.

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Edited by Tim Davenport

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