
Debs on the Socialist Movement

by Elias Tobenkin

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“Anything the matter with the Socialist movement?”

In substance this was the question put to Eugene V. Debs the other day as he was packing his suitcase preliminary to leaving Newark, NJ, for the state of Connecticut, where he had some speaking engagements to fill.

“It is a pleasure,” Debs said, “to watch the enthusiasm with which the Socialists everywhere are working. Of course, differences arise. But there is no use flying off the handle on account of these differences. They can be, and generally are, thrashed out to the advantage of the Socialist movement.

“And it is well that there is harmony in the movement. There is nothing so hurtful to the Socialist Party as squabbles over little, insignificant things. The uninitiated, who is not familiar with the Socialist mind, may easily become discouraged at seeing these squabbles and mistake them for vital disagreements, and then turn away from the Socialist movement, using the old argument that the Socialists do not agree among themselves.”

Debs was speaking, of course, of the Socialist movement in the United States. He was not speaking of a single city or of a single Socialist local. There may be more than one Socialist local where a few individual Socialists see nothing but ruin and perdition ahead for the Socialist movement if this and not that policy or method is followed.

“What about the labor movement?” Debs was asked. The labor movement is a favorite with Debs, and he talked freely. He said:

“Socialists must advocate militant unionism, industrial unionism. It is a mistake to fondle trade unionism in the hope of swinging it toward radicalism at some later time. We must consistently advocate industrial unionism, revolutionary unionism.

“But there is one thing that we have to guard against in the advocacy of industrial unionism. We must not allow ourselves to be influenced by those advocates of industrial unionism who scoff at political action. We of course at this moment designate the proper form, program, and conduct of the industrial union. But it is not necessary. What is essential now is to preach the theory of industrial, of revolutionary unionism, and have the theory take root in the minds of the

workers. As to the methods which industrial unionism will pursue, we can trust that to the future. The question as to what national body a newly formed industrial union should join will solve itself as soon as the principles of revolutionary unionism have percolated through the minds of the workers, as soon as they are ready to organize along industrial lines.”

While not mentioning the Industrial Workers of the World by name, it was easily seen that Debs did not approve of the advocacies of that organization for the reason, he thought, that its leaders are very frequently opposed to political action and neglect the political phase of the class struggle.

In speaking about the Socialist press Debs became intimate and spoke about the *Appeal to Reason* in a fond manner. *The Appeal*, he said, has more than half a million circulation now, and what is more, it has harmony and unity in its office.

“That does not mean,” Debs said, “that differences as to policy and tactics do not arise in the *Appeal* office. Differences are bound to arise and should arise. They make for progress. But they should be settled in the appropriate manner. In the *Appeal* office we have a way of tackling difficulties and keeping at them until they are thrashed out to the satisfaction of all concerned. We just get together and reason and reason, and then reason some more, until all are satisfied, until all feel that the right course is being taken.

“This amicable adjustment of difficulties should be adopted whenever possible. The Socialist Party needs all the good, able men it has. And to let a man withdraw from active work on account of some difference that could be settled easily is not a wise course to pursue.”

Referring to the pardon of Fred Warren, the editor of the *Appeal to Reason*, Debs said that the pardon by President Taft was so clumsily and undiplomatically handled that it had the reverse of the desired effect so far as the government was concerned. President Taft plainly could not conceal his fear of the Socialist movement. The utterance he gave to his disappointment at not being able to risk the imprisonment of Warren betrayed this fear of the government.

On Victor Berger and his activity in Congress Debs looked fondly.

“Berger,” he said, “is in the most trying position in a capitalist Congress. But he is doing fine. His propaganda work in Congress is of immense value. It helps fix the Socialist Party in the minds of the capitalist representatives in its true position. Berger has succeeded in impressing upon Congress that Socialism is the greatest factor in our national life today.”

As a veteran Socialist journalist Debs was asked his views of the Socialist press. And curious enough, while many a Socialist is ready to

throw a stone at the Socialist newspapers, Debs had nothing but words of praise for them. the praise of the Socialist press on the part of Debs comes through his familiarity with the newspaper and publishing business. When to publish a daily newspaper in a metropolis is a question of a million dollars, the Socialist newspaper, backed by the dimes and quarters of poor workingmen, are doing well, Debs thought extremely well.

“I read *The Call*,” he said, “and I think it of inestimable value to the working class, to the Socialist movement.”

The *Chicago Daily Socialist*, Debs said, has been going through a severe crisis almost from the day of its birth, but it is pulling up and will win its struggle for existence.

The interest in Socialism on the part of the young generation was one of the things that Debs frequently recurred to. He had no end of praise for Elizabeth, NJ, with its young Socialists, who are keeping tab on the capitalist administration in their town, as well as of the United States government at large, and are carrying on an agitation in plain, concrete terms by pointing out concrete cases of graft and corruption and misuse and folly of capitalism.

Debs spoke with enthusiasm about all the states he had visited. The Socialist movement is everywhere taking hold in great shape, he said. But nowhere is it as strong as in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has at all times been a center of the bitterest class conflict. Poverty and ignorance made the state an Eden for financiers like Carnegie, Schwab, Baer, and Frick. Today things have changed. The sentiment has swung around. The people in Pennsylvania are awake and the Socialist Party will reap wonderful results there in the elections this fall.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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