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# 1919 May Day Speech.

by Eugene V. Debs

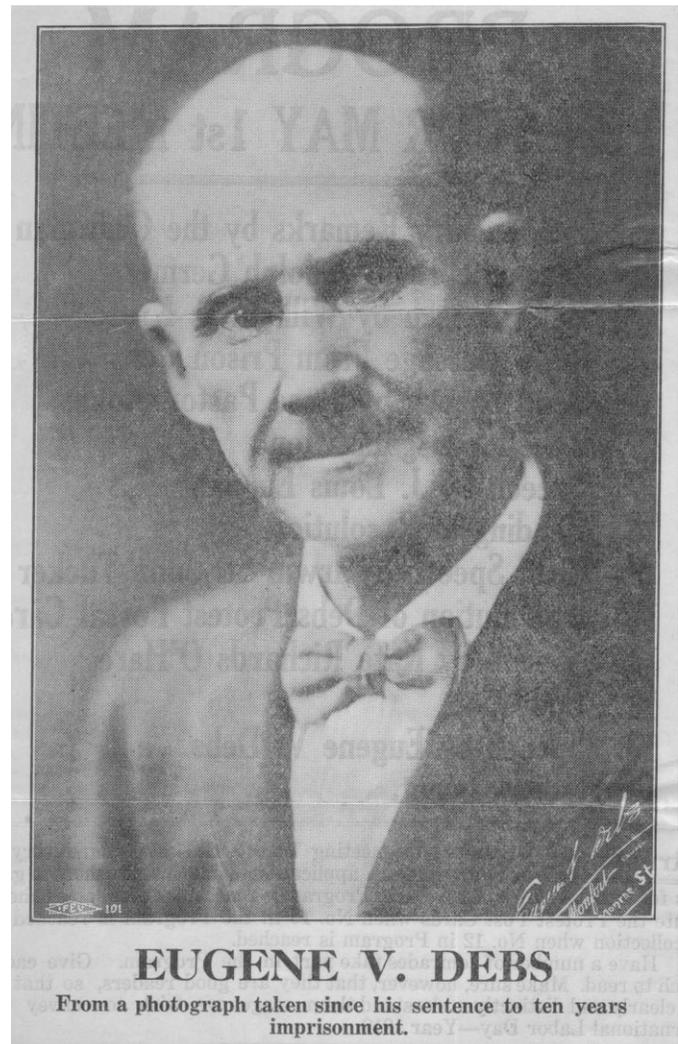
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*Eugene V. Debs was indicted for a speech made by him at the state picnic of the Socialist Party of Ohio. He had sentenced to ten years imprisonment at the Moundsville, West Virginia Penitentiary by Judge Westenhaver. A press dispatch informs us that the clerk of the United States Supreme Court will issue the mandate calling for Debs' imprisonment about April 15th and that this will mean that Debs will begin his prison sentence upon International Labor Day, May 1st, 1919.*

On this May Day, in this wonderful year of 1919, the doors of a Federal prison yawn wide open for me and for my comrades, who have stood true to the cause of Socialism during the bloody holocaust of the war. But what says the song of my comrade and fellow comrade Rose Pastor Stokes?

“Our prison doorway is the gate  
Whereby the new day enters;  
Each tyranny but serves to make  
New rebels of dissenters.”

Jail has no terrors for me. I have been in jail before. Twenty-four years ago I was sentenced to six months in prison for the crime of contempt of court, because I was using “persuasion” to further the organization of the railroad employees. Twenty-four years ago! And now we find the rail-



road employees of the whole country, united in four great Brotherhoods, first forcing a universal eight-hour day from the government by the threat of a general strike, and then calmly proposing to take over and run all the railroads themselves, be-

cause the government has failed and private ownership has failed to conduct them efficiently and well.

It took twenty-four years to bring them to this stage of self-confidence and solidarity. But now things are moving with such wonderful rapidity that twenty-four hours often seems sufficient to bring about a new revolution. The hour of the people draws near. And if my imprisonment can aid in any way to bring nearer the striking of that hour in this land then I welcome imprisonment, I glory in it, I rejoice in it. A thousand — ten thousand times I would rather spend my remaining days under lock and key than to betray or retard this great cause.

So far as I am concerned it does not matter much. The margin is narrow, the years are few, between now and the sunset. My only care, so far as I am concerned, is to preserve to the last the integrity of my own soul, and my loyalty to the only cause that is worth living for, fighting for, dying for.

And in what a glorious company do we stand, who are privileged to bear for you the hate of the foes of life and honor. Twenty centuries ago the Man of Galilee spoke to the common people, and they heard him gladly. He was brought before the Scribes and the Pharisees, and the priests and the doctors and the lawyers and the judges. They said, "He is preaching dangerous doctrines. He is a Bolshevik!" They hung him on a cross near Jerusalem as a warning to the centuries. But ever since that time the cross on which he was hung has been the emblem for which tens of thousands have gone gladly to their death.

And ever since men and women of moral courage have dared to speak the truth as they saw the truth; they have been maligned and persecuted, they have been stoned and burned at the stake, their ashes have been scattered to the four winds. But these are remembered, and they who wrought their deaths are buried in the obloquy of forgetfulness and of shame. Remember that George

Washington was denounced as an unprincipled scoundrel; Jefferson was said to be a violent fanatic; Samuel Adams a dangerous character; Patrick Henry was called an incendiary. But the cause which they championed triumphed, and their names today are revered.

A little later there was a group of abolitionists who fought against the institution of slavery, which had existed in this country for 250 years. Abolitionism was the Bolshevism of that day, for it struck at the root of an evil thing, instead of compromising with it, on the ground that "the time is not ripe." Those men were ridiculed, denounced, imprisoned, and killed; but today they are honored, while their persecutors are forgotten and their very memories reviled.

And shall we fear or be ashamed to join such company? You and I, comrades, who are reviled and hated for the cause, are richer than any millionaire. How poor is Rockefeller! Millions of dollars, but not a comrade! But as for us, we love humanity; our good depends upon the good of all humanity.

And now the people of all the nations of the world are beginning to believe this thing, to find it true; and the earth is beginning to shake. The common man is beginning to think. That is Bolshevism! That is the beginning of the end of capitalism — and the end of the beginning of Socialism. And because we bid the people to think, they are putting us in jail. Can they stop thought by this means? Can a thought be imprisoned? Remember what the Scripture says; that Paul was put in prison, but there came an earthquake shortly after, and the prison doors were opened. People began to think, and the walls of the Bastille were torn down. Can prison doors stop thought? If the Bastille fell, will Leavenworth, will Atlanta, will the Moundsville prison stand forever?

I am going to speak to you as a socialist, as a revolutionist, as a Bolshevik. What is this thing that the whole world is talking about? What is it that the ruling class power is denouncing, upon

which they are pouring a flood of malicious lies — what is it? It is the rise of the workers, of the common men, the peasants, the soldiers — who for the first time in history are saying unitedly, “We have made what there is, we produce wealth; now we will take what we have produced for it is ours.” Do you remember what the Psalmist says — “The sea is his, for he made it.” So the worker is beginning to say “All wealth is mine, for I made it.” And for the first time since ages began, he stands erect, his bowed head lifted; in his grim strength he begins to shake off his manacles, to straighten himself in the sunlight. He opens his eyes, he begins to see for the first time. He asks: “Why may I press my rags closer to my body, while I may not touch the costly robes my own hands have produced?” — “Why must I walk in alleys, while I am forbidden to enter the great palaces which my hands have built? Why must I set the table for all the banquets of the world, when I am forbidden to eat of the crumbs which fall from the rich man’s table?”

And to stop him from thinking thus, they are going to put me and my comrades in jail. With every drop of my blood I defy their law, and I despise them. I am appealing to you, to the common people; I care nothing about the Supreme Court, corporation lawyers every one of them. The Supreme Court is not the court of last resort; the people are.

Sixty years ago the Supreme Court decided that a black man was not human; that he had no rights which his master was bound to respect. By that decision they imagined that they had made chattel slavery secure for all time. But Lincoln was elected President after a campaign in which he poured scorn upon that Supreme Court’s decision. Within five years the Dred Scott decision was swept from the land with a torrent of blood. How great a cost! How terrible the price we paid!

Like Wendell Phillips, I say to you, “When they pass that kind of law, trample it under your feet.” It is not a law, it is an act of violence. Such

is the Espionage Law. Why, even the Supreme Court dared not pronounce that law constitutional. They evaded the issue. They dared not put that decision upon record. And why not? Read the law, and read the Constitution, and you will see. The amendment to the Espionage Law makes it a crime to criticize crime; it rivets a fetter upon your lips, it binds a gag tight in your mouth. It destroys what was left of democracy in this land. Do I — can I — respect a law that destroys all liberty, that places this country where Russia was under the Tsar? No! I despise it, and so does every other man or woman with decent blood in their veins and the light of honesty in their eyes.

For what does that law tell you? It is a crime to criticize any official of the government. But what did the government itself say, in the Federal Industrial Relations Commission report? What did it say? Why, this: “A government which can be maintained only through the suppression of criticism ought not to be maintained.” Remember what the Scripture says again, “They love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.” Why this muzzling of criticism? What are they afraid of? We were forbidden to criticize war, and now we are forbidden to criticize peace. For peace is often as terrible as war. Who is it that made war? The ruling class. You have never made war. You have no cause for war. You pay all the bills, shed all the blood, make all the sacrifices; they receive all the gains. You must not say a word. Have your limbs shot off, your eyes gouged out, your lungs gassed, come back in fragments, and look for a job so that you can make enough money to pay the taxes which will meet the expenses of the war. But — you must say nothing about the causes of the war, and the peace which is to follow the war will be made by your masters, and you must say nothing about that either. The Attorney General [A. Mitchell Palmer] has just announced that one of his first jobs will be to secure the passage of an extension of the Espionage Law which will prevent all lawless and seditious agitation; by which

he evidently means that labor must not ask for a realization of the promises that were made to it, or labor will be punished for treason.

Who is it that is making the terms of peace? Is it not strange that the great common people who shed their blood, who fought the war, who made all the sacrifices — is it not strange that they should have no voice in the making of the terms of peace? The working class form the victims of all the wars of all the ages. Across all the centuries I can see them. In ancient Rome they were slaughtered for the amusement of patrician loungers on the benches of the Coliseum; through all the Middle Ages the serfs were killed for the profit and glory of the knights. And today, you who were dragged and hurled into the war, you who shed your blood like water, you who suffered agony that no human mind can imagine nor tongue describe — you have no voice in the Peace Conference that is settling the destinies of the world; no voice — except the voice of Gompers. And that is not the voice of labor.

No voice, did I say? Yes, you have one — but it is not speaking in Paris. There where the elder statesmen gather, where the four old men are parcelling out the world among them, the voice is the voice of capital. They are planning a League of Nations there as the last desperate stand of Capitalism. It is the final expedient of the exploiting classes, the commercial and economic big thieves to retain their supremacy. But even while they plan, their eyes are not on their work, and their ears do not listen to what they themselves are saying. No, for out of Russia there comes a Voice, and out of Russia there shines a Light, which claims their fearful attention even while they pretend to be drafting a constitution for the world. It is no longer Wilson, it is Lenin who dominates the Peace Conference. They have listened to Wilson's words, and were captivated for a while by the exquisite rhetoric which he exudes; but beneath this shining fabric of words they found no substance of truth. When Lenin spoke, it was to tell the truth, and

the working class of every nation in the world responded to his utterance with a mighty shout. The Voice of Labor sounds at Paris as an echo from the mighty utterance of Nikolai Lenin; and the whole world hearkens when he speaks.

There is much talk now about recognizing Russia. Raymond Robins is demanding that the United States recognize Russia. There are two sides to that question. Suppose Russia should refuse to recognize us? Suppose Russia should say, "We will buy your supplies because we need them, and you will take our gold because you want it, but we, Soviet Russia, will not recognize the United States until from your flag is wiped the foul blot of Political Persecution; until the United States of America becomes a civilized nation by releasing all political and industrial prisoners. Then, and not till then, will sovereign Soviet Russia acknowledge that the United States is fit to be our comrade."

Great movements are shaking the foundations of all the countries of the world. In England the Triple Alliance of Railroad Men, Miners, and Transport Workers are quietly planning to overthrow Lloyd George and establish a Labour man as Prime Minister, with all the dictatorial powers which Lloyd George now possesses, for the nationalization of all mines and railroads and socially necessary industries. In Germany, the Ebert and Scheidemann Socialists are already tottering to their fall; in France, in Italy, Labor is uniting its strength for the establishment of Soviet republics. Hungary has done so; the spirit of Kossuth finds its answer in the spirit of Bela Kun. All of Central Europe plans to follow.

In every previous revolution it has been said, "The working class is not ready." And so in Russia Kerensky tried to tell the working class that it was not ready. But Lenin and Trotsky said, "If you do not begin your will never learn," and so they began, and in the months since the dictatorship of labor was established they have made more progress and did more in constructive work than all the

capitalist governments have ever dared to do. They have refused to compromise. They have established an absolute qualification for citizenship, a qualification of service. They have said, "No voice in the government without useful labor." And for that they have been denounced and vilified with every infamous lie that the foul imagination of a capitalist tool could invent. But the working class of the world is not swallowing these lies; they are preparing to follow their example.

On this May Day let us stand upright and be counted. We need to be united. We need to get together. We need to feel the common touch. The world will always be against us if we are not for ourselves. You who produce everything, you who really create, you who are conserving civilization — how can you endure to think that you are the bottom class, the lower order? When you go for a job to the master class you work upon conditions which they prescribe. You depend upon them for tools, you work for their benefit.

But now — look into the eyes of your

brother and see the new light that is shining there. We have endured, we have been oppressed, we have suffered; now let us unite and stand together against capitalism. Let us unite industrially. Let us establish the service qualification for industry. What they are calling "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" simply means "no work, no vote." Unless one serves society he cannot enjoy the protection and comfort of society. Let us as workingmen establish the absolute rule that since Labor creates all wealth, all good things of right belong to those whose labor has produced them.

The doors of the prison may clang shut upon our bodies, but they cannot imprison our souls. A few of us may fall, a few of us may die, but the great movement goes gloriously on. It cannot be long now before it shall triumph. Our emancipation, the emancipation from the power of the ruling class, cannot long now be delayed.

On, comrades, with renewed resolution, with courage mounting ever higher. We are right, and the right will win.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

*Photo of Debs here was published as a full page image on page 2 of the pamphlet.*

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