
Debs to the Socialist Party.

by William M. Fiegenbaum

Published in *The Socialist World* [Chicago], v. 1, no. 4 (Oct. 15, 1920), pp. 16-18.

(Atlanta, Ga., October 7th.) — “I am not going to die on your hands. There’s too much to live for and work for now. I am going to find it hard to stay in these walls for the next four weeks. I want to get out and go on an organizing tour. I am anxious — oh, so anxious! — to make the fight for Socialism. And I appeal with all my heart to every man and woman who has a Socialist tongue in his head to get out and fight.”

With these words by Eugene Victor Debs, the most remarkable political conference in American history came to a close.

The National Campaign Committee of the Socialist Party had come to Atlanta to meet with the Presidential candidate; the comrades who had banded themselves to work for liberty and industrial freedom were compelled to meet within granite walls, behind steel bars, with armed men pacing up and down in front of the windows.

Amnesty for Debs.

The significance of the scene was manifest to everyone. And as a part of the order of business, Committeeman George E. Roewer, Jr., of Boston, reported upon his interview with Attorney General Palmer on September 14th [1920], when the demand for general amnesty was made. It seemed to be the general opinion that a single word of regret, of repentance, from Debs would cause the iron doors to swing wide open.

And Debs said, “It is not we who are seeking pardon. It is the administration. We are confined, but they are our prisoners. They are coming to us for a pardon. They are waiting for us to relent. WELL, WE CAN OUTWAIT THEM!”

And that seemed to be the interest that Debs has in a possible release, if the release must come as

the result of “clemency,” rather than as the recognition of the right of anyone, under all circumstances, to exercise the right of free speech.

The committee meeting took up various campaign matters and planned out a fiercely aggressive campaign for the remainder of the month of October [1920].

It was a historic event; and even the guards and “trusties” seemed to realize it. A white-clad “lifer,” who has charge of the Warden’s office, walked on his tip-toes, as if fearing to disturb the deliberations of the committee. Eugene V. Debs, long, lean, tanned, clad in blue denim, with canvas “sneakers” on his feet, sat with this comrades, his hand cupped to his ear so that he might miss nothing of what was said, and from time to time, taking an interested leading part in the committee’s deliberations.

It was strange to watch the scene. And the most eagerly alert one there was Eugene V. Debs. Nothing was too minute a point for him to discuss. It was his party, his comrades, his Cause — and every detail of the work of that committee was of breathless interest to him.

“We are going to make the Socialist Party the biggest thing politically in the United States,” said Debs. “In the days when I was new in the Socialist movement, I used to be interested in a big vote, but later, I felt that it didn’t matter much. This year, however, is different. This year, a big vote for our ticket will make us what we should be. We should use every legitimate means to get the biggest possible vote for Socialism, and then go out and organize. If I am out next winter, I am going on an organizing tour to build up the locals. That is what is needed more than anything else.”

At another time, Debs laughed, “Did you notice that both Cox’s and Harding’s trains were ditched?”

Everything gets rotten at the approach of the old parties — even the rails spread. That ditching is significant of the time when the working people will ditch both old parties for all time.”

“Just imagine,” he said, “the party that stands for freedom, compelled to issue its appeal to the American people from behind prison walls! Has there ever been anything like it in American history before? Will there ever be anything like it in American history again? We must impress it upon the people that this scene is symbolic of what has befallen this country.”

The Federated Press Ouster.

The standard bearer was particularly indignant at the ejection of Paul Hanna and Laurence Todd, representatives of the Federated Press, from the office of Secretary of State Colby. Hanna had criticized the methods of the State Department in giving out whatever it suited them to call news, in a letter addressed to an underling of the department, and at his request. As a result of writing that letter, Hanna and Todd are forever barred from the public conferences, at which the “news” is given out.

Debs said with respect that, “Can you imagine anything more outrageous? The administration thus throttles all attempts to get the news on highly important matters before the working people. All news must be filtered through the capitalist press before it gets out — only then can the people read it. And when Paul Hanna, representing the only working class news-gathering agency in America, exposes the crookedness of the State Department’s methods, he is ejected, kicked out. Labor has no place in Washington now. Colby’s boot is stronger than Hanna’s right. How I’d like to be on the platform just once, with Colby as my text!”

Appeal to Women Voters.

Debs has written an appeal for the party to the

newly enfranchised voters to vote for the party that has always stood for woman suffrage. “When Cox and Harding were in knickerbockers, we were fighting for the suffrage for women. Forty-one years ago I got Susan B. Anthony a hearing in Terre Haute, when the ‘respectable’ women sought to drive ‘that creature’ out of the city. I haven’t made a speech in 40 years in which I have failed to make the demand for political rights for women.

“We fought for it when it was unpopular, when it meant outrageous persecution. We were for it with every breath that we have ever drawn. Are the old parties, who were hostile or indifferent, when we were fighting for it, going to scoop off the cream? Now that you have the ballot, I would ask of the women, what are you going to do with it? Are you going to use it to strike down the people who have been fighting for all these years to give it to you? Are you going to keep the people enslaved who fought to give you the vote?

“The first suffrage convention was held 72 years ago; from that day to this, either the Republican or the Democratic Party has been in power. There wasn’t a day that they couldn’t have granted suffrage if they had wanted to. But they didn’t.”

The committeemen were so impressed with Debs’ eloquent demand for a special leaflet appealing to women voters that he was promptly ordered to write down his demand, and the party will make it into an article and a leaflet.

(The Debs leaflet on suffrage has already appeared, and is being widely distributed.)

With Debs and the Committee in all the meetings was Joseph M. Coldwell, old time New England Socialist, now a “political,” and Debs’ constant companion. Formerly a Communist, Coldwell says that “there is not a single point on which Gene and I disagree.”†

And Debs said, “Joe and I have many meetings here. I back Joe into a corner, and make speeches to him, and he backs me into a corner and makes speeches

†-Joseph M. Coldwell was a leader of the 1913 Draper Textile Machine Co. strike in Hopedale, MA. He was a delegate to the 1917 and 1919 Emergency Conventions of the Socialist Party, bolting the 1919 gathering to help found the Communist Labor Party. Coldwell was arrested in January 1918 for alleged violation of the so-called Espionage Law in a speech in Providence. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison on July 6, 1918 but remained free pending appeal. Finally imprisoned after the founding of the CLP in September 1919, Coldwell served 26 months behind bars at Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, gaining his release circa June 1922. Thereafter, Coldwell spoke on tour under the auspices of the Workers Party of America, of which he was a member. Coldwell eventually rejoined the Socialist Party and was the party’s candidate for Governor of Rhode Island in 1934 and for US Senate in 1936.

to me. And those meetings have eloquent orators and highly appreciative audiences. And as a result of those meetings I can inform you comrades that we are going to sweep this penitentiary. The other parties won't have a look-in."

The Moscow International.

The matter of the Party's relations to the Moscow International came up in three of the sessions with the candidate.

The [National Executive] Committee had voted in view of the closeness of the vote on affiliation with reservations, the matter be dropped of forming any affiliations with European parties agreeing with our own. A section of the party, however, reported a demand for instant affiliation without reservations, and on the terms laid down by Moscow.

"Did you read," said Debs, "the terms of affiliation made up by the Second Congress of the International [July 19-Aug. 7, 1920], and issued to the parties of the world by Gregory Zinoviev?"

They were the terms drawn up in reply to the applications for affiliation by the Socialist Parties of the United States, of Italy, and of other countries. They required the instant change of the party's name and policy, the inauguration of "illegal" work, preparation for armed insurrection, and expulsion of certain "traitors." The American "traitor" whose expulsion was required as a condition of affiliation is Morris Hillquit.

"How can you," said Debs, "commit the party unreservedly to something that doesn't exist? The Moscow International is in a state of gestation. It hasn't taken form. *If you were to commit the party in America to the International program laid down by Lenin, you would kill the party.*

"The angry wrangling over the Moscow program is disrupting parties everywhere. What we need before everything else is a party to affiliate somewhere. We must not enter a policy that means disruption.

"The Moscow program would commit us to a policy of armed insurrection. The Moscow comrades have arrogated to themselves the right to dictate the

very terms, the tactics, the conditions of our work here. It is outrageous, autocratic, ridiculous. The Moscow International is in an experimental stage, and yet it ventures to assert that it has found the method of settling all problems of all nations.

"Our job is now to make our campaign a success. The rest will take care of itself."

The Party's Answer.

As a result of the discussion, the committee drew up a resolution, which was concurred in in every detail by Comrade Debs. The resolution recited the policy of the party from the outbreak of the war; the resolution, virtually cutting loose from the Second International in 1919; the Majority and Minority programs of 1919; the reservations appended to the application of the party for affiliation in 1920 with the Moscow International, and the majority resolution, adopted at the New York Convention, 1920, calling for specific reservations to affiliation, reserving the right of the party to determine its own tactics, and declining to be bound by special formulas, such as "the dictatorship of the proletariat through the form of soviets;" the fact that the majority resolution declares that the party will await further [conditions?] imposed by Moscow. Therefore, the resolution declares that the party will await further developments before taking further action in the international situation. In agreeing to the resolution, Debs said, "Moscow wants us to change our name to 'Communist Party.' They require adherence to a Communist program. I am not a Communist; I am a Socialist. My party is not a Communist party; it is a Socialist party. We cannot go in."

The Final Message.

Debs' final message to the members of the committee was a warm and affectionate embrace, and a demand that they keep up the fight. "I do not see these prison walls," he said, "they do not exist for me. I am with the comrades, and I am marching with them to victory."

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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