Prisoner No. 9653! —
Eugene Debs Talks to Norman Hapgood

by Norman Hapgood

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Norman Hapgood, famous editor, author, and critic, has interviewed for the Daily Star Eugene V. Debs, Socialist candidate for the Presidency, now a political prisoner, "Number 9653," in the Atlanta penitentiary.

Many interviews Norman Hapgood has had with men of public prominence over a long span of years. His talk with the imprisoned Debs bids fair to rank ass one of the most gripping in its context, most graphic in the style in which it is narrated.

As an editor of important periodicals, including ***Collier's*** *and* ***Harper's,*** *and as former US minister to Denmark, Mr. Hapgood developed his keen powers of analysis and study of political philosophy. As a biographer of the lives of great statesmen, his grasp of history and his love of Americanism is such that in his Debs interview there are important interpretations that will appeal to the hearts of Americans even though, like Mr. Hapgood himself, they do not assemble under the political banner upheld by the 65-year old philosopher-leader who is "Number 9653" in the Atlanta penitentiary. In the interview, Debs' abhorrence of violence to achieve his principles is clearly shown.*

Why have I just left a comfortable home, to spend 80 tiresome hours on a train, in order to talk 65 minutes with a man some of whose beliefs are not mine?

Because I believe in liberty. In 1920 not many people do. If many Americans did believe in liberty, Eugene Debs would not be in Atlanta penitentiary, and there would be one less blot on the history of our country.

Did you ever enter the strong gates of a prison? Has your mind ever pictured the sinking heart of a man who hears those heavy iron doors clank behind him? Wife and child, perhaps, are shut from him in the outer world. Honor and respect are out there. And, inside? The lost are there, the despairing, the destroyed. Leave hope behind, ye who enter. And yet it is not as bad as it was, some centuries ago. The harmonious and austere building at Atlanta is infinitely superior, in what happens inside of it, to the prisons of Lincoln's days. God knows it is bad enough.

Partly, it is bad because we in truth do not know what to do with certain types of dangerous depravity. Give us time, a century or two, and we may learn the alphabet of treating such aberration. Granted we are ignorant about crime — what about Prisoner 9653? Why is he in this place? Can we pretend that we do not know enough not to keep in prison a noble and famous man, 65 year old, with eyes like dawn and the smile of a radiant soul?

Not Leaders' Intentions to Nominate Debs.

Before I start my talk with Debs (he will wait — he has many weary weeks, months, years allotted to him by our law for waiting) I want to tell Attorney General Palmer why Debs was nominated this time for the Presidency. I say Mr. Palmer, because I am not much interested in his alibi about a general proclamation signed by the President, and the Attorney General's inability to pass on particular cases. I think I know that it is not the sick President who has <*illeg.*> been determining the policy of the Department of Justice. Well, Mr. Palmer, here is something that is not generally known: It was not the intention of the Socialist

leaders to nominate Debs this year., They had another man in view. The rank and file simply took it out of their hands. These masses had just one reason. Debs was their friend and Debs was in jail. That was enough for them. Perhaps the voice of the people was the voice of God.

Now I will ask Mr. Palmer to put with this fact one other. He has read it, but perhaps not recently. He may have been too busy. If he will look it up he will find one reason that the British, whatever they may do in Ireland or Asia, are a little shy about interfering with the rights of free-born Englishmen at home. All the strength and will of George the Third, then at the height of his power, was used to keep a citizen, John Wilkes, a journalist, like Debs, out of the House of Commons, and also to keep him in jail. All the powers of the House itself were used to keep the same undesirable citizen out of their midst. The fight lasted years. The rough workingmen of London elected Wilkes whenever there was an election, and when he was in jail they elected as his associate anybody he told them to. After many years of attempting to curb freedom of representation and freedom of the press, Wilkes took his seat, and the House of Commons has never forgotten.

Sweet and Barnes Might Profit Also.

Of course, Mr. Palmer is not the only person who might profit from this bit of history. [New York Assembly] Speaker Sweet and Bill Barnes might discuss it together as they reminisce about the recent Socialist election in New York and lay their plans for the future. The House of Representatives might think it over in connection with Victor Berger's strength in Milwaukee and try to guess how the citizens who are forbidden the right to select their representatives must feel, especially when they see Truman H. Newberry comfortably ensconced in his Senate seat.

But I am summoned and must stop this preaching and follow a prison attendant through the great door, but not far beyond it. I am not to see the cells this time, though I have seen them before in this same penitentiary, and I know that the warden is a good man, doing his best at a bitter job, taking an interest in his prison farm and in moral health. But to see Prisoner 9653 we go only so far as a reception room, and Eugene V. Debs, four times nominee of a great party for the Presidency, now No. 9653, sets forth eagerly to meet me. How warm his grasp! How pure and sunny his smile! How his face carries the record of his 40 years of service, of forbearance, of hope of a great belief. I think little about the theories of that pope of socialism, Karl Marx. I feel that I am in the presence of this world's high spirits.

Suddenly Asks His Most Dangerous Question.

We sit down on opposite sides of a long table. Debs' lawyer is there and so is the prison attendant. Never mind; Debs doesn't mind. He leans across, his face alight, his speaking and delicate hands at play. He will not let me get in my question. His warm cordiality prevents. He knows I am not a socialist and that I am not going to vote for him. He knows all about it. But what is that to him? I am a human being, which is enough. But there is more. I have recently chosen the unpopular course on a great subject — Russia — and Debs knows all about that also, and pours out an overgenerous appreciation until, afraid of that man at the end of the table, who is responsible for the allotment of time, I see a chance to turn the switch and I suddenly ask the most dangerous question that I know.

"Mr Debs," I broke in, "I appreciate deeply what you have said, but your last words bring me to something I want to ask you. To me it is a momentous thing, a tragic thing. Who has saved Lenin from a vast Western offensive that would have broken him down? The British Labour Party has done it. And what does Lenin do? He calls the leaders of that party a pack of traitors. It is the Third International against the Second International that I look upon as one of the greatest of our tragedies."

To be sure we understood each other's terms, I went on: "The Third International, of course, is the claim of the Moscow Communist Party to dictate policies to socialist parties all over the world. The Second International stands for freedom of development, for socialism as an evolution. It was dominated by the British Labour Party and does not differ from the Fabian Socialism of Sidney Webb."

Doubts Report.

I though Debs would hesitate, for it is a topic that has produced much confusion in the socialist ranks. A flash of sadness went across his happy face and he caught back at my quotation from Lenin about traitors.

"I don't like the glib use of a word like traitors," he said, a little lower than his usual tone, with his eyes for a moment looking far away. "I realize what Lenin has done. To me he and Trotsky are monumental figures. But I have been puzzled by what he has said recently about other socialist parties, if he is authentically reported. The British Labour Party saved him. Without that party England would have been fully in the war against him. France would have been, even we should have been in it. The British Labour Party did a great thing. It did all that in the circumstances it could do. It was right to stop where it did stop. If for me to say that is to become a traitor, then a traitor I am willing to be."

So, dear reader, you see this prisoner No. 9653 is no more afraid of Nicolai Lenin than he is of Mitchell Palmer.

"How do you explain it?" I persisted.

Ignorance is Cause.

"I think it is probably ignorance," he replied. "I don't believe Lenin and the men around him understand anything about some other countries. They seem actually to believe that England is ready for a revolution like the one in Russia. They do not know how much it meant to challenge the hypocrisy of Lloyd George, to defy him to go to war, and they believe the Labour Party could have done much more. It would have been madness."

"And in this country," I put in, "I hear from friend of Lenin that he implies we are on the verge of revolution also."

"Yes," he answered, "apparently he does. How foolish it would be! Our Communist Party in this country, with its doctrine of being prepared in advance to take control by force when the opportunity comes, is not giving strength. It is giving weakness.

"It is not by arming that strength comes, it is by persuasion. To try to use force now is only to drive away those who might be with us. When we have persuaded enough persons, when thereby it is time for us to rule, when the occasion comes, then the strength will be given to us."

Surprised at Stand.

Here Debs volunteered something, without any suggestion from me, that I must say startled me, as I, like everybody else, had imbibed unconsciously from the newspapers the conception of a much less reasonable man. Debs stopped, went almost out of his way, to interpolate the statement that the constitution of the United States is so drawn that it enables the people without violence to obtain by amendment any kind of government they may desire. It would do our fire-eaters some good to compare that statement by Debs with a certain passage about amendment and revolution in Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural.

This question of force is all essential, and I wanted to drive it still nearer home. So I mentioned the bomb in Wall Street [Sept. 16, 1920], and asked him what he would do if he were President. "What would happen if Debs were President?" is the way I put it.

"I hope," he said, "if Debs were President such a thing would not occur."

"Yes," I said, "I know what you mean; but I am talking across you to my conservative friends. I want an answer for them."

Who Benefited?

"Well," Debs cried willingly, "do we know who threw that bomb? Let me ask you a question; it is a reasonable one. Who benefited? Who benefited?"

I nodded. "You mean a plant?"

"No matter how indirect," he went on, "how remote, the sleuths benefit. Thousands of them are making a harvest today because that bomb went off. Can you trace their influence? You can not. I know, I who tell you. I have spent a lifetime with them.

"There is not a union, not a local in this whole country, without its spy. They are everywhere. Their business is to stir up trouble to divide, to make discord between one element and other, and to betray us to the enemy. Once, long ago, I wanted to take a step

in secret. I found it was immediately known to the enemy. So I learned that any attempt to accomplish anything in secret is folly. Nothing can be done that is of any use except what is done in the open.

Opposed to Violence.

"But about this bomb. I speak of the detectives because they profit by it, but other causes must be mentioned. How about the administration? How about the suppression of free speech, the imprisonments for conviction? That may be a real cause where the bomb is only a result. I have worked against violence all my life. It is not my way. But when we pay so much attention to a symptom as we pay to this explosion, we close our minds to the causes. Perhaps—"

And here Debs smiled that doubly gentle smile with which he marks the approach of a difficulty or a contradiction, and his talking hands were poised before him. "Perhaps," he said, "it all works together for good. Sometimes I think it does. The Allies attack Russia. That gives her her chance. It brings discordant elements together. If they had been let alone they would probably have torn one another apart. So with this bomb. It is not my way. But it may put the fear of God into some of those Wall Street fellows. It may make them think a little.

Detests Informers.

He went back to the detectives. The idea of them haunted him. He had seen too much of informers and instigators, like those whom Federal Judge Anderson recently delivered his passionate though restrained opinion against. But I switched him to another track.

"It is clear about the administration," I said, "but is it important? We know, do we not, that if we had any public opinion in this country no administration could keep Eugene Debs in prison a week. The administration is nothing. Public opinion is everything. Why are Americans so dense when freedom is at stake?"

"You have said it!" cried Debs — cried, I write, to indicate the fervor, for his voice was low, soft, and calm. "You are right. It is the public that matters. And I will tell you what is the matter with the public."

No difficulties here, no doubts; all eagerness, for here was the bitter experience of a lifetime.

Press at Fault.

It is the newspapers. Oh, those lies! Those lies! It is a lucky thing for me that I was shut up here in Atlanta prison when that bomb went off in Wall Street. If I had been free they would have had me as the cause of it.

"When the explosion occurred in the building of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harrison Grey Otis publicly declared that I was the cause. When McKinley was shot, I narrowly escaped lynching in my own state. I was the murderer.

"Why, let me tell you what the newspapers have done to me among my own people, in my own hometown. Before the war there was not a man, woman, or child who wasn't my friend. You could walk up one side of the principal street and down the other, and ask every person there about me, and every one would say a friendly word. I had lived there a lifetime, and I can say that nobody ever came to me and went away empty handed. I never failed to help any kind of a person who wanted help, if there was anything I could do. Now — now—"

His lean, fine head was thrown back and his long arms spread wide.

"Today if Eugene Debs should go back to that hometown of his, he would no longer find it a family of friends. The people there now believe him some kind of a horrid thing, an enemy of what is good. The newspapers have done that."

"Yes," I said, "it is the great evil. But what can be done?"

"Ah," he answered, "that is it. What can be done? But it is the next task before us. It is the next fight we must throw ourselves into. We go into it against great odds, almost hopeless odds. Perhaps the best hope is that the people after awhile will come to disbelieve altogether what they read."

He switched suddenly, implying much about why he was in a prison, among felons, when he exclaimed, "They don't want me out, the newspapers. They know I could go onto the platform and tell about them. They know that I have the facts."

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Debs is most eager to be at liberty. In moments

of contempt for government, or of feeling for the wrongs done to many simple men, he may say he would rather stay in until all come out — rather die there, if need be. But the other impulse conquers. He wants to be in the great fight. He longs to be free to deliver the truth, his truth, to thousands of his fellow men, and face to face. He is not a man who belongs apart, in a study or in a cell. He loves men, masses of men, and wants to look into their upturned faces and pour out what is in his soul. He is their candidate for the Presidency, and the United States government, on the flimsy pretext of an outworn war power, shuts him in a prison on the eve of an election.

Does it know what it is doing for the class war in this country? Does it know what it is doing to make common men laugh scornfully when such words as law and justice and order are spoken? Time and again, I have been astonished this summer and autumn when men and women I know well have told me they intended to vote for Debs, though they had no belief whatever in the theories of Karl Marx. They opined that Marx had been dead a good while and that a good many things had happened and that the world would have to struggle on toward fairness by many different routes — but they were going to vote for Debs.

Deluge Coming.

This tendency may not show on a big scale in this election, because the majority are still drugged, but those who are free to think are the advance guard, and there is a deluge coming soon. I have reasons that seem to me good fro voting with one of the two big parties that I prefer to have win, but even so I felt like a cowardly conservative as I listened to the stream of generous feeling and tolerant thought that flowed from the rich personality of the imprisoned candidate of a party that will sweep half the countries of Europe in the first elections that are held on real issues.

Debs talked about a revival of a forward movement after this election is behind us. He thinks it is coming strong and soon, and coming through a broader party than labor and socialism have been able to organize before. I asked him if it would be in general like the British Labour Party, and he was inclined to think it might be. He was not sure, however, that well-to-do men of radical tendencies could cooperate as much here with the labor element as they do in England and he further thought the lack of cohesion in the Committee of 48 at Chicago was an illustration of the difficulty.

Labor Uncertain.

"Our hardest task," he said, "is not the defeat of capitalism. That would be easy if we could first conquer ourselves, determine our course, confide in one another. Labor is wandering in a fog. Is it to be wondered at, when you remember that this is the first time in the history of the world that the masses, on a large scale, have undertaken to settle their own destiny? A laboring man is by nature distrustful. He distrusts everybody. He distrusts other laboring men. And he has good cause to distrust them."

Here Debs again sketched the treachery, the ever-present informer and hired, secret provoker of discord and violence, and made me see afresh the terrible hidden and powerful wires that the enemy of labor is able to run through the humblest room in which working men gather together to grope their way toward the government of themselves. From this long, heartbreaking experience have emerged the guiding principles of Debs' teaching and Debs' life. They are these:

Secret Work Futile.

Secret work is futile. Violence is harmful.

The first great goal is to keep labor together, to prevent its diversion. Consequently, though Debs is opposed to violence himself, he will not make an enemy of the man whose despair drives him to violence. He will welcome as comrades all who seek the same goal.

Opposition does not embitter him. Combat with him is a contest for sweetness and light.

That is the great, fine thing about Debs. Nothing embitters him.

I do not think he ever hated a single human being, or even advised a single act of revenge. If he spoke of "that suburb of Hell called Pullman," it was not hatred of any man — it was a heart beating for misery that it knew and darkness that it understood.

Friend of the Outcast.

Debs has sympathized with the IWW, and many people therefore think he sympathizes with sabotage and violence, but what he sympathizes with is the outcast in the western lumber camps, and if well-dressed readers of these words want a scientific basis for Debs' emotion, let them read the books Professor Parker and John Graham Brooks have written about the IWW, or Brooks' new book, *Labor's Challenge to the Social Order.*†

As to violence, Debs, in spite of the greatest provocation to be discouraged with reason, says and says again things like this: "I am opposed to the form of our present government; I am opposed to the social system in which we live; I believe in the change of both, but by perfectly peaceful and orderly means."

Testifying about the Pullman strike he said: "Never in my life have I broken a law or advised others to do so."

When one of Grover Cleveland's investigating commissioners asked him whether the combination of the working people into one big union would not give them a dangerous power, Debs answered:

"A little power is more dangerous than great power," and I think he said something when he said that. I believe Debs is really in sympathy with "American institutions," as they are called, if we carry out those institutions in good faith.

Believes in Free Speech.

Debs says: "I believe in the right of free speech in war as in peace." Daniel Webster said precisely the same thing.

Debs was put into prison this last time for opposing the war. Not for recommending violent interference with it, but for frankly avowing his disbelief in any war whatever. He wants to know why Lincoln was not put in prison for opposing the war against Mexico, and the cool answer is that they had no Espionage Act then. As the French say: "We have changed all that." He takes his stand on the first amendment to the constitution, which says: "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press."

But although this country is no longer in any actual sense at war the gentle and peace-loving Debs is in prison for having disbelieved in war. He has pointed out that Benjamin Franklin beat him to it when he said: "There never was a good war or a bad peace," and he has even gone so far as to argue that Jesus did not say, "kill one another."

"If it is a crime," he concludes, "under the American law, punishable by imprisonment, for being opposed to human bloodshed, I am perfectly willing to be clothed in the stripes of a convict and to end my days in a prison cell."

†- Carleton Hubbell Parker and Cornelia Stratton Parker, *The Casual Laborer, and Other Essays.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920. John Graham Brooks, *American Syndicalism: The IWW.* New York: Macmillan, 1913. John Graham Brooks, *Labor's Challenge to the Social Order: Democracy its Own Critic and Educator.* New York: Macmillan, 1920.

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