

Eugene V Debs: Trade Unionist and Socialist” in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (1987, University of Illinois) 89-109

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On June 12, 1894, Eugene V Debs walked to the podium of a noisy and crowded convention hall in Chicago, struck the gavel to call the assembled delegates to attention, and then made the keynote address at the first annual convention of the American Railway Union (ARU). Founded only a year earlier, the ARU sought to transform railroad workers' organization through the creation of an industrial union that would enroll workers regardless of their skill or craft position. Understandably, this effort encountered the intense hostility of the railroad brotherhoods, those older organizations of workers in the industry built upon craft lines. As Debs opened the convention, however, both he and the assembled delegates reflected a proud confidence from the events of the past spring. In its first serious test, the ARU withstood the opposition of a major railroad (James J. Hill's Great Northern) and the craft brotherhoods to achieve a decisive victory that both restored the wage cuts and emphasized the potent sense of solidarity and worker unity industrial unionism encouraged. Yet major difficulties loomed before the delegates and, as Debs concluded his enthusiastic account of the union's first strike, he addressed the basic issue before the convention in a far more somber tone.

The workers at George Pullman's railroad car shops just outside of Chicago had sent a delegation to ask the ARU to support their strike, then in its fifth week. As Debs explained the conditions in Pullman, the level of anger in the hall rose noticeably. Not only had these workers suffered wage cuts and worsened working conditions, but many of them were also forced to live in the town of Pullman. There George Pullman and his management executives set the rents for housing and the fees for water, gas, and sanitation service, established the library with its annual fee, banned saloons, built the churches, and hired the ministers and priests to staff them. Despite Pullman's references to the community as a model for avoiding industrial strife, most workers experienced that company town as less a utopia than a further extension into their personal and family life of Pullman's assumed right to exploit their existence. Indeed, as Debs explained, George Pullman set the fees for these essential services to provide a steady six percent return on investment and never once cut those fees despite the wage cuts. Further, Debs stated in a taut angry tone, when a delegation of workers approached a company executive to protest the most recent wage cut on May 10, 1894, they were summarily fired the next day despite assurances they had gained that there would be no retribution for the simple act of presenting the petition. The strike began on May 11 as news of the firings spread throughout the plant, and these workers were now at the ARU convention requesting the full support of the new union.

In spite of the catalogue of horrors he had just recounted, Debs urged caution. Money, supplies, organizers, speakers—all this and more Debs gladly supported, but he warned against committing the ARU as an institution to the strike. The recent success against Hill's railroad notwithstanding, Debs knew that the ARU was organizationally weak. Since the conclusion of their first strike, new members had streamed into the ARU at an incredible rate of 2,000 a week. Impressive as this was, the figure also suggested the difficult task the ARU faced: its own membership was new, poorly organized on the local level, and inexperienced with a nationwide strike or boycott. As Debs's concluding words of caution faded from the auditorium, the representatives of the Pullman workers rose to appeal to the delegates for aid. The poignancy of their testimony, fused with the delegates' own enthusiasm over their recent victory, led the convention to overrule its president. The ARU, the convention decided, would support the Pullman workers with a nationwide boycott of any railroad company whose management refused to detach Pullman cars. The vote taken, Debs prepared to lead the union into battle.

After repeated failures to arbitrate the dispute (George Pullman refused even to meet with his workers), the ARU ordered the boycott of Pullman cars to begin on June 25. In the cities and towns west of Chicago, where the ARU strength was strongest and where management refused to separate the Pullman cars, workers of all levels of skill quit work in protest. Within a week the boycott proved successful, and even the appeals of the leaders of the craft brotherhoods went unheeded by their members. But Debs and other leaders of the ARU were not the only ones

watching these developments. With far less pleasure major railroad executives across the country viewed the success of the boycott with great concern. They understood, as did Debs, that the issues involved in this struggle were central to the future development of America's industrial system. As the *New York Times* warned its readers, the Pullman strike was "in reality . . . a struggle between the greatest and most powerful railroad labor organization and the entire railroad capital. Success in the Pullman boycott," the *Times* continued, "means the permanent success of the one organization through which it is sought to unite all employees of railroads." If the ARU were successful, both sides agreed, this dispute would mark the beginning of a major redistribution of power between employer and worker that could eventually transform the face of industrial America: industrial unionism might be extended to other industries and with it would spread the workers' collective ability to check and counter traditional management prerogatives.

Precisely because the stakes were so high, railroad companies prepared a detailed counterattack. Through the General Managers Association, an organization of executives from the twenty-four railroads with terminals in Chicago, they created a series of committees to devise overall strategy, to implement day-to-day tactical decisions, to hire strikebreakers, and to coordinate these efforts with local, state, and federal authorities. Backed by seemingly unlimited resources, the association declared on June 25 that the announced boycott by the union was both "unjustifiable and unwarranted" and that any workers who participated in such activities were subject to immediate dismissal. Up to this point, the actions of the association did not differ significantly from earlier corporate responses to major threats to their autonomous control of production. Had they intended simply to defeat workers' efforts in this specific dispute, the battle would have been fought on these grounds until its conclusion. But the managers had a quite different purpose in mind. Although only the Pullman company was the target of the boycott, the association joined forces with Pullman for the purpose of eliminating the American Railway Union and, they hoped, eradicating all militant unionism from the industry. To achieve this goal they intended to secure the active involvement of the federal government.

On June 30, the fifth day of the strike, the association implemented the first step in its plan. Through the good offices of Attorney General Richard Olney, a former corporate lawyer for the industry who retained close ties with railroad leaders, the managers had Edwin Walker appointed as special government attorney to aid in the prosecution of the Pullman strikers. The fact that until a week before his appointment Walker had been counsel for the association caused the ARU lawyer, Clarence Darrow, to comment: "I did not regard this as fair." However, this was but the first step in a complex plan. Working closely with officials in Washington, the managers in Chicago first deputized some five thousand new U.S. marshalls that they themselves selected and had them fan out through Chicago with instructions to aggravate rather than ease potential trouble spots. Simultaneously, Olney decided to charge the strikers with obstruction of the U.S. mails and ordered his federal attorneys to prepare injunctions against Debs and other ARU leaders. On July 2 a disturbance at Blue Island, Illinois, on the outskirts of Chicago, largely instigated by the newly deputized marshalls, triggered the plan. Federal officials in Chicago wired Olney for assistance, and on July 3 two federal judges granted the injunction against the ARU that, among other provisions, prohibited Debs from any communication whatsoever with ARU locals or members. Olney also met with President Grover Cleveland, read him the telegrams from Blue Island, and pressed upon him the urgency of the situation in Chicago. On July 4, Independence Day, the final tactic in this joint corporate-governmental plan fell into place as the president ordered federal troops into Chicago over the expressed opposition of the city's mayor and the governor of Illinois. Lest anyone think that the troops were to be neutral peacekeepers, General Nelson Miles, commander of the soldiers, quickly dispelled such notions. As his troops occupied the city, Nelson gave a newspaper interview in which he expressed a bitter dislike of Debs and claimed that the ARU men were less strikers than rebels against government authority. He left the interview to hold the first of his many meetings with the association. Their goal achieved, the managers retired to watch the ensuing conflict: "It has now become a fight between the United States Government and the American Railway Union," a spokesman for the association commented on July 4, "and we shall leave them to fight it out."

Confronted by the direct power of the government, the successful strike of the ARU collapsed as members nationwide faced arrest and imprisonment. In Chicago, Debs and other leaders of the union were also arrested first on charges of conspiracy and then, a week later, for contempt of court for ignoring an earlier injunction. Although never convicted on the conspiracy charge, Debs was sentenced in the contempt case and served a six-month

sentence in the Woodstock County jail. It was this jail experience, coupled with his triumphant address to a crowd of over one hundred thousand upon his release in Chicago, that established the central myth of Debs's career. The close alliance between the government and the business community had raised the Pullman strike to a level of dramatic national importance and focused enormous attention on Debs himself. Then, still in the glare of this fame, a little more than a year after his release from jail, Debs publicly announced that he had become a socialist. To many Americans, the relationship between the term in jail and his embrace of the socialist label seemed intimate, and many came to look on that jail term as the source and site of Eugene Debs's conversion. The most prominent promoter of this theme was Debs himself. Prior to the Pullman strike and his subsequent prison term, Debs wrote some years later, "I had heard but little of Socialism." But during that strike, "in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed.*" While in jail, Debs continued, he avidly read a series of books on social problems and when Victor Berger, Milwaukee's socialist leader, visited him, bearing as gifts the three volumes of Marx's *Das Kapital*, that experience set "the wires humming in my system." Drawing on the archetype of Saul on the road to Damascus, Debs and his followers suggested that, in a moment of blinding insight, he understood the systematic problems with capitalism and the promise of socialism, and he emerged from jail a changed and charged man.

The Woodstock incarceration is critical in any evaluation of Debs's life and career. It remains the portal through which one understands the meaning of socialism for him and other Americans in the decades to come. If that dramatic conversion did in fact occur, Debs's socialist activity then marked a sharp break with the concerns and ideas of his earlier career. Further, it places his socialist years outside the boundaries of traditional American political discourse and, therefore, outside the experience of most American working people. But a less mythic view of Debs's life suggests that, important as it was, the Pullman event was but one aspect of a complex development in the career of this preeminent American native son.

Eugene Debs was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on November 5, 1855. The third of six children and the oldest male, there was little in his early life that foreshadowed his post-Pullman career. At the time of his birth, Debs's parents, Marguerite and Daniel, were quite poor, but by the end of his teen years these immigrants from Alsace, France, were the proprietors of a successful retail store that sold fine foods and liquors. Debs's own experience during these years reflected a similar tone. A student in the local public schools, he diligently absorbed the moral as well as the intellectual education provided there. After winning a spelling bee in the eighth grade, his teacher presented him with a Bible that she had inscribed with the admonition: "Read and Obey." There is no contemporary evidence to suggest he thought to do other than just that. Despite his scholastic record, the young Debs left school after the first year of high school to begin work as a paint scraper on the Vandalia Railroad. Motivated neither by family poverty nor poor grades, Debs simply seemed anxious to enter the bustling world of work.

Many in Terre Haute in 1870 felt that the community was poised on the edge of dramatic economic development, and the prospectuses of the business community and the editorials of the newspapers prophesied a time in the near future when the community would surpass even Pittsburgh as a center of iron production. Debs's early work experience seemed to affirm this optimism. Within a year he was promoted from his unskilled position into the ranks of the locomotive firemen, a group of workers generally considered to be in training for the premier skilled position in the industry, the locomotive engineer. By 1874, however, the serious depression that had begun a year earlier reached Terre Haute and Debs, along with many other workers, was laid off for the first time in his life. He traveled to St. Louis in search of work, encountered urban poverty on a large scale for the first time, and in a letter explained his motivation to his sister, Louise, back in Terre Haute: "I don't expect to stay away from home forever," the nineteen-year-old Debs wrote, "nor even for an unreasonable length of time; I only want to stay long enough and to prove that I can act manly when must be."

Debs did not find work in St. Louis but when he returned home his mother, fearful of the high fatality rate associated with railroad work, prevailed upon her son to wait for an upturn in the railroad industry. Through the intercession of his father, Debs instead obtained a clerk's position in Herman Hulman's wholesale grocery. A few months later, when Joshua Leach, founder of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, came to Terre Haute to organize a local, Debs became a charter member and was elected recording secretary of Vigo Lodge, No. 16. While the juxtaposition of Debs's actual work with his position in the new Brotherhood might appear odd to the modern

eye, it did not strike his contemporaries in the same fashion. The Brotherhood at that time was less a trade union than a benovolent society, and the organization's basic concern was to provide accident and death benefits to members. The Brotherhood neither entered into negotiations with management nor saw in their organization an alternative to management's right to structure and direct the work force and the work day. Further, class lines were not understood to be as sharply drawn in the Terre Haute of the 1870s as they would be perceived in the decades to come. Employment as a clerk or as a soon-to-be skilled worker did not necessarily either exclude future social mobility or erect personal and so- ciety barriers between people in those occupations in this small, decentral- ized urban center. As a teenage friend of Debs's explained years later, recalling the Terre Haute of his youth, he and other friends in the 1870s foresaw the time "when Gene would reach an eminence in trade equal to Herman Hulman, or step into a Master Mechanics job in charge of all the engine men."

This perception of Terre Haute as a community free of permanent class distinctions and possessed of extensive opportunities for advancement was common in post-Civil War America. In marked contrast with such major urban centers as New York, small urban communities such as Terre Haute, with their lesser level of industrial development and their largely local business elite, appeared to maintain a sense of social cohesion and har- mony even into the industrial age. The republican values associated with the tradition of the American Revolution, which stressed the primacy of citizenship and the duties and obligations inherent in the fulfillment of one's manhood, and which rejected as of primary importance economic differences among citizens, were considered still vital. Even when the social deference based on economic distinctions (the paint scraper and the railroad owner, despite their common citizenship, did not occupy the same social plateau) was recognized, it was seen less as a permanent barrier than as a positive asset even by many on its far side. Thus the success of others was often seen as essential for one's own eventual improvement. As Debs noted frequently in his later years, the Terre Haute of his youth was a community where "all were neighbors and all friends."

But in Terre Haute as across the nation the emergence of industrial capitalism, with its firmer class lines, demands for stricter work discipline, and renewed calls for a stronger hierarchical social structure, slowly altered the community. In Terre Haute, the first evidence of this change came during the great nationwide railroad strikes of 1877. The strike began in Martinsburg, West Virginia, on July 16 to protest a wage cut by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. As other roads announced the same wage cut in turn, the strike spread across the nation. Although the violence that dominated strike activity in cities such as Pittsburgh and Chicago did not occur in Terre Haute, the Vandalia Railroad workers did strike and occupy the railroad depot en masse. Despite this dramatic action, the motivation of the majority of these workers fell far short of the revolutionary fears then proclaimed in the nation's newspapers. They struck, the strike committee explained to the local paper, not so much to protest the wage cut announced by their owner but rather to protest the manner in which their owner was forced to cut wages in an attempt to stay competitive with the dominant railroad lines. There existed a community of interest between themselves and the Vandalia management, these strikers asserted, and they claimed that both workers and the local owner reeled under the pressure of the major monopolists. Thus, when the coal miners of adjoining Clay County telegraphed their offer to march on Terre Haute to institute a general strike in support of these workers, the strike committee flatly refused the suggestion. They were striking in defense of their community and its values, they asserted, and their employer was not the target. But the strikers' employer, William Riley McKeen, proved to have a quite different understanding of those values than did his workers. In private, unbeknownst to the strikers, McKeen and a number of local business associates requested from a fed- eral judge in Indianapolis that a detachment of federal troops be sent to evict the men from the depot and break the strike. The troops did arrive and the strike was broken, even as McKeen continued to assert in public his own commitment to social harmony and to the values associated with American citizenship.

McKeen's private actions clearly revealed the limits of that concept of harmony, at least as interpreted by the business community. But most strikers were unaware of those actions and continued to present their strike activity as a defense of the basic values they presumed were shared by all Terre Hautians. Yet even a strike proclaimed for these ends proved too dramatic an action for the twenty-two-year-old Debs to endorse. During the events of that last week in July 1877, Debs took no known public role. The following September, however, at the annual convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, he made his feelings well known in a long speech to the delegates. Although he recognized the justice in the call by the strikers for a fair wage, Debs stridently rejected the strike as a

tactic for working people. "Does the Brotherhood encourage strikers?" he asked, and then proceeded with his answer: "To this question we most emphatically answer, No, Brothers. To disregard the laws which govern the land? To destroy the last vestige of order? To stain our hands with the crimson blood of our fellow beings? We again say No, a thousand times No." It was not surprising that McKean and other business leaders in Terre Haute vigorously applauded this speech; but the fact that it was also warmly received by the majority of delegates at the convention suggests something of the direction of the Brotherhood as well during these years. As did Debs, most delegates placed responsibility for social discord on the shoulders of working people and looked to their employers as both personal and social models for maintaining the qualities of manhood, harmony, and community.

Given this accord between Debs and the majority of delegates, it was not surprising that his 1877 speech also marked his rise within the Brotherhood. Elected grand marshal for the year following that speech, Debs became, within two years, first assistant editor and then editor of the Brotherhood's magazine, the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*. In 1880 he was named grand secretary-treasurer of the Brotherhood. In the Terre Haute local of the Brotherhood, Debs received similar rewards for the sentiments expressed at Indianapolis. Of the local men holding office in the lodge during the strike, all of whom except Debs had taken active roles during the strike, only Debs was returned to office, first as recording secretary and then as master of the lodge.

Based on the expression of social harmony, in which both railroad workers and their employer publicly applauded the position taken by the young Debs, it was only a matter of time before Debs and his supporters sought to capitalize on that accord in the political arena. Debs rejected efforts to create an independent working-class political party because he perceived it to be destructive of the community he sought; instead he ran as a Democrat for the office of city clerk in 1879. In a three-way race against Republican and labor candidates, Debs won a decisive victory and received more votes than the successful Democratic candidate for mayor. The nature of his electoral coalition in 1879 reinforced his belief in harmony. He received public support from both McKean (a life-long Republican), Hulman, and other employers, and he carried the wards of railroad workers by decisive majorities. But the key to his success lay in the results from Terre Haute's second ward. Traditionally Republican, it housed the majority of the town's elite. In that three-way race, Debs attracted more than forty-five percent of these votes. A politician with a potent appeal to working people, Debs swamped the labor candidate by more than two to one citywide and by almost three to one in the railroad workers' wards. Simultaneously, he also did well in traditional Republican strongholds. As the local Republican newspaper ruefully admitted after the election, Debs was "the blue-eyed boy of destiny."

Debs's successful reelection campaign in 1881 revealed a similar pattern. By now a leader of both the local lodge and the national Brotherhood, Debs nonetheless retained the active support of employers such as McKean and expanded his support among working people. In 1884 this cross-class support brought Debs first the Democratic nomination and then election to Indiana's state assembly. The nature of his own political consciousness and the foundation of his appeal to employers and workers alike can best be gauged by a brief examination of Debs's participation in the debates over two bills in the assembly in 1885. The first, concerning the responsibility of railroad corporations to their workers, Debs sponsored himself. It sought to end the common law assumption that injury or fatality were either the worker's individual fault or the result of other workers' mistakes—in either case, the employer had traditionally been deemed to be without legal responsibility. Although this bill passed the assembly, the state senate emasculated the bill and even Debs refused to vote for the final version. If this bill indicates why many workers supported Debs, it was also only a part of his response to the growing system of industrial capitalism. In that same session of the assembly, Debs was one of a minority of

Democrats who joined ranks with the Republicans to vote for the establishment of a state militia. The debate on this bill was both intense and pointed. As one opponent of the bill argued, it was simply an antilabor measure, "a direct blow at wage laborers, and if they dare to raise their voices to oppression this militia is to declare a riot and charge upon the laborers." But for Debs, still seeking harmony and community amid in-

creasing factionalism, his understanding of the lessons of the 1877 strike remained uppermost in his consciousness. Further, he argued, although he now publicly claimed that he represented worker' interests in the assembly, never could he approve an action on behalf of one group that might violate his understanding of broader community interests. Thus the failure of his bill to enforce responsible action by railroad corporations did not release working people from their obligations to the larger community.

Debs's identification as a worker's representative by the early 1880s was no idle boast, nor simply a ruse to catapult himself into an easy position in politics or the Brotherhood. He was deeply engaged in organizing workers both in Terre Haute, where with P. J. McGuire he helped start the first carpenter's local, and across the country. On his trips for the Firemen, Debs also aided railroad workers of every job description to organize, and he was also responsible for the unionization of workers in other industries as well. Although he was no *pie card-a* worker's term for labor officials interested primarily in their own salary and prerogatives-Debs did hold a quite particular idea of his role at this time. He argued consistently in his editorials in the *Firemen's* magazine that the concept of manhood, with its attributes of personal honor, industry, and responsibility to one's duties, was the essential foundation of American citizenship. Fulfillment of these duties, he held, was incumbent upon all regardless of economic station. While this emphasis could lead to a strong union consciousness, Debs did not develop it in this fashion during the early 1880s. For even as he urged all to rise to the responsibilities of their manhood, Debs remained highly suspicious of working people's ability to do just that by themselves. In a central way his incessant organizing trips reflected this concern. If left to themselves, Debs felt, workers might easily repeat the anarchy of 1877.

But if brought into an organization such as the Firemen, whose aim, Debs explained, was to "instill the love of sobriety into the putrid mind of debauchery, and create industry out of idleness " then workers would find the necessary encouragement to fulfill their duties. For in that organization they would benefit from the example of men like Debs who, in turn, themselves had the respect of such community leaders as McKeen and Hulman. With the work force so organized, and with the Brotherhood cleansed "of all worthless material;'success was assured, for then "we will be beckoned onward and upward by those who have the power to assist us."

Debs persisted in these attitudes despite the increased tension evident nationwide between employers and workers. He essentially ignored the founding of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions in 1881 and remained publicly silent when that group emerged in 1886 as the American Federation of Labor. Similarly, Debs had little positive to say about the Knights of Labor prior to 1888, despite the attraction of that organization for many firemen. Indeed, during the Knight's major strike against the Gould railroads in 1886, Debs, along with other Brotherhood officials, actually urged their members not to honor the strike. Privately, however, Debs began to question his premises even as he, for the moment, maintained a consistent pattern in public. At the core of his thought was a commitment to the idea of the independent citizen living within a community of relative equals. His understanding allowed for economic differences between men but asserted that the bonds of common citizenship would prevent the emergence of permanent divisions within society. Debs still held to that understanding, but in the

mid-1880s, he began to question, at first quite hesitantly, whether employers as a group were acting in a similar fashion. The year-long strike of the Brotherhood against the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad in 1888 forced him to clarify his thinking and marked the beginning of a central transformation in his life. The immediate causes of the Burlington strike were relatively simple.

The engineers and firemen who worked for the railroad demanded an end to the classification system (by which they received apprentice pay for the first three years, although they performed the full job) and the establishment of a uniform pay scale based upon actual mileage traveled. Led by President Charles E. Perkins, Burlington officials refused to negotiate these demands, and a joint strike of engineers and firemen began on February 27, 1888. That the strike began with the official support of the two brotherhoods suggested a potential new development for workers in the railroad industry. Not only had the two brotherhoods been extremely cautious in authorizing strike activity in the past, but they had rarely worked together in any capacity before. Tension had long existed between them over jurisdictional disputes (the Firemen, for example, allowed members promoted to the engineer's position to retain membership in their brotherhood), and recently these feelings had intensified due to the bitter public criticisms of each other expressed by Debs and the Engineer's chief, P. M. Arthur. But in the initial days of the strike, this show of harmony appeared to foreshadow ultimate success. Where company officials had privately es-

timated that forty percent of the workers would refuse to honor the strike call, fully ninety-seven percent walked out, although only sixty-six percent belonged to either brotherhood. When a week later, on March 5, a joint meeting of the grievance chairmen of both brotherhoods endorsed a boycott of all Burlington freight cars hauled by other railroads until the company and the men settled, it seemed as if success was assured.

But success proved elusive for these workers in 1888, and in the complex reasons for the strike's failure lay many of the lessons Debs himself would take from this experience. To begin with, the Burlington officials were adamantly opposed to considering the strikers' demands. Instead, their aim was the elimination of all unionized workers in their employ. As Charles Perkins had noted, union workers "owe allegiance to somebody else, and not to the railroad company that employs them." To achieve employee loyalty in 1888, the Burlington management successfully sought an injunction before a sympathetic federal judge to end the boycott and to impose penalties on managers of other roads and brotherhood officials if they continued to refuse to handle Burlington cars. This injunction led the two chiefs of the brotherhoods, P. M. Arthur and Frank P. Sargent of the Firemen, to call off the boycott. Second, divisions within the ranks of labor strengthened management's hand even before the injunction was granted. Both brotherhoods had a history of breaking the strikes of the Knights of Labor in the industry, and as the Burlington strike began, Chicago-based officials of the railroad received telegrams from Knights of Labor organizers offering their members as replacements. Finally, the promising show of unity between the two brotherhoods itself did not last the duration of the strike. Following the injunction that March, Arthur cooled noticeably in his support of the strike and that fall, at the Engineer's annual convention, he had his members withdraw from the strike without prior consultation with the Firemen. The firm opposition of management and the basic lack of unity within labor turned the strike's promising beginning into total defeat. In the aftermath, neither the Engineers nor the Firemen were able to reestablish lodges on the Burlington road until the twentieth century.

As complete as the defeat was, the Burlington strike nonetheless proved to be of major importance in Debs's life. The uncompromising position of the Burlington officials and the expressions of support they received in major newspapers across the country forced Debs to reexamine his belief in the concepts of manhood and community. These traditional values existed in a social structure, Debs had held, where at a minimum all could agree that "a fair day's work demanded a fair day's pay." But the position of the Burlington officials led Debs to question whether that tacit agreement still retained its social force. The system of industrial capitalism, with its structured hierarchy, firmer class divisions, and extended control over daily work life, challenged the foundation of Debs's traditional value system. As Debs mulled over these thoughts, he came to reinterpret his earlier ideas while remaining firmly within a broad democratic tradition. Where his earlier expressions had emphasized the opportunities available to Americans and looked to successful men such as William Riley McKeen as models, his new perceptions questioned whether men such as McKeen used their success to inhibit the success of others; and he now stressed the examples of Thomas Flaine, John Brown, and Abraham Lincoln as models for his audience. The democratic tradition, he now suggested, had to address the class realities of a maturing industrial society. Debs's view of the world of labor also

changed in the aftermath of the Burlington strike. The fratricidal conduct of the various unions before and during that strike led him first to suggest and then to advocate the industrial organization of all workers in the industry. To create an organization of railroad workers that transcended divisions among workers based on level of skill, or ethnic and religious differences, became for Debs a consuming passion. "The spirit of fraternity [is] abroad in the land!" Debs wrote in 1890, and this conviction led him to help establish the American Railway Union a few years later. For Debs, as for other railway workers, the Burlington strike had taught critical new lessons.

The Pullman strike of 1894 sharpened the lessons Debs and others had learned during 1888. The close working relationship between the federal government and major railroad corporations led Debs and many other workers to acknowledge more clearly the presence and permanence of class divisions in American society. The simpler affirmations of an earlier period, oblivious of the growing concentration of economic power, and the real expectation by local and national elites that working people defer to their judgment no longer explained present experience. As Debs moved toward a firmer class awareness, however, and ultimately toward public identification as a socialist in 1897, he did not therefore discard the democratic political ideology that had so informed his earlier career. As his dramatic speech before a crowd of over one hundred thousand people in Chicago upon his release from Woodstock County jail in November 1895 indicated, Debs sought instead to integrate his new awareness of class with his still deeply held democratic beliefs. He appealed to no European theorist but rather argued that his new awareness was actually consistent with the best of that earlier American tradition. "Manifestly," he began, "the spirit of '76 still survives. The fires of liberty and noble aspirations are not yet extinguished." Addressing his audience as "lovers of liberty and despisers of despotism," Debs focused on the growing threat industrial capi-

talism presented to those traditional values. In the present day, he declared, "corporations [know] the price of judges, legislators and public officials as certainly as Armour knows the price of pork and mutton." The corporation reigned for the moment, but Debs saw in a self-conscious and aggressive American working class hope for the future: "They are not hereditary bondsmen. Their fathers were born free-their sovereignty none denied and their children yet have the ballot." In that speech Eugene Debs established the major themes that would occupy him, and attract millions of Americans, over the next thirty years. In the context of industrial capitalism, Debs told audiences time and again, commitment to class struggle was neither unpatriotic nor a negation of earlier beliefs. Given the revolutionary transformation of society and politics engineered by the corporations, he argued, a socialist commitment, informed by the democratic tradition, was indeed the fulfillment of the basic promise of American life and the values of manhood, duty, and citizenship that sprang from it. In an odd way Debs did not see himself as a revolutionary but held that he sought both to conserve from the past and reinterpret for his generation the best of American experience. In the years after the Pullman strike, he dedicated himself to this task first in the Populist party and, when that movement splintered after the election of 1896, in the Socialist party of America. Debs's jail term, then, did not reflect a dramatic conversion. His turn toward socialism emerged from the events of the past twenty years in his community, its political arena, and most importantly, in his experience as a leader of the Firemen. The slow circuitous path he traveled from the 1877 strike to public identification as a socialist's path he traveled by touch and feel rather than through discussions of theory-accounts in part for his less than orthodox interpretation of socialism. Simultaneously, that same path explains much about the appeal of this native son to Americans of his generation.

Eugene Debs's career as a socialist proved to be a long and at times tumultuous one, with the numerous moments of exhilaration ultimately offset by recognition of the persistent resistance by the majority of American workers to join the Socialist party of America. Never comfortable with theoretical discourse, Debs found his relations with certain comrades (perhaps especially Victor L. Berger of Milwaukee and Morris Hillquit of New York) particularly strained. These allies were often aghast at Debs's unorthodox formulations of socialism and frequently angry at Debs's reluctance to take a firm public position on a series of debates within the party. Yet at the same time Berger, Hillquit, and other party leaders were fundamentally dependent upon Debs. When Americans of varied political persuasions

mentioned socialism, inevitably Debs came to mind. The leader of the Pullman strike had become the titular leader of the socialist movement, its national symbol and spokesperson, and had emerged as the single most important vehicle through which the party might reach the American working class. Recognizing this, even his opponents

acceded to Debs's nomination as the party's presidential candidate in five of the six national elections between 1900 and 1920. He was, for Americans of all political faiths, the embodiment of that movement.

From the perspective of his almost twenty year involvement with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, however, his socialist career contained a certain paradox. Debs achieved national fame and acclaim at precisely the time he relinquished daily intimate contact with working people and their institutions. From 1875 until his painful last appearance before a Firemen's national convention in 1894 (where, in the aftermath of the Pullman strike, a significant portion of the delegates voted *not* to grant him speaking privileges), Debs's daily life had revolved around the needs of railroad workers. While his understanding of how best to meet those needs changed substantially, he nonetheless remained firmly rooted within the world of work. Following the Pullman strike, however, the context of his agitation altered. As he sought to impress upon his fellow citizens the necessity of applying their democratic political traditions to an economic system that increasingly determined large aspects of daily life, Debs of necessity moved beyond the world of the trade union. He did not dismiss the trade union as irrelevant but rather came to insist that, to be effective even in the arena of wages and work conditions, the trade union had to broaden its perspectives. This position brought Debs into conflict with certain trade union leaders such as the chiefs of the brotherhoods and Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). It also demanded that he enter more fully the world of socialist debate and disputation, and for most of his career that world remained uncomfortable and even alien to him. Thus the leadership he provided the socialist movement was often erratic: from the podium he could be powerfully effective in moving Americans to view their society from a different perspective; in inner party councils, he was most often either silent or tentative, even contradictory, in his positions. Not surprisingly, then, Debs came to glory in his role as a public leader and increasingly shunned the more bruising world of party meetings and debates.

Oddly, what turned Debs in this direction involved an issue of fundamental importance to the trade union movement. In developing the ARU with its industrial union organization, Debs alienated leaders of the craft unions. But as he saw in the industrial union a more effective economic and political institution to meet working people's needs, this advocacy pushed him beyond the familiar dimensions of his pre-1894 world. From the coal fields of West Virginia to the steel mills of Pittsburgh, from the textile mills of Lawrence to the railroad junction towns of Kansas, the socialist Debs preached industrial unionism. It would eliminate caste divisions within labor, he told his working-class audiences, and from that unity which transcended level of skill or ethnic background on the job would emerge, he insisted, a more unified political consciousness that could sweep the working class into power. Not surprisingly, when the Western Federation of Miners in 1898 sponsored the Western Labor Union built on industrial union principles, Debs was present to applaud the decision. Four years later, the Western Labor Union claimed a national jurisdiction and directly challenged the American Federation of Labor in creating the American Labor Union. Once again, Debs attended that convention and relished the opportunity to follow Gompers' emissary to the podium with a slashing attack on the AFL's exclusionary craft policies. In 1905, when that group reorganized as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Debs again was a delegate and publicly endorsed the new movement.

Ironically, however, Debs's involvement in the industrial union movement also brought him into further conflict with other socialist leaders. Men like Berger and Hillquit held that the proper position was to work within a Gompers-led federation with the aim of slowly changing it over time. Debs fundamentally disagreed and argued that the federation would never significantly broaden its craft base to include the immense numbers of unorganized, unskilled immigrant workers then staffing America's mass-production factories. Although he made this point in public, he still avoided participation in the inner party debate to determine policy. After 1908, moreover, his own position changed. While he remained committed to industrial unionism, he allowed his membership in the Industrial Workers of the World quietly to lapse. The withdrawal of the Western Federation of Miners in 1906 had eliminated the one strong union force in the IWW, Debs felt, and the continued bickering among the various caucuses rendered the organization ineffective. Further, as one deeply committed to political action as well as economic organizing, Debs strongly opposed the increasing rhetorical emphasis on sabotage and direct action by workers on the job by such IWW leaders as William "Big Bill" Haywood. In a long and acerbic response to a Haywood speech in 1912, Debs termed the measures Haywood advocated as "reactionary, not revolutionary," understandable only as "the tactics of anarchist individuals and not of Socialist collectivist." Within the year that followed, Debs assisted in the recall of Haywood from the Socialist party's national executive committee on the grounds that the latter opposed political action and favored violence. By 1913 Debs had completely dismissed the IWW and actually warned

workers to avoid the group, for they would be "most basely betrayed, sold out and treacherously delivered to their enemies by the IWW Judases." It is paradoxical that one of the few internal party debates Debs entered found him aligned with Berger and Hiliquit.

Although Debs continued to advocate industrial unionism, it was not until two decades later that that concept was transformed into an effective organizing tool for mass-production workers. But Debs's role as a socialist political leader had a broader success in his own time. In the 1900 presidential election Debs, the candidate of a young and inexperienced Socialist party, received just under one hundred thousand votes. Four years later, Debs's total was more than four times that figure. Simultaneously, in a growing number of communities, voters elected Socialists to the mayor's office, the city council, and the state legislature. Expectations for 1908 ran high, and the Socialist party leased a special railroad train, immediately dubbed the "Red Special;" to carry Debs and his entourage into thirty-three states. The final vote was, however, depressing as it barely topped the 1904 total. The belief in inevitable progress was momentarily fractured, and Socialists sought to explain the results by pointing to the profusion of reform platforms and candidates within the major parties. In time reform would run its course, they suggested, and those voters would then turn to socialism. The off-year elections in 1910 encouraged this interpretation, as Victor Berger was elected to the United States Congress from Milwaukee and nearly one hundred Socialists won election to state and local office. Nominated again in 1912 for the fourth consecutive time, Debs led an invigorated party to the polls. The results that November were gratifying, as Debs received nearly one million ballots in the race against the winner Woodrow Wilson, the incumbent William Howard Taft, and former president Theodore Roosevelt. State and local Socialist candidates also did well and in the Southwest, especially Texas and Oklahoma, the party's electoral strength grew astronomically.

As encouraging as the results were, they ultimately represented the high point of Socialist party strength. Following 1912, an electoral decline ensued that did not end until, in the 1920s, there were but a handful of elected Socialist officials nationwide. In part elections themselves proved to be a faulty barometer of socialist consciousness. In the drive to build the vote, socialist principles often gave way to pragmatic political compromise, and party members might ignore the long-term educational value of electoral campaigns in developing a worker self-consciousness. As Debs himself had warned in 1911, "Voting for socialism is not socialism, any more than a menu is a meal." Where elected, Socialist officials often found themselves bound by the expectations of their own supporters to lower taxes. As the young Walter Lippmann pointed out in 1913, after serving a two-year term as secretary to the Socialist mayor of Schenectady, New York, such a tax policy prevented fundamental restructuring of "the returns on privilege.... And because of that, [Socialist] political action in Schenectady must be ineffective." But there was no simple alternative course. If reform politics did not inevitably lead to future Socialist strength, a "purer" revolutionary platform repelled all but a few of the faithful. Ultimately, Debs had to confront the painful realization that, despite the tumultuous crowds that often applauded his talks, the majority of American workers, native and immigrant alike, affirmed their allegiance to the dominant political parties each November. As one Socialist coal miner lamented decades later, remembering his hero: "Poor old Debs! . . . The people wouldn't vote for him the way they should have. He told people the truth, but they went on voting Democrat and Republican."

Debs did not run for the presidency in 1916. In the years since 1912, he had suffered two serious physical collapses and was incapable of sustaining a national campaign. The party nominated Allan Benson in his place, but Debs did run a less demanding campaign that fall. The party ran him as a candidate in Indiana's Fifth Congressional District, which included Terre Haute and its vicinity. The campaign possessed an odd personal tone for the sixty-one-year-old Socialist leader, as he appealed for votes in the same political district that, some thirty years earlier, had applauded him for his more regular political analysis. Debs campaigned hard and finished a distant second to the Republican candidate. Through 1917 and the first half of 1918, Debs was mostly sick, confined in bed or recuperating in a sanitarium. From his sickbed he watched as America entered the First World War and as, under the guise of a national emergency, agents of the state and federal governments arrested Socialists, FWW members, unionists, and dissidents. The Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 broke like a thunder clap on a generally depressed and defensive American socialist movement. If the Russians were successful in a society barely a step from feudalism, many socialists suggested, all that might stand between the dark American present and the future could be hard work and the application of proper tactics. As Debs himself wrote early in 1918, the Russian

Revolution is "the soul of the new-born world," and he declared: "We stand or fall by Russia and the revolution—the whole program clear-cut from start to finish."

In this mood, Debs rose from his sickbed in June 1918 to undertake a series of antiwar speeches. In Canton, Ohio, Debs delivered a stirring speech in which he warned of the dangers to the basic idea of citizenship that the war hysteria encouraged: corporate leaders, he noted, "are today wrapped in the American flag [and] shout their claim from the housetops that they are the only patriots." To counter this debased view of citizenship, Debs raised the memory of earlier American dissenters and reminded the audience they did not stand alone in the current struggle to enable working people to control their "own jobs . . . own labor and be free men instead of industrial slaves." Socialists, Debs concluded, have a "duty to build the new nation and the free republic. We need industrial and social builders. . . . We are pledged to do our part. We are inviting—aye challenging you in the name of your own manhood and womanhood to join us and do your part . . . [to] proclaim the emancipation of the working class and the brotherhood of all mankind."

Two weeks after that speech, Debs was arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Act of 1917 for giving it. Following a trial that September in federal court in Cleveland, the jury found Debs guilty and the judge sentenced him to ten years in federal prison. Appeals delayed his incarceration until the next April, when Debs surrendered and was sent to a prison in Moundsville, West Virginia. That June he was transferred to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, where the climate and stricter prison regime took a toll on the aging Debs. Political affairs also weighed heavily on him. The repression of dissidents of every political persuasion continued throughout 1919, and the Socialist party was in disarray. Already reeling from the arrests, the party confronted another attack from the Left in the form of newly founded American Communist party. The Communists dismissed the Socialist party as lacking proper revolutionary ardor. They attacked their former comrades unstintingly and insisted that they had, in their adherence to the Bolshevik model, the proper tactics and strategy for the American movement. Both Socialists and Communists, moreover, constantly badgered Debs in prison to declare for their side. By 1920, Debs begged off and told both sides that neither his health nor prison regulations (which seriously limited his correspondence) allowed him to enter the debate with full knowledge. That fall, however, federal prisoner 9653 did conduct his fifth and last campaign for the presidency from his jail cell in Atlanta. Debs received nearly one million votes, even as the movement he sought to rejuvenate lay in tatters across the nation.

The Republican, Warren G. Harding, won that 1920 election, and in an unexpected move just before Christmas in 1921, Harding ordered the release of Debs and twenty-three other political prisoners. Debs was elated but found he had little energy for politics. Most of 1922 he spent close to

home, frequently in bed, attempting to restore his body and mind. He was now sixty-seven, and the prison years had taken a severe toll. He did issue a press release affirming his membership in the Socialist party, and toward the end of that year he began to speak in public again. But only on occasion did even flashes of his earlier power and effectiveness appear. It was not just that he was frail—he was—but also that the prewar movement as he knew it no longer existed. The government repression had wreaked havoc on the party, and the more recent nationwide open shop drive, designed to eliminate even the trade union, far more accurately reflected the dominant political tone than did the Communist party's claims for a revolutionary moment. Debs remained weak during these years, and he periodically entered sanitariums in attempts to restore his health. On September 20, 1926, he entered the Lindlahr sanitarium just outside Chicago. He left but one time, bundled in heavy blankets against the sharp October air, for a short drive in the sun. On October 20, after lying unconscious for five days from a massive heart attack, Eugene Victor Debs died.

Debs's record of commitment to working people over more than forty years remains impressive. The evolution of his understanding of the proper structure for unionists was credible and instructive in his own era, although the fruits of that idea appeared more clearly in the 1930s, a decade after he died. Equally impressive was Debs's understanding of the need to reclaim a democratic political tradition from elite domination. His insistence on the intimate interdependence between political ideas and economic life remains his most potent legacy to American society. Despite the resistance to many of his specific programs from many Americans, Debs was a powerful public leader who could evoke the best from his fellow citizens. As one friend wrote the week after he died: "His real moment

lives in the hearts that beat with saddened cadence this week; hearts which dared hope because our 'Gene raised their eyes to the sun."