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## The Debs centennial

James Patrick Cannon

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**EUGENE V.  
DEBS**

**The Socialist Movement  
Of His Time -  
Its Meaning For Today**

by James P. Cannon



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# The Debs Centennial

WRITTEN ON THE 100th ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE BIRTH OF EUGENE V. DEBS

by James P. Cannon



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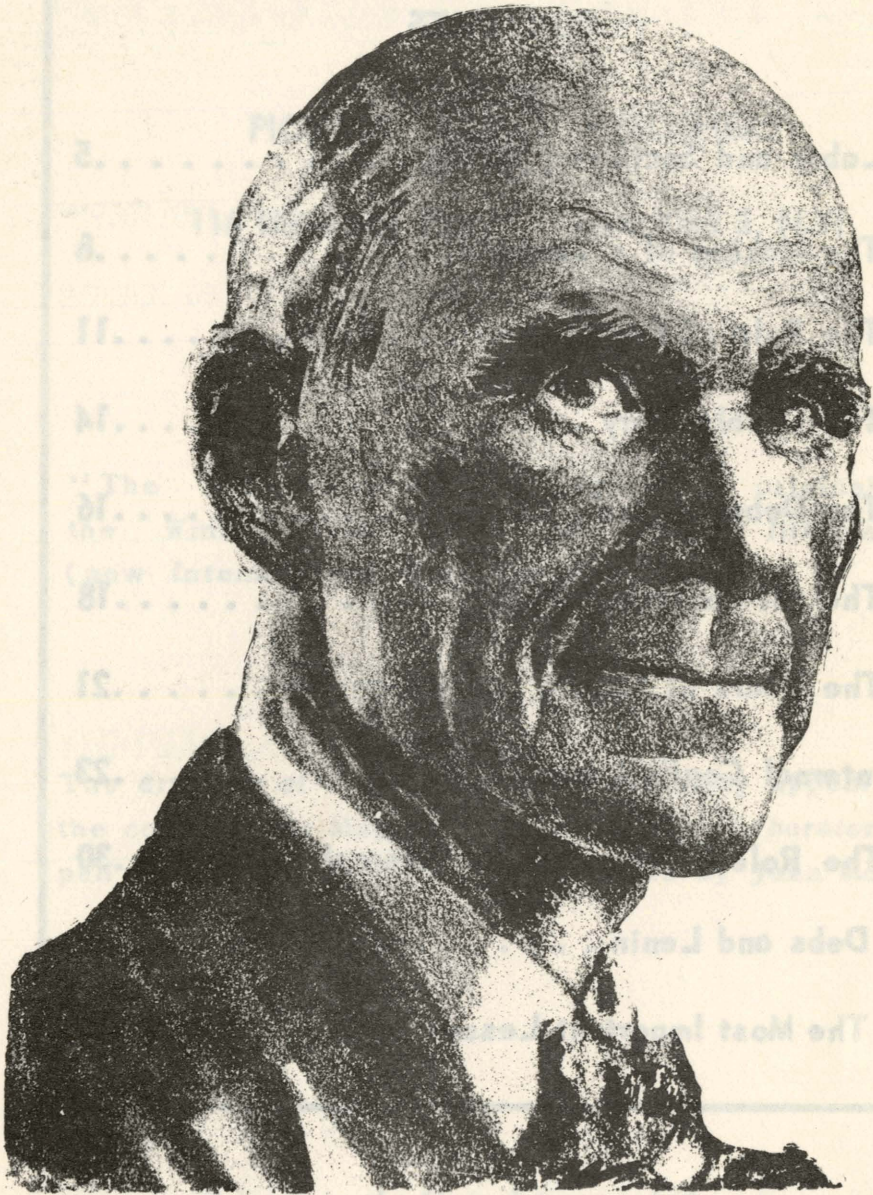
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# The Debs Centennial

## 1. Labor and Socialism Today

**T**HE CENTENNIAL of the birth of Debs coincided with the merger of the AFL and CIO in a year of standstill, which appears to present a mixed picture of progress and reaction.

The organized labor movement as it stands today, with industrial unionism predominant, owes a lot to Debs, but his name was not mentioned at the merger convention. Debs was the greatest of the pioneers of industrial unionism who prepared the way — but that was yesterday. The smug bureaucrats who ran the convention are practical men who live strictly in the present, and they are convinced that progress is something you can see and count, here and now.

They counted approximately 15 million members in the affiliated organizations, and even more millions of dollars in the various treasuries, and found the situation better than ever. The official mood was never more complacent and conservative.

On the other hand, various groups and organizations calling themselves socialists, taking the numerical size of the present-day movement of political radicalism as their own criterion, found nothing to cheer about in Debs' centennial year. They compared the present membership and support of all the radical organizations with the tens of thousands of members and hundreds of thousands of votes



of the Socialist Party in Debs' time, and concluded that things were never so bad. Their celebrations of the Debs Centennial were devoted mainly to nostalgic reminiscences about the "Golden Age of American Socialism" and sighs and lamentations for a return to "the way of Debs."

In my opinion, both of these estimates derive from a misunderstanding of the present reality of the labor movement and of its perspectives for the future. The changes since the time of Debs are not all progressive as the complacent trade-union bureaucrats imagine, and not all reactionary as some others assume, but a combination of both.

The organization of 15 million workers in the AFL-CIO, plus about 2 million more in the independent unions — and the acquisition of a trade-union consciousness that has come with it — represents in itself a progressive achievement of incalculable significance. And more than trade-union expansion is involved in this achievement.

There has been a transformation of the position of the working class in American capitalist society, which is implicitly revolutionary. Properly understood, the achievements on the trade-union field represent a tremendous advance of the cause of American socialism; since the socialist movement is a part of the general movement of the working class, and has no independent interests or meaning of its own.

In addition to that — and no less important — the revolutionary socialist movement of the present, although numerically smaller, is ideologically richer than its predecessors. Insofar as it has assimilated the experience of the past, in this and other countries, and incorporated their lessons in its program, it is better prepared to understand its tasks. That represents progress for American socialism in the highest degree, for in the last analysis the program decides everything.

At the same time, it is obvious that the progressive growth of the industrial labor movement has not been accompanied by a corresponding development of the class-consciousness of the workers. On the contrary, the recent years have seen a decline in this respect; and this is reflected in the numerical weakness of socialist political organization.

That is certainly a reactionary manifestation, but it is far outweighed by the other factors in the situation. The over-all picture is one of tremendous progress of the American working class since the time of Debs. And the present position is a springboard for another forward leap.

In their next advance the organized trade unionists will become class conscious and proceed to class political organization and action. That will be accomplished easier than was the first transformation of a disorganized, atomized class into the organized labor movement of the present day. And most probably it will take less time.

The same conditions and forces, arising from the contradictions of the class society, which produced the one will produce the other. We can take it for granted without fear of going wrong, that the artificial prosperity of present-day American capitalism will explode sooner and more devastatingly than did the more stable prosperity of expanding capitalism in the time of Debs; and that the next explosion will produce deeper changes in the consciousness of the workers than did the crisis of the Thirties, which brought about the CIO.

In the light of that perspective, the work of revolutionary socialists in the present difficult period acquires an extraordinary historical significance. With that prospect in view, the present momentary lull in the class struggle, which gives time for thought and reflection, can be turned to advantage. It can be, and probably will be, one of the richest periods in the history of American socialism — a

period of preparation for great events to come. A study of the socialist movement of the past can be a useful part of this preparation for the future.

That is the only sensible way to observe the Debs Centennial. It should be an occasion, not for nostalgic reminiscence, not for moping and sighing for the return of times and conditions that are gone beyond recall, but for a thoroughgoing examination and critical evaluation of the early socialist movement. It should be seen as a stage of development, not as a pattern to copy. The aim should be to study its defeats as well as its victories, in order to learn something from the whole experience.

The first rule for such an inquiry should be to dig out the truth and to tell it; to represent the Debsian movement as it really was. Debs deserves this, and he can stand it too. Even his mistakes were the mistakes of a giant and a pioneer. In an objective survey they only make his monumental virtues stand out more sharply in contrast.

## **2. The Making of a Socialist**

The real history of America is the history of a process leading up to socialism, and an essential part of that process is the activity of those who see the goal and show it to others. From that point of view Eugene V. Debs is a man to remember. The day of his birth one hundred years ago — November 5, 1855 — was a good day for this country. Debs saw the future and worked for it as no one else has been privileged to do. On the honor roll of the socialist pioneers his name leads all the rest.

The life of Debs is a great American story; but like everything else American, it is partly foreign. He was truly indigenous, about as American as you can get, and he did far more than anyone else to "Americanize" socialism. But he was not, as he is sometimes pictured, the

exponent of a peculiar home-made socialism, figured out all by himself, without benefit of "foreign" ideas and influences.

Debs was the perfect example of an American worker whose life was transformed by the ideas of others, and imported ideas at that. Many influences, national and international, his own experiences and the ideas and actions of others at home and abroad, conspired to shape his life, and then to transform it when he was already on the threshold of middle age.

The employers and their political tools did all they could to help. When President Cleveland sent federal troops to break the strike of the American Railway Union in 1894, and a federal judge put Debs in jail for violating an injunction, they made a great, if unintended, contribution to the auspicious launching of the native American socialist movement.

The inspired agitator began to "study socialism" in Woodstock jail. That was the starting point of the great change in the life of Debs, and thereby in the prospects of socialism in this country. It was to lead a little later to the organization of the first indigenous movement of American socialism under the name of the Socialist Party.

The transformation of Debs, from a progressive unionist and Populist into a revolutionary socialist, didn't happen all at once, as if by a sudden revelation. It took him several more years after he left Woodstock jail, carefully checking the new idea against his own experiences in the class struggle, and experimenting with various reformist and utopian conceptions along the route, to find his way to the revolutionary socialism of Marx and Engels.

But when he finally got it, he got it straight and never changed. Debs learned the basic essentials from Kautsky, the best popularizer of Marxism known in this country.

in the epoch before the First World War. Thereafter the Marxist theory of the class struggle was the central theme of all his agitation. He scornfully denounced the Gompers theory that the interests of capital and labor are identical. And he would have no truck with the delusive theory that capitalism will grow into socialism through a series of reforms.

Debs campaigned for the overthrow of capitalism by workers' revolution, and refused to settle for anything less. As he himself expressed it, he "determined to stick to the main issue and stay on the main track, no matter how alluring some of the by-ways may appear."

Debs was the main influence and most popular attraction making possible the formation of the Socialist Party of America at the "Unity Convention" in 1901, and the party became an important factor in American life mainly because of him.

There had been socialists and socialist organizations in this country for a half century before that; but they had been derailed every time by a combination of objective circumstances and their own misunderstanding of the doctrine they espoused. The original socialists had been mainly utopians of various kinds, or German immigrants who brought their socialist ideas with them and never learned to relate them to American conditions.

Engels who, like Marx, was foreign to no country, saw no future for that kind of socialism in the United States. In his letters to friends in this country, up to the time of his death in 1895, he continuously insisted that American socialism would never amount to anything until it learned to "speak English" and find expression through the native workers.

In Debs the movement finally found a man who really spoke the language of the country, and who knew how

to explain the imported idea of socialism to the American workers in relation to their own experiences.

When he came to socialism, Debs had already attained national fame as a labor leader. He brought to the new party the rich benefits of his reputation and popularity, the splendor of his oratorical gifts, and a great good will to work for the cause. Debs made the difference; Debs, plus conditions at the time which produced an audience ready to respond. With Debs as its outstanding spokesman after the turn of the century, socialism began for the first time to get a hearing in this country.

### **3. The Role of the Agitator**

Part of what I have to say about Debs and the movement he symbolized is the testimony of a witness who was there at the time. The rest is afterthought. My own appreciation of Debs goes all the way back to the beginning of my conscious life as a socialist. I never knew Debs personally, but I heard him speak several times and he loomed large in my life, as in the lives of all other radicals of my generation.

Debs was an ever-present influence in the home where I was raised. My father was a real Debs man — all the way through. Of all the public figures of the time, Debs was his favorite. Debs' character and general disposition, his way of life — his whole radiant personality — appealed strongly to my father.

Most of the pioneer socialists I came to know were like that. They were good people, and they felt warmly toward Debs as one of their own — the best representative of what they themselves were, or wanted to be. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they loved Debs as a man, as a fellow human being, as much as they admired and trusted him as a socialist leader and orator.

My father's political evolution had been along the same line as that of Debs. He had been a "labor man" since the old Knights of Labor days, then a Populist, then a Bryanite in the presidential campaign of '96, and he finally came to socialism, along with Debs, around the turn of the century.

The *Appeal to Reason*, for which Debs was then the chief editorial writer, came to our house in the little town of Rosedale, Kansas, every week. When Moyer and Haywood, then leaders of the Western Federation of Miners, were arrested in 1906 on a framed-up charge of murder, the *Appeal*, with Debs in the lead, opened up a tremendous campaign for their defense. Debs called for revolutionary action to prevent the judicial murder, with his famous declaration: "If they hang Moyer and Haywood, they will have to hang me!"

That was when I first began to take notice of the paper and of Debs. From week to week I was deeply stirred by the thunderous appeals of Debs and the dispatches of George H. Shoaf, the *Appeal's* "war correspondent" in the Western mine fields. My father and other local socialists chipped in to order extra bundles of the paper for free distribution. I was enlisted to help in that work. My first activity for the movement — in the memory of which I still take pride — was to distribute these special Moyer-Haywood editions of the *Appeal* from house to house in Rosedale.

The campaign for the defense of Moyer and Haywood was the biggest socialist action of the time. All the agitation seemed to center around that one burning issue, and it really stirred up the people. I believe it was the action itself, rather than the political arguments, that influenced me most at first. It was an action for justice, and that always appeals powerfully to the heart of youth. My

commitment to the action led to further inquiry into the deeper social issues involved in the affair.

It was this great Moyer-Haywood campaign of Debs and the *Appeal to Reason* that started me on the road to socialism while I was still a boy, and I have always remembered them gratefully for that. In later years I met many people all around the country whose starting impulse had been the same as mine. Debs and the *Appeal to Reason* were the most decisive influences inspiring my generation of native radicals with the great promise of socialism.

Debs was a man of many talents, but he played his greatest role as an agitator, stirring up the people and sowing the seed of socialism far and wide. He was made for that and he gloried in it. The enduring work of Debs and the *Appeal to Reason*, with which he was long associated, was to wake people up, to shake them loose from habits of conformity and resignation, to show them a new road.

Debs denounced capitalism with a tongue of fire, but that was only one side of his agitation. He brought a message of hope for the good time coming. He bore down heavily on the prospect of a new social order based on cooperation and comradeship, and made people see it and believe in it. The socialist movement of the early days was made up, in the main, of people who got their first introduction to socialism in the most elementary form from Debs and the *Appeal to Reason*.

That's a long time ago. In the meantime history has moved at an accelerated pace, here and everywhere else. Many things have happened in the world of which America is a part — but only a part — and these world events have had their influence on American socialism. The modern revolutionary movement has drawn its inspiration and its ideas from many sources and many experiences



since the time of Debs, and these later acquisitions have become an essential part of its program.

But for all that, the movement of the present and the future in the United States is the lineal descendant of the earlier movement for which Debs was the outstanding spokesman, and owes its existence to that pioneering endeavor. The centennial of the birth of Debs is a good time to remind ourselves of that and to take a deeper look at the movement of his time.

#### 4. The Double Story

Those of the younger generation who want to study the ancestral origins of their movement, can easily find the necessary material already assembled. A group of conscientious scholars have been at work reclaiming the record as it was actually written in life and pointing it up with all the necessary documentation.

The published results of their work are already quite substantial. Almost as though in anticipation of the Debs Centennial, we have seen the publication of a number of books on the theme of Debs and American socialism within the last decade.

*The Forging of American Socialism*, by Howard H. Quint, gives an account of the tributary movements and organizations in the nineteenth century and ends with the launching of the Socialist Party at the Unity Convention in 1901.

*The American Socialist Movement—1897-1912*, by Ira Kipnis, takes the story up to the presidential campaign of 1912, and gives an extensive report of the internal conflicts in the Socialist Party up to that time. The reformist leaders of the party come off badly in this account. The glaring contrast between them and Debs is fully documented on every point.

Following that, the Debs Centennial this year coincides with the publication of a rather concise history of *The*

*Socialist Party of America* by David A. Shannon. Professor Shannon's research has evidently been thoroughgoing and his documentary references are valuable. In his interpretation, however, he appears to be moved by a tolerance for the reformist bosses of the party, who did an efficient job of exploiting the popularity of Debs and counteracting his revolutionary policy at the same time.

On top of these historical works, Debs speaks for himself in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*. This priceless volume, published in 1948, contains an "explanatory" introduction by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. which in simple decency had better been left out.

Schlesinger, the sophisticated apologist of American imperialism, has no right to introduce Debs, the thoroughgoing and fully committed revolutionary socialist; and still less right to "explain" him because he can't begin to understand him. Schlesinger's ruminations stick out of this treasury of Debs' own speeches and writings like a dirty thumb; but everything else in the book is clean and clear. It is the real Debs, explained in his own words.

Finally, there is the truly admirable biography of Debs by Ray Ginger, entitled *The Bending Cross*. Following after earlier biographies by David Karsner and McAlister Coleman, Ginger gives a more complete and rounded report. This is a sweet book if there ever was one; the incomparable Gene comes to life in its pages. All the lights and shadows in that marvelous life as it was actually lived are there, the shadows making the lights shine brighter.

\* \* \*

Out of this imposing mass of documentary material — allowing for the shadings of opinion and interpretation by the authors — emerges a pretty clear picture of what the Socialist Party was and what Debs was. Debs was by far the most popular socialist in the heyday of the

party, and in the public mind he stood for the party. But the history of American socialism in the first two decades of this century is a double story.

It is the story of the party itself — its official policies and actions — and the story of the unofficial and largely independent policies and actions of Debs. They were related to each other and they went on at the same time, but they were not the same thing. Debs was in and of the party, but at the same time he was bigger than the party — bigger and better.

## 5. The Debs Legend

Ray Ginger, the biographer of Debs, remarks that he was a legendary figure while he was still alive. Many stories — some of them of doubtful authenticity — were told about him, and many people professed devotion to him for different and even contradictory reasons.

Debs was a many-sided man, the like of which the movement has not seen, and this gave rise to misinterpretations by some who saw only one facet of his remarkable personality; and to misrepresentations by others who knew the whole man but chose to report only that part which seemed to serve their purpose. This business of presenting fragmentary pictures of Debs is still going on.

There is no doubt that Debs was friendly and generous, as befits a socialist, and that he lived by the socialist ideal even in the jungle of class society. For that he was praised more than he was imitated, and attempts were often made to pass him off as a harmless saint. It was the fashion to say that Debs was a good man, but that's not what they put him in prison for. There was nothing saintly about his denunciation of the exploiters of the workers and the labor fakers who preached the brotherhood of workers and exploiters.

For all the complexity of his personality, Debs was as rigidly simple in his dedication to a single idea, and in suiting his actions to his words, as was John Brown, his acknowledged hero. His beliefs and his practices as a socialist agitator were related to each other with a singular consistency in everything he said and did. The record is there to prove it.

He was a famous labor organizer and strike leader — a man of action — long before he came to socialism; and he never lost his love and feel for the firing line of the class struggle after he turned to the platform. Striking workers in trouble could always depend on Gene. He responded to every call, and wherever there was action he was apt to turn up in the thick of it.

Debs was a plain man of the people, of limited formal education, in a party swarming with slick lawyers, professional writers and unctuous doctors of divinity. It was customary for such people to say — flattering themselves by implication — that Debs was a good fellow and a great orator, but not the “brains” of the party; that he was no good for theory and politics.

The truth is, as the documentary record clearly shows, that as a political thinker on the broad questions of working-class policy in his time, Debs was wiser than all the pretentious intellectuals, theoreticians and politicians in the Socialist Party put together. On practically all such questions his judgment was also better than that of any of the left-wing leaders of his time, most of whom turned to syndicalism to one degree or another.

Debs' own speeches and writings, which stand up so well even today, make the Socialist Party for which he spoke appear better than it really was. The simplicity, clarity and revolutionary vigor of Debs were part of the

party's baggage — but only a part. The Socialist Party, by its nature and composition, had other qualities and the other qualities predominated.

## 6. The All-Inclusive Party

The political law that every workers' party develops through internal struggles, splits and unifications is vividly illustrated in the stormy history of the Socialist Party — from start to finish. There is nothing obscure about this history; it is quite fully documented in the historical works previously mentioned.

The Socialist Party came into existence at the "Unity Convention" of 1901, but it had roots in the movements of the past. The new unity followed from and was made possible by a split in the old Socialist Labor Party, which was left on the sidelines in dogmatic isolation; a split in the original, short-lived "Social Democracy," in which Debs and Berger broke away from the utopian colonist elements of that organization; and an earlier split of thousands of native radicals — including Debs and J. A. Wayland, the famed publisher of the *Appeal to Reason* — from the Populist movement, which in its turn, had been "united" with the Democratic Party and swallowed up by it.

These currents of different origins, plus many other local groups and individuals who had begun to call themselves socialists, were finally brought together in one camp in the Socialist Party.

Revolutionists and reformists were present at the first convention, and even after, until the definitive split in 1919. In addition, the new organization made room for a wide variety of people who believed in socialism in general and had all kinds of ideas as to what it really meant and how it was to be achieved. All hues of the

political rainbow, from dogmatic ultra-radicalism to Christian Socialism, showed up in the party from the start.

The mixed assemblage was held together in uneasy unity by a loose organizational structure that left all hands free from any real central control. The principle of "States' Rights" was written into the constitution by a provision for the complete autonomy of the separate state organizations; each one retained the right to run its own affairs and, by implication, to advocate its own brand of socialism. Decentralization was further reinforced by the refusal to sanction a national official organ of the party. This measure was designed to strengthen the local and state publications — and incidentally, the local bosses such as Berger — in their own bailiwicks.

The party's principle of the free press included "free enterprise" in that domain. The most influential national publications of large circulation — *Appeal to Reason*, *Wilshire's Magazine*, *The Ripsaw*, and *The International Socialist Review* — were all privately owned. The individual owners interpreted socialism as they saw fit and the party members had no say, and this was accepted as the natural order of things.

To complete the picture of a socialist variety store, each party speaker, writer, editor and organizer, and — in actual practice — each individual, promoted his own kind of socialism in his own way; and the general unification, giving rise to the feeling of greater strength, stimulated all of them to greater effort. The net result was that socialism as a general idea got a good work-out, and many thousands of people heard about it for the first time, and accepted it as a desirable goal.

That in itself was a big step forward, although the internal conflict of tendencies was bound to store up problems and difficulties for the future. Such a hetero-

geneous party was made possible, and perhaps was historically justified as an experimental starting point, by the conditions of the time.

The socialist movement, such as it was, was new in this country. In its experiences, as well as in its thinking, it lagged far behind the European movement. The different groups and tendencies espousing socialism had yet to test out the possibility of working out a common policy by working together in a single organization. The new Socialist Party provided an arena for the experiment.

The trade unions embraced only a narrow stratum of the skilled and privileged workers; the problem of organizing the basic proletariat in the trustified industries — the essential starting point in the development of a real class movement — had not yet been seriously tackled. It was easier to organize general centers of radicalism, in the shape of socialist locals, than industrial unions which brought down the direct and immediate opposition of the entrenched employers in the basic industries.

In the country at large there was widespread discontent with the crude brutalities of expanding capitalism, just entering into its first violent stage of trustification and crushing everything in its path. Workers, exploited without the restraints of union organization; tenant and mortgaged farmers waging an unequal struggle to survive on the land; and small businessmen squeezed to the wall by the trend to monopolization — they all felt the oppression of the "money power" and were looking about for some means of defense and protest.

The ruling capitalists, for their part, were happy with things as they were. They thought everything was fine and saw no need of ameliorating reforms. The two big political parties of capitalism had not yet developed the flexibility and capacity for reformist demagoguery which

they displayed in later decades; they stood pat on the status quo and showed little interest in the complaints of its victims. The collapse of the Populist Party had left a political vacuum.

The stage was set in the first decade of the present century for a general movement of social protest. And the new Socialist Party, with its appeal to all people with grievances, and its promise of a better deal all the way around in a new social order, soon became its principal rallying center.

## 7. The Years of Growth and Expansion

With Debs as its presidential candidate and most popular agitator, and powerfully supported by the widely-circulated *Appeal to Reason*, the new party got off to a good start and soon began to snowball into a movement of imposing proportions. Already in 1900, as the presidential candidate of the new combination of forces before the formal unification in the following year, Debs polled nearly 100,000 votes. This was about three times the vote for a presidential candidate of any previous socialist ticket.

In 1904 the Debs vote leaped to 402,283, a sensational four-fold increase; and many people, calculating the *rate* of growth, began to predict a socialist majority in the foreseeable future. In 1908 the presidential vote remained stationary at 420,713; but this electoral disappointment was more than counter-balanced by the organizational growth of the party.

In the intervening four years the party membership had doubled, going from 20,763 in 1904 to 41,751 in 1908. (Official figures cited by Shannon.) The party still had the wind in its sails, and the next four years saw spectacular advances all along the line.

Socialist mayors were elected all the way across the country from Schenectady, New York, to Berkeley, Cali-



fornia, with Milwaukee, the home of small-time municipal reform socialism — almost as famous and even milder than its beer — the shining light in between.

We had a socialist mayor in New Castle, Pennsylvania, when I was there in 1912-1913, working on *Solidarity*, eastern organ of the IWW. Ohio, a center of "red socialism," had a number of socialist mayors in the smaller industrial towns. On a tour for the IWW Akron rubber strike in 1913, I spoke in the City Hall at St. Marys, Ohio, with Scott Wilkins, the socialist mayor of the town, as chairman of the meeting. Scott was a "red socialist," friendly to the IWW.

By 1912, according to official records cited by Kipnis, the party had "more than one thousand of its members elected to political office in 337 towns and cities. These included 56 mayors, 305 aldermen and councilmen, 22 police officials, 155 school officials and four pound-keepers."

If the transformation of society from capitalism to socialism was simply a process of electing enough socialist mayors and aldermen, as a great many leaders of the Socialist Party — especially its candidates for office — fervently believed, the great change was well underway by 1912.

In the campaign of 1912 the socialist cause was promoted by 323 papers and periodicals — five dailies, 262 weeklies and 10 monthlies, plus 46 publications in foreign languages, of which eight were dailies. The *Appeal to Reason*, always the most widely read socialist paper, reached a circulation of over 600,000 in that year. The party membership, from a claimed 10,000 (probably an exaggeration) at the formation of the party 11 years earlier, had climbed to an average of 117,984 dues-payers for 1912, according to official records cited by Shannon.

In the 1912 presidential election Debs polled 897,000 votes on the Socialist ticket. This was before woman suffrage, and it was about six percent of the total vote that year. Proportionally, this showing would represent more than three million votes in the 1952 election.

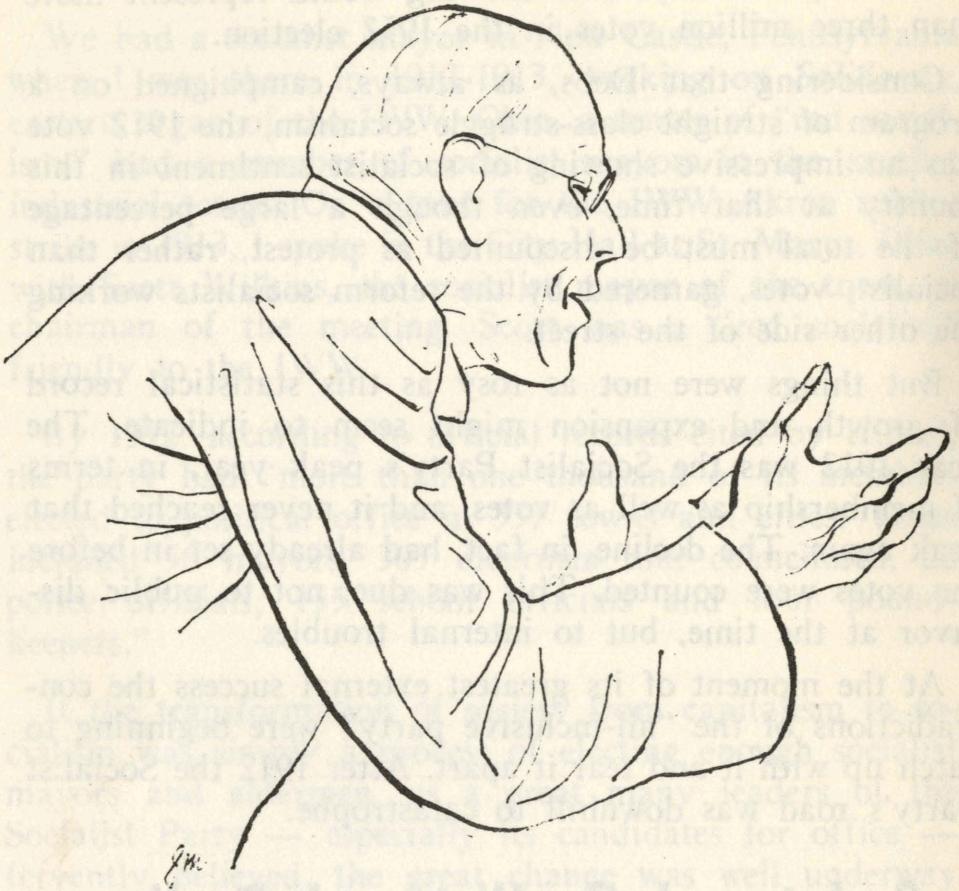
Considering that Debs, as always, campaigned on a program of straight class-struggle socialism, the 1912 vote was an impressive showing of socialist sentiment in this country at that time, even though a large percentage of the total must be discounted as protest, rather than socialist, votes, garnered by the reform socialists working the other side of the street.

But things were not as rosy as this statistical record of growth and expansion might seem to indicate. The year 1912 was the Socialist Party's peak year, in terms of membership as well as votes, and it never reached that peak again. The decline, in fact, had already set in before the votes were counted. This was due, not to public disfavor at the time, but to internal troubles.

At the moment of its greatest external success the contradictions of the "all-inclusive party" were beginning to catch up with it and tear it apart. After 1912 the Socialist Party's road was downhill to catastrophe.

## **8. Internal Conflict and Decline**

The Socialist Party was more radical in its first years than it later became. The left wing was strong at the founding convention and still stronger at the second convention in 1904. As we see it now, the original left wing was faulty in some of its tactical positions; but it stood foursquare for industrial unionism and took a clear and definite stand on the basic principle of the class struggle — the essential starting point of any real socialist policy. The class struggle was the dominant theme of the party's pronouncements in its first — and best — period.



### EUGENE V. DEBS

**"The supreme need of the hour is a sound, revolutionary working class organization. . . It must express the class struggle. It must recognize the class lines. It must, of course, be class conscious. It must be totally uncompromising. It must be an organization of the rank and file."**

A loose alliance of the left and center constituted the party majority at that time. The right-wing faction led by Berger, the Milwaukee slow-motion, step-at-a-time municipal reformer, was a definite minority. But the opportunists fought for control of the party from the very beginning. As a pressure tactic in the fight, Berger threatened, at least once a year, to split off his Wisconsin section.

Soon after the 1904 convention the centrists led by Hillquit combined with the Milwaukee reformists against the proletarian left wing. Thereafter the policy of Berger — with a few modifications provided by Hillquit to make it go down easier — became the prevailing policy of the party. With this right-wing combination in control, “political action” was construed as the pure and simple business of socialists getting elected and serving in public office, and the party organization became primarily an electoral machine.

The fight for industrial unionism — the burning issue of the labor movement championed by Debs and the left wing — was abandoned and betrayed by the opportunists in the hope of propitiating the AFL bureaucracy and roping in the votes of conservative craft unionists. The doctrine of socialism was watered down to make it more acceptable to “respectable” middle-class voters. The official Socialist Party turned more and more from the program of the class struggle to the scramble for electoral success by a program of reform.

This transformation did not take place all at once and without internal convulsions. The battle between left and right — the revolutionists and the reformists — raged without let-up in all sections of the party. Many locals and state organizations were left-wing strongholds, and there is little room for doubt that the majority sentiment of the rank and file leaned toward the left.

Debs, who voiced the sentiments of the rank and file more sensitively and accurately than anyone else, always stood for the class-struggle policy, and always made the same kind of speeches no matter what the official party platform said. But Debs poured out all his energies in external agitation; the full weight of his overwhelming influence was never brought to bear in the internal struggle.

The professional opportunists, on the other hand, worked at internal party politics all the time. They wangled their way into control of the national party machinery, and used it unscrupulously in their unceasing factional maneuvers and manipulations. They fought, not only to impose their policy on an unwilling party, whose majority never trusted them, but also to drive out the revolutionary workers who consciously opposed them.

In 1910 Victor Berger, promoting the respectable reformist brand of socialism, was elected as the first socialist congressman; and a socialist city administration was swept into office in Milwaukee in the same year. These electoral victories had the double effect of strengthening the reformist influence in the party and of stimulating the hunger and thirst for office in other parts of the country by the Milwaukee method. Municipal elections, in which the opportunist wing of the party specialized, on a program of petty municipal reform, yielded many victories for socialist office-seekers, if not for socialism.

Says Kipnis: "Few of these local victories were won on the issue of capitalism versus socialism. In fact, this issue was usually kept well in the background. The great majority of Socialists elected to office between 1910 and 1912 were ministers and professional men who conducted their successful campaigns on reform questions that appeared crucial in their own communities; local option,

prohibition, liquor law enforcement; corruption, inefficiency, maladministration, graft, and extravagance; bipartisan combinations, boss and gang rule, and commission government; public improvements, aid to schools, playgrounds, and public health; municipal ownership, franchises, and equitable taxation; and, in a small minority of the elections, industrial depression and labor disputes."

\* \* \*

The steady shift of the official policy from the class struggle to reformist gradualism, and the appeal to moderation and respectability that went with it, had its effects on the social composition of the party. Drove of office-hunting careerists, ministers of the gospel, businessmen, lawyers and other professional people were attracted to the organization which agreeably combined the promise of free and easy social progress with possible personal advantages for the ambitious. In large part they came, not to serve in the ranks but to take charge and run the show. Lawyers, professional writers and preachers became the party's most prominent spokesmen and candidates for office.

At a Christian Socialist Congress in 1908 it was claimed that more than 300 preachers belonged to the Socialist Party. The preachers were all over the place; and in the nature of things they exerted their influence to blunt the edge of party policy. Kipnis pertinently remarks: "Since the Christian Socialists based their analysis on the brotherhood of man rather than on the class struggle, they aligned themselves with the opportunist, rather than the revolutionary, wing of the party."

The revolutionary workers in the party ranks were repelled by this middle-class invasion, as well as by the policy that induced it. Thousands left the party by the

other door. Part of them, recoiling against the parliamentary idiocy of the official policy, renounced "politics" altogether and turned onto the by-path of syndicalism. Others simply dropped out. Thousands of revolutionary-minded workers, first-class human material out of which a great party might have been built, were scattered and lost to the movement in this period.

The revolutionary militants who remained in the party found themselves fighting a losing battle as a minority, without adequate leadership. In a drawn-out process the "all-inclusive" Socialist Party was being transformed into a predominantly reformist organization in which revolutionary workers were no longer welcome.

At the 1912 convention the right-wing majority mobilized to finish the job. They pushed through an amendment to the constitution committing the party to bourgeois law and order, and proscribing the advocacy of any methods of working-class action which might infringe upon it. This amendment — the notorious "Article 11, Section 6" — which later was included almost verbatim in the "Criminal Syndicalism" laws adopted by various states to outlaw the IWW — read as follows:

"Any member of the party who opposes political action or advocates crime, sabotage, or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class to aid in its emancipation shall be expelled from membership in the party. Political action shall be construed to mean participation in elections for public office and practical legislative and administrative work along the lines of the Socialist Party platform."

This trickily worded amendment was deliberately designed to split the party by forcing out the revolutionary workers. This aim was largely realized. The convention action was followed by the recall of Bill Haywood, the fighting leader of the left wing, from the National Execu-

tive Committee, and a general exodus of revolutionary workers from the party.

The reformist bosses had also calculated that their demonstration of respectability would gain more recruits and more votes for the Socialist Party, if not for socialism. But in this they were sadly disappointed. The party membership declined precipitately after that, and so did the votes. By 1916 the party membership was down to an average of 83,138, a drop of close to 35,000 from the 1912 average. And the party vote that year — with Benson, a reformist, as presidential candidate in place of Debs — fell to 588,113, a decline of one-third from the Debs vote of 1912.

The Socialist Party never recovered from the purge of 1912, and came up to the First World War in a weakened condition. The war brought further mass desertions — this time primarily from the right-wing elements, who were finding the struggle for socialism far more difficult and dangerous than the program of reformist gradualism had made it appear. At the same time, the war, and then the Russian Revolution, also brought a new influx of foreign-born workers who swelled the membership of the language federations and provided a new base of support for a reinvigorated left wing.

This new left wing, armed with the great ideas of the Russian Revolution, fought far more effectively than its predecessor. There was no disorganized withdrawal and dispersal this time. The opportunist leaders, finding themselves in a minority, resorted to wholesale expulsions, and the split became definitive. The new left wing emerged from the internal struggle and split as the Communist Party.

The new Communist Party became the pole of attraction for all the vital elements in American radicalism in



the next decade. The Socialist Party was left on the sidelines; after the split it declined steadily. The membership in 1922 was down to 11,277; and by 1928 it had declined to 7,793, of which almost half were foreign-language affiliates. (All figures from official records cited by Shannon.)

Debs remained a member of the shattered organization, but that couldn't save it. Nothing could save it. The Socialist Party had lost its appeal to the rebel youth, and not even the magic name of Debs could give it credit any more. The great agitator died in 1926. In the last years of his life the Socialist Party had less members and less influence — less everything — than it had started with a quarter of a century before.

## **9. The Role of Debs in the Internal Conflict**

The Socialist Party was bound to change in any case. It could begin as an all-inclusive political organization, hospitably accommodating all shades and tendencies of radical thought; but it could not permanently retain the character of its founding days. It was destined, by its nature, to move toward a more homogeneous composition and a more definite policy. But the direction of the change, and the eventual transformation of the party into a reformist electoral machine, were not predetermined. Here individuals, by their actions and omissions, played their parts, and the most decisive part of all was played by Debs.

The role of Debs in the internal struggles of the Socialist Party is one of the most interesting and instructive aspects of the entire history of the movement. By a strange anomaly, the conduct of this irreproachable revolutionist was the most important single factor enabling the reform-

ist right wing to control the party and drive out the revolutionary workers.

He didn't want it that way, and he could have prevented it, but he let it happen just the same. That stands out clearly in the record, and it cannot be glossed over without falsifying the record and concealing one of the most important lessons of the whole experience.

Debs was by far the most popular and influential member of the party. If he had thrown his full weight into the internal conflict there is no doubt that he could have carried the majority with him. But that he would never do. At every critical turning point he stepped aside. His abstention from the fight was just what the reformists needed to win, and they could not have won without it.

Debs never deviated from the class-struggle line in his own public agitation. He fought steadfastly for industrial unionism, and he never compromised or dodged that issue as the official party did. He had no use for vote-catching nostrums. He was opposed to middle-class intellectuals and preachers occupying positions of leadership in the party. His stand against the war was magnificent. He supported the Russian Revolution and proclaimed himself a Bolshevik.

On all these basic issues his sympathies were always consistently with the left wing, and he frequently took occasion to make his own position clear in the *International Socialist Review*, the organ of the left wing. But that's as far as he would go. Having stated his position, he withdrew from the conflict every time.

This seems paradoxical, for Debs certainly was no pacifist. In the direct class struggle of the workers against the capitalists Debs was a fighter beyond reproach. Nothing and nobody could soften him up or cool his anger

in that domain. He didn't waste any of his good nature on the capitalist-minded labor fakers either.

Debs' blind spot was the narrower, but no less important, field of internal party politics and organization. On that field he evaded the fight. This evasion was not inspired by pacifism; it followed from his own theory of the party.

As far as I know, Debs' theory of the party was never formally stated, but it is clearly indicated in the course he consistently followed in all the internal conflicts of the party — from beginning to end. He himself always spoke for a revolutionary program. But at the same time he thought the party should have room for other kinds of socialists; he stood for an all-inclusive socialist party, and party unity was his first consideration.

Debs was against expulsions and splits from either side. He was opposed to the split in 1919 and saddened by it. Even after the split had become definitive, and the Rights and Lefts had parted company for good, he still appealed for unity.

Debs believed that all who called themselves socialists should work together in peace and harmony in one organization. For him all members of the party, regardless of their tendency, were comrades in the struggle for socialism, and he couldn't stand quarreling among comrades.

This excellent sentiment, which really ought to govern the relations between comrades who are united on the basic principles of the program, usually gets lost in the shuffle when factions fight over conflicting programs which express conflicting class interests. The reformists see to that, if the revolutionists don't. That's the way it was in the Socialist Party. Debs held aloof from the factions, but that didn't stop the factional struggles. And there was not much love lost in them either.

Debs' course in the internal conflicts of the party was also influenced by his theory of leadership, which he was inclined to equate with bureaucracy. He deliberately limited his own role to that of an agitator for socialism; the rest was up to the rank and file.

His repeated declarations — often quoted approvingly by thoughtless people — that he was not a leader and did not want to be a leader, were sincerely meant, like everything else he said. But the decisive role that leadership plays in every organization and every collective action cannot be wished away. Debs' renunciation of leadership created a vacuum that other leaders — far less worthy — came to fill. And the program they brought with them was not the program of Debs.

Debs had an almost mystic faith in the rank and file, and repeatedly expressed his confidence that, with good will all around, the rank and file, with its sound revolutionary instincts, would set everything straight. Things didn't work out that way, and they never do. The rank and file, in the internal conflicts of the party, as in the trade unions, and in the broader class struggle, can assert its will only when it is organized; and organization never happens by itself. It requires leadership.

Debs' refusal to take an active part in the factional struggle, and to play his rightful part as the leader of an organized left wing, played into the hands of the reformist politicians. There his beautiful friendliness and generosity played him false, for the party was also an arena of the struggle for socialism. Debs spoke of "the love of comrades" — and he really meant it — but the opportunist sharpers didn't believe a word of it. They never do. They waged a vicious, organized fight against the revolutionary workers of the party all the time. And they were the gainers from Debs' abstention.

Debs' mistaken theory of the party was one of the most

of the most costly mistakes a revolutionist ever made in the entire history of the American movement.

The strength of capitalism is not in itself and its own institutions; it survives only because it has bases of support in the organizations of the workers. As we see it now, in the light of what we have learned from the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, nine-tenths of the struggle for socialism is the struggle against bourgeois influence in the workers' organizations, including the party.

The reformist leaders were the carriers of bourgeois influence in the Socialist Party, and at bottom the conflict of factions was an expression of the class struggle. Debs obviously didn't see it that way. His aloofness from the conflict enabled the opportunists to dominate the party machine and to undo much of his great work as an agitator for the cause.

Debs' mistaken theory of the party was one of the most important reasons why the Socialist Party, which he did more than anyone else to build up, ended so disgracefully and left so little behind.

## 10. Debs and Lenin

Here we can make an instructive comparison between the course of Debs — to whom we owe so much — and that of Lenin — to whom we owe even more.

As we see them in their words and works, which were always in harmony, they were much alike in character — honest and loyal in all circumstances; unselfish; big men, free from all pettiness. For both of them the general welfare of the human race stood higher than any concerns of self. Each of them, in his own way, has given us an example of a beautiful, heroic life devoted to a single idea which was also an ideal. There was a difference in one of their conceptions of method to realize the ideal.

Both men started out from the assumption that the transformation of society requires a workers' revolution. But Lenin went a step farther. He saw the workers' revolution as a concrete actuality of this epoch; and he concerned himself particularly with the question of how it was to be prepared and organized.

Lenin believed that for victory the workers required a party fit to lead a revolution; and to him that meant a party with a revolutionary program and leadership — a party of revolutionists. He concentrated the main energies of his life on the construction of just such a party, and on the struggle to keep it free from bourgeois ideas and influences.

Lenin recognized that this involved internal discussion and conflict, and he never shirked it. The Menshevik philistines — the Russian counterparts of the American Bergers and Hillquits — hated him for that, especially for his single-minded concentration on the struggle for a revolutionary program, and for his effectiveness in that struggle, but that did not deter him. Lenin believed in his bones that the internal problems of the party were the problems of the revolution, and he was on top of them all the time.

After 1904 Debs consistently refused to attend party conventions, where policy was decided, and always declined nomination for the National Committee, where policy was interpreted and put into practice. Lenin's attitude was directly opposite. He saw the Party Congress as the highest expression of party life, and he was always on hand there, ready to fight for his program. He regarded the Central Committee as the executive leadership of the movement, and he took his place at the head of it.

Lenin wrote a whole book about the conflict at the Second Congress of the party in 1903, where the first

basic division between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks took place. He was in his element there, in that internal struggle which was to prove so fateful for the Russian Revolution and the future of all mankind.

Contrasting his own feeling about it to that of another delegate dismayed by the conflict, Lenin wrote:

"I cannot help recalling in this connection a conversation I happened to have at the Congress with one of the 'Centre' delegates. 'How oppressive the atmosphere is at our Congress!' he complained. 'This bitter fighting, this agitation one against the other, this biting controversy, this uncomradely attitude . . .'

"'What a splendid thing our Congress is!' I replied. 'A free and open struggle. Opinions have been stated. The shades have been brought out. The groups have taken shape. Hands have been raised. A decision has been taken. A stage has been passed. Forward! That's the stuff for me! That's life! That's not like the endless, tedious, word-chopping of intellectuals which terminates not because the question has been settled, but because they are too tired to talk any more . . .'

"The comrade of the 'Centre' stared at me in perplexity and shrugged his shoulders. We were talking in different languages." (*One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*, p. 225 footnote.)

In her book, *Memories of Lenin*, Krupskaya, his widow, quoted those words of Lenin with the remark: "That quotation sums up Ilyich to a 't'."

The practical wisecracks in Lenin's time looked disdainfully at the ideological conflicts of the Russian emigres, and regarded Lenin as a sectarian fanatic who loved factional squabbling for its own sake. But Lenin was not fighting over trifles. He saw the struggle against opportunism in the Russian Social Democratic Party as an

essential part of the struggle for the revolution. That's why he plunged into it.

It is important to remember that the Bolshevik Party, constructed in the course of that struggle, became the organizer and leader of the greatest revolution in history.

## 11. The Most Important Lesson

Debs and Lenin, united on the broad program of revolutionary socialism, were divided on the narrower question of the character and role of the party. This turned out to be the most important question of our epoch for socialists in this country, as in every other country.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 clarified the question. Lenin's party of revolutionists stood up and demonstrated its historical rightness at the same time that the all-inclusive party of Debs was demonstrating its inadequacy.

This is the most important lesson to be derived from the experiences in the two countries, so far apart from each other yet so interdependent and alike in their eventual destiny.

The validity of the comparison is not impaired by reference to the well-known fact that Russia came to a revolutionary situation before America, which hasn't come to it yet. Lenin's greatest contribution to the success of the Russian Revolution was the work of *preparation* for it. That began with the construction of a revolutionary party in a time of reaction, *before* the revolution; and the Bolshevik Party, in turn, began with *Lenin's theory of the party*.

The Socialist Party of Debs' time has to be judged, not for its failure to lead a revolution, but for its failure to work with that end in view and to select its membership accordingly. Socialism signifies and requires the revolutionary transformation of society; anything less than that is mere bourgeois reform. A socialist party deserves the



name only to the extent that it acts as the conscious agency in preparing the workers for the necessary social revolution. That can only be a party of revolutionists; an all-inclusive party of diverse elements with conflicting programs will not do.

The achievements of American socialism in the early years of the present century are not to be discounted, but it would be well to understand just what these achievements were. The movement, of which the party was the central organizing force, gave many thousands of people their first introduction to the general perspective of socialism; and it provided the arena where the main cadres of the revolutionary movement of the future were first assembled. These were the net results that remained after everything else became only a memory, and they stand to the historic credit of the early Socialist Party — above all to Debs.

But these irrevocable achievements were rather the by-products of an experimental form of socialist organization which, by its nature, could only be transitory. By including petty-bourgeois reformists and proletarian revolutionists in one political organization, the Socialist Party, presumed to be an instrument of the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists, was simply introducing a form of the class struggle into its own ranks. The result was unceasing internal conflict from the first day the party was constituted. The eventual breakup of the party, and the decision of the revolutionary elements to launch a party of their own, was the necessary outcome of the whole experiment.

In the Russian movement Lenin saw all that beforehand, and the revolution was the gainer for it. After the Russian Revolution, the left wing of the American Socialist Party, and some of the syndicalists too, recognized the

superiority of Lenin's method. Those who took the program of socialism seriously had no choice but to follow the path of Lenin. The Bolshevik Party of Lenin rightly became the model for the revolutionary workers in all countries, including this country.

The launching of the Communist Party in 1919 represented, not simply a break with the old Socialist Party, but even more important a break with the whole conception of a common party of revolutionists and opportunists. That signified a new beginning for American socialism, far more important historically than everything that had happened before, including the organization of the Socialist Party in 1901. There can be no return to the out-lived and discredited experiment of the past.

The reconstituted movement has encountered its own difficulties and made its own mistakes since that new beginning in 1919. But these are of a different order from the difficulties and mistakes of the earlier time and have to be considered separately. In any case, the poor ideological equipment of the old movement cannot help in their solution.

The struggle against the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism, the prerequisite for the construction of an honest revolutionary party, requires weapons from a different arsenal. Here also the Russian are our teachers. The programmatic weapons for the fight against Stalinist treachery were given to us by Trotsky, the coequal and successor of Lenin.

There can be no return to the past of the American movement. In connection with the Debs Centennial some charlatans, who measure the worth of a socialist movement by its numerical strength at the moment, have discovered new virtues in the old Socialist Party, which

polled so many votes in the time of Debs, and have recommended a new experiment on the same lines. Besides its worthlessness as advice to the socialist vanguard of the present day, that prescription does an injustice to the memory of Debs.

He deserves to be honored for his great positive contributions to the cause of socialism, not for his mistakes. The life work of Debs, as the foremost agitator for socialism we have ever had, as the man of principle who always stood at his post in the class struggle in times of danger and difficulty, will always remain a treasured heritage of the revolutionary workers.

It is best — and it is enough — to honor him for that. The triumph of the cause he served so magnificently will require a different political instrument — a different kind of party — than the one he supported. The model for that is the party of Lenin.



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