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## “Prisoner No. 9,653: Eugene Debs on capitalism, incarceration, and solidarity”<sup>108</sup>

Peter Cole

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Eugene Debs (1855–1926) might be the most important, influential, and well-known anti-capitalist in U.S. History. He’s best known as a co-founder of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and its four-time presidential candidate. Before that, he led the American Railway Union (ARU) which, in solidarity with striking workers of a railroad company, pulled off perhaps the greatest work stoppage of the late nineteenth century. He also helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a revolutionary union whose members are known as Wobblies.

In addition to being a respected labor and political leader, and a brilliant speaker, late in life he became a ferocious critic of prisons based upon his own experiences with incarceration. He had served six months in prison for his role in leading the Pullman boycott and strike in 1894. Then, in 1918, he was sentenced to ten years in prison for his outspoken opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I. His criticism of what now is called the prison-industrial complex was rooted in his personal experience which, itself, was part of his larger critique of capitalism.

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<sup>108</sup> This essay was adapted from my keynote presentation at the conference of the Eugene V. Debs Foundation, “‘While There is a Soul in Prison, I Am Not Free’: The History of Solidarity in Social and Economic Justice,” in April 2021. Thanks to Wes Bishop, the Eugene V. Debs Foundation, the Cunningham Memorial Library, and the Indiana State University Department of History.

This essay contends that his embrace of working-class notions of solidarity and class struggle, along with his hopes and dreams for socialism, were based in his experiences as a worker, unionist, and prisoner. While not considered a “prison abolitionist” by most, it is instructive to locate Debs in that movement. He believed that capitalism was the root cause of the problems with mass incarceration: “Capitalism and crime have become almost synonymous.”<sup>109</sup> Hence, prisons were emblematic of the broader issue that capitalism created inequality and poverty that could and should be eradicated with socialism.

In recent years, Debs has been experiencing something of a renaissance. Obviously, Debs coming into vogue is due to the renewed interest in socialism as evidenced, for instance, by the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the mid-2010s and early 2020s. A brief investigation of Debs’s life offers much about labor and political organizing as well as the movement against mass incarceration.

The life of Eugene Victor Debs, best described by his biographer Nick Salvatore, very much defined American life from the mid-19th into the early 20th twentieth centuries. No doubt his popularity was due, in part, to the fact so many others could relate to him—i.e., he was “of the people.” Debs was born in 1855, shortly before the Civil War, to immigrants from the Alsace region of France. He was born and raised in Terre Haute, Indiana, on the state’s western edge and along the eastern banks of the Wabash River, just across from Illinois. In the 1850s, Terre Haute still was something of a frontier town. It also was something of a boom town—benefiting from its location on the Wabash but also thanks to the multiple, important railroad lines that passed through the region.

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<sup>109</sup> Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 171.

At fourteen, Debs ended his formal schooling and found work on the railroads. He first cleaned grease from the trucks (or wheels), a dirty and dangerous if vital job. Then he became a painter and car cleaner in railroad shops; later, and for many decades, he kept a small tool he had used to scrape paint—displayed on a wall of his house. After cleaning and painting trains, he worked as a fireman (or stoker) for a few years; stokers shoveled coal into the furnace that powered the steam-driven engines that transformed the US into the world’s mightiest industrial country in the world. Stoking was hard, hot, and dangerous. Although he worked on the railroads for only five or six years, Debs’s experiences were quite formative to his worldview. He said as much at his federal trial, in 1918: “At 14, I went to work in a railroad shop. At 16, I was firing a freight engine on a railroad.”<sup>110</sup>

By the age of twenty, he no longer worked on the railways, settling back in his hometown. Instead, he worked as a clerk in a dry good store. Although comfortable, he wanted more, so he ran for and was elected to several political offices, at the local and state levels, as a Democrat. However, he quickly became disillusioned with mainstream electoral politics. Instead, he found his life’s calling as the editor of his union’s newspaper, *Firemen’s Magazine*, and then as grand secretary-treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. In 1885 he married Katherine “Kate” Metzel, also from the same Indiana town. While Kate maintained the house in Terre Haute for the rest of her life, Debs traveled constantly and for many decades. They never had children and she rarely traveled with her husband. Arguably, he was closer with his younger brother Theodore, who was a constant companion and confidante.

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<sup>110</sup> Debs, *Debs and the War*, 40.

In 1893, Debs played a pivotal role in forming the ARU, which elected him as its first president. The ARU was founded as an industrial union, in stark contrast to the typical railroad craft unions, including Debs' old one. Called brotherhoods, the railroad industry's craft unions were conservative, meaning they solely focused on the material interests of members and nothing more—also nicknamed “bread-and-butter” or “pure-and-simple” unionism. By contrast, the ARU was industry wide, meaning any worker in any craft in the industry could belong. Debs and other founders of the ARU were influenced by the Knights of Labor, the first powerful union to emerge, in the mid-1880s, as a national force. Simply put, industrial unionists believed workers were far weaker when divided into different craft unions. They were well aware railroads were the largest, wealthiest, most powerful corporations the country had ever seen and believed workers only could stand up to them by uniting everyone in the industry. After all, the brotherhoods clearly had failed to amass sufficient power to challenge the railroads. Industrial unionists hoped to counter the wealth and political influence of corporations with superior numbers and solidarity.

Debs also was mindful of the pervasive nature of white supremacy deeply dividing the U.S. working class which was, and remains, far more diverse than the middle and upper classes. In the Gilded Age, Debs was quite unusual among white unionists in loudly advocating for equality for African Americans, including in unions. At the ARU founding convention, Debs spoke in favor of opening membership to Black railroaders; however, the majority rejected this proposal. This vote was indicative of the racist line that most working-class white Americans refused to cross. While Debs had not embraced Socialism as a philosophy yet, he already embraced a commonsense notion of solidarity that is socialism's foundation.

Despite this setback, within months the ARU demonstrated real promise. The ARU quickly had become the country's largest union, with over 100,000 members. In April 1894, the ARU defeated the powerful Great Northern Railway in a strike that reverberated across the land.

The following month, the ARU—with Debs at the helm—undertook the largest, arguably most important strike of the era. The previous year, the worst depression of the still-young American industrial economy had begun. Nicknamed the Panic of 1893 though it lasted five years, millions of workers were laid off by businesses in a desperate attempt to avoid going bankrupt though many still did. Just south of Chicago, the Pullman Palace Car Company, the country's leading manufacturer of dining and sleeper railroad cars, fired many workers while the rest saw their wages slashed. Worse, their rent was not reduced; since the Pullman company was both an employer of and landlord for many workers in the town of Pullman, cutting wages without cutting rent was a double blow few could handle.

Many Pullman workers belonged to the ARU, and this local declared a strike in May 1894. In solidarity, albeit with trepidation, Debs and the entire ARU voted to boycott all railroad lines still moving Pullman cars—nationwide. That is, the ARU called for a boycott of every railroad line that used Pullman cars, whether in Maine, New Mexico, or anywhere else. Technically this action was not a strike because railroad workers continued working (other) railroad cars. However, since Pullman cars were so numerous, the effect of the boycott was to snarl traffic across the country and greatly impair commerce across the nation. The boycott proved incredibly effective, particularly in Chicago, the industrial and railroad hub of the country. Debs compared this boycott to “the Christ-like virtue of sympathy...the hope of civilization and supreme glory of mankind.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 137.

What had started as a strike in the Chicago area became a national one in which hundreds of thousands of railroad workers—not even all in the ARU—respected this boycott. In so doing, the ARU demonstrated incredible power and the effectiveness of the industrial union model and working-class solidarity.

As the Pullman boycott shut down the most important city in the country and slowed traffic nationwide, employers and those sympathetic—including the middle and upper classes, mainstream media, and political establishment—criticized Debs. A *New York Times* editorial called Debs “a lawbreaker at large, an enemy of the human race.”<sup>112</sup> Debs and his supporters, of course, thought quite differently. Debs described this struggle as “a contest between the producing classes and the money power.”

The Pullman boycott carried on for more than two months, largely peacefully, until the General Managers Association, a Chicago-based organization of several dozen railroad corporations, secured the active support of the federal government. U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, who previously had many railroads as clients and still received a huge retainer from one, deployed the U.S. Department of Justice to defeat the ARU. Olney suggested that railroad companies put U.S. mail onto Pullman cars. That way, if railroad workers refused to move trains with Pullman cars attached, they interfered with the delivery of the mail; in other words, boycotters unknowingly and unintentionally were tricked into committing a federal crime. Quickly, a federal judge issued an injunction ordering railroad workers to cease interfering with the mail.

Since the ARU refused to call off its boycott, President Grover Cleveland ordered tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers to enforce this injunction. Although this boycott had been peaceful up

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<sup>112</sup> *New York Times*, July 9, 1894, 4.

to that point, once National Guard troops were involved—including in Illinois, where the governor opposed deployment—clashes quickly broke out between strikers and their sympathizers against the military. In more than a score of states, dozens were killed and hundreds injured. Soon enough, the railroads started running again, with Pullman cars. Once the president, attorney general, federal judiciary, and military sided the employers, the ARU boycott was broken. Debs and seven other ARU leaders also were found guilty of violating the federal injunction and sentenced to prison, in Debs's case for six months.

Debs's experience in Woodstock proved pivotal in his life and, indeed, the entire country. He and the other ARU members served their time in prison in tiny Woodstock, Illinois, about fifty miles northwest of Chicago. Just like later political prisoners in Northern Ireland, Palestine, and South Africa, they chose to educate themselves. They formed the grandly named Co-Operative Colony of Liberty Jail, reading books on economics and history, to prepare for the next chapter in the working-class struggle.

The Woodstock jailer allowed many visitors, including several who helped Debs convert to the cause of socialism. Many accounts give the credit to German-born, Milwaukee-based socialist Victor Berger with Debs's "conversion experience." However, Scottish union leader and Labour Party leader Keir Hardie also visited Debs and urged him to embrace socialism. Unlike Berger, Hardie came from a much more humble, working-class background. Due to the intense poverty of his family, Hardie had gone down into the coal mines as a ten-year-old. Hardie joined the coal miners' union and, later was a founding member of the British Labour Party. Labour's first Member of Parliament, Hardie happened to visit the United States in 1895. During his several-month tour, Hardie spoke in Chicago on the second U.S. Labor Day. Hardie then visited Debs who had deeply impressed the Scottish unionist and socialist.



In the most widely circulated telling of Debs's conversion story, Berger brought some English translations of writings by Karl Kautsky, a Czech Austrian writer very well known as an interpreter of Karl Marx's writings. However, Hardie also left some writings for Debs, who already was developing such a worldview. In prison Debs had plenty of time to think about how the Pullman boycott was incredibly effective until the U.S. government put its fingers on the scales and basically defeated the strike. Therefore, Debs became far open to more radical politics. As Debs later wrote: "The writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped not only his argument but also caught the spirit of his socialist utterance and I thank him and all who helped me out of darkness into light."<sup>113</sup>

Right after completing his six-month sentence, Debs walked out of Woodstock jail only to be greeted by a huge crowd. He then took a train to Chicago where, despite heavy rains, a crowd of reportedly many tens of thousands of supporters thronged the station. Soon after disembarking, Debs gave a speech and declared:

Manifestly the spirit of '76 still survives. The fires of liberty and noble aspirations are not yet extinguished. I greet you tonight as lovers of liberty and as despisers of despotism. I comprehend the significance of this demonstration and appreciate the honor that makes it possible for me to be your guest on such an occasion. The vindication and glorification of American principles of government, as proclaimed to this world in the Declaration of Independence, is the high purpose of this convocation.

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<sup>113</sup> Eugene V. Debs, "How I Became a Socialist," *New York Comrade*, April 1902.

Debs continued, lambasting elected leaders “as men with heads as small as chipmunks and pockets as big as balloons who occupied the most sacred public offices.”<sup>114</sup> Debs’s criticism of both main political galvanized people and further transformed Debs into an immensely popular public figure.

In the late 1890s Debs continued to figure out his politics. In the words of biographer Salvatore, “The Debs who emerged from jail was not the same man who had gone in... a new idea, that of socialism, was beginning to take hold of him.”<sup>115</sup> However, the Socialist Party did not yet exist, though other, very small such parties did, including the Social Democratic Party of America. Meanwhile, Debs’s old union, the ARU continued endorsing quite socialistic policies, including government ownership of the railroads. In an open letter for the ARU newspaper, the *Chicago Railway Times*, Debs declared, “We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society. We are on the eve of universal change.”<sup>116</sup>

Just a few years later, in 1900, Debs helped found the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and became its standard bearer for the next quarter century. In the view of SPA supporters, the two main political parties in the United States were both committed to capitalism as demonstrated through policies that ignored the plight of most American workers and farmers—rhetoric notwithstanding. Hence, Debs and other socialists believed a radical alternative was needed. Notably, the idea that Americans could create a new party that, in the not-so-distant future could gain power, did not sound nearly as far-fetched as it does to Americans in the 2020s. After all, in

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<sup>114</sup> Debs, “Liberty: Speech at Battery D, Chicago,” 1895, in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*, 337–344.

<sup>115</sup> Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 149.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 162.

the 1850s—just two generations prior—the Republican Party had been born, elected a president in their second election attempt (1860), and became the dominant party into the 1930s. Although Debs remained committed to the electoral approach as embodied by a political party, he continued advocating for working-class people to join industrial unions.

In 1905, Debs returned to Chicago to help found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), perhaps the most powerful, and definitely the most colorful, revolutionary union in U.S. history. Debs and others had many reasons to start a new union. First and foremost was the extreme poverty, suffering, and inequality in America, especially in cities. At that time, a small group of corporations had incredible power, with monopolies and oligopolies dominating every single sector of the economy. However, despite the surge of corporate power, the government did nothing to regulate industry while a tiny group of American capitalists amassed wealth greater than European monarchs could imagine. In addition, the government consistently took employers' side in workplace disputes, the courts were deeply conservative, while the military and police essentially provided free security to corporations to defeat workers' strikes and crush unions.

Worse, workers wanting change received no help from the mainstream labor movement as embodied by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), divided into dozens of craft unions. Debs never seemed more militant than in castigating the AFL at the IWW convention: "What we want today, above all things, is united economic and political action, and we can never have that while the working class are parceled out among hundreds, aye thousands, of separate unions that keep them for reasons, many of which they readily suggest themselves."<sup>117</sup> Debs's critique of reformist

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<sup>117</sup> Debs, *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*, 386.

craft unions who embraced “bread-and-butter” unionism was shared by the two hundred other left-wing radicals who had gathered to found a new socialist labor federation on May Day 1905.

Debs was joined in Chicago by other legendary figures such as Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, the famous union organizer and child labor abolitionist; William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, the leader of the militant, socialist Western Federation of Miners and chair of what he declared “the Continental Congress of the Working Class”; Lucy Parsons, the Black anarchist and widow of Albert Parsons who was executed by the state of Illinois after the Haymarket massacre and; a host of other socialists, anarchists, unionists, and revolutionaries from the U.S. but also Canada, New Zealand, and Spain. Wobblies believed that capitalism was the core problem and, thus, the solution was socialism. The IWW’s powerful preamble reads, in part, that a new society needed to be fashioned out of the ashes of the old but only after the abolition of the wage system. Wobblies believed that socialism only could be achieved via workers organizing on the job, through revolutionary unions.

Debs, however, envisioned the IWW’s One Big Union more as the trade union wing of the SPA. In other words, socialists of the SPA variety embraced both economic and political approaches, but socialists of the IWW strip believed people had their greatest power on the job, so should focus their energies there. Big Bill Haywood famously said that workers’ greatest power involved simply putting their hands in their pockets, i.e. stopping work. However, the Wobblies increasingly rejected electoral politics, believing that economic elites totally controlled the political and judicial systems. Instead, only workplace action could possibly succeed, via the general strike or One Big Strike. What began as a simple disagreement grew over time. Within a few years Debs was not involved in the IWW, and other SPA members like him also drifted away.

Then, in 1912–1913, a major rift occurred between socialists who believe in the SPA and socialists who believed in the IWW. Haywood and other Wobblies left the SPA.

Debs ran for president in 1912 when he and the SPA had their greatest electoral success. Keir Hardie, who returned to the United States on several occasions and wrote about U.S. politics for an English audience, was effusive in his praise of Debs and the SPA. The election, no doubt, is fascinating because Debs was part of a four-way race in which all four candidates embraced at least some policies that could be called Progressive and, arguably, socialist. As Hardie wrote:

The late Mark Hanna, the Republican boss, predicted that Socialism would be the leading issue in the campaign for 1912. Unless there is a great war in which America will be involved before then, his prediction seems likely to be completely verified. Educated America stands aghast and ashamed at the power of the trusts, their disregard of law, and their corrupting influence upon public life. And so that class is turning to Socialism as the only way of escape. They realise that the nation must own the trusts, or otherwise the trusts will own the nation. The feeling of despair which formerly led good men to wring their hands as those bereft of hope for their country is being replaced by one of confidence in their future.<sup>118</sup>

Truly, Debs and the SPA's popularity pulled everyone leftward. Overall, the SPA did relatively well and won hundreds of offices at the local level and hit double digits in a number of western states. President Woodrow Wilson, like Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Howard Taft before him, enacted a series of Progressive policies that—for the first time and only partially—used governmental power, on behalf of the people, to rein in corporate greed and power. In retrospect, though, 1912 proved to be the high-water mark for Debs and the SPA.

World War I broke out shortly thereafter, in 1914, and while the United States officially remained neutral, the government actively supported the British and French side against the

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<sup>118</sup> Keir Hardie, "America Re-Visited: Labour Vote To-Day and To-Morrow," *The Labour Leader*, October 9, 1908.

Germans. Generally, the U.S. Left was highly critical of the war as well as of European socialists who basically chose nationalism over international working-class solidarity. Such was the line of many Americans on the left, including Debs and others in the SPA.

Most famously, in June 1918 in Canton, Ohio, Debs delivered a speech in which he harshly criticized the U.S. war in France. His criticisms were numerous. First and foremost, “the working class, who fight all the battles...who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses, have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace. It is the ruling class that invariably does both.” By contrast, “The master class has always declared the wars. The subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose—especially their lives.” Crucially, working-class people—on both sides of the war—suffered the negative consequences and gained none of the benefits. Additionally, many Americans pointed out that Germany had not attacked the United States and questioned Wilson’s argument in favor of war, namely “to make the world safe for democracy,” as arrogant rhetoric masking imperial ambitions. Of course, Debs’s critique was hardly unique, but he was the most prominent socialist in America and perhaps the most principled left-wing leader respected beyond the left and the labor movement.<sup>119</sup>

Debs’s speech received very wide attention in the press and from the government. As a result, shortly after his speech, Debs was charged with violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts. His case quickly went to trial, in September 1918, with national coverage.

Debs was at his popular apex, during the trial, and delivered some of his most famous remarks. He used the forum to, as always, advocate for his beliefs:

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<sup>119</sup> Debs, *The Canton Speech*, 19,

I believe, Your Honor, in common with all Socialists, that this nation ought to own and control its own industries. I believe, as all Socialists do, that all things that are jointly needed and used ought to be jointly owned—that industry, the basis of our social life, instead of being the private property of a few and operated for their enrichment, ought to be the common property of all, democratically administered in the interest of all...I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.

In his remarks at the sentencing hearing, when he could have pleaded for clemency, Debs cried out: “While there is a lower class I’m in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it and while there is a soul in prison I am not free.” As poignant as those words were, the single word “solidarity,” associated with Debs if even more so with the IWW, might suffice. Few were surprised when Debs was found guilty and sentenced to ten years in prison.<sup>120</sup>

At the age of 63 Debs was incarcerated as federal prisoner 9,653. He spent his first few months in a relatively comfortable state prison in West Virginia before being transferred to a new federal prison in Atlanta. In his new prison Debs quickly found himself in wretched conditions. The food was unpalatable, and he could not eat for two weeks despite working in the clothing warehouse. For fifteen hours each day, he was confined with five other men in a small cell in the southern heat. On a few occasions, it was reported that Debs was near death due to lumbago, heart trouble, blinding headaches, and kidney trouble caused by atrocious food.

Debs was, of course, hardly the only human sent to prison for opposing the war. He joined thousands of other Americans and immigrants in what now is called the First Red Scare (with the Second Red Scare commencing after World War II). While in Atlanta, he became depressed as his beloved Socialist Party became bitterly divided over a variety of issues, including how to respond

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<sup>120</sup> Debs, *The Canton Speech*, 41-42 and 57.

to the newly formed Soviet Union. Debs also worried that the massive government repression—which also threatened the existence of the IWW. In prison, Debs became despondent, wondering whether what he had devoted his whole life to would ever bear fruit. Indeed, the world seemed so far from where he hoped it would be.

Nevertheless, in 1920 Debs agreed to run for president one more time—from prison, the first time an American had done so. The SPA slogan was “from the prison to the White House!” The government, however, made it nearly impossible for Debs to campaign, for instance only allowing him to compose and share one 500-word statement a week. Despite this repression, he received more than 900,000 votes. While it is impossible to know, the large vote total might have been inflated by those in sympathy with Debs—but not Socialism. Many also were deeply upset about his continuing imprisonment when the war had ended two years prior. There was a widespread belief that the Espionage and Sedition Acts were unconstitutional, violating the First Amendment by criminalizing thought as opposed to action.

There also was a national campaign to free Debs as well as other political prisoners that emerged in 1919 and picked up steam. In 1920, a new president, Warren Harding, was elected. Ironically, it was Harding, the conservative Republican, who commuted Debs’s sentence ahead of Christmas in 1921, whereas the Democrat Wilson had been Debs’s foe. When Debs left the Atlanta prison, thousands of inmates broke out in enormous cheers that could be heard far away and which brought tears to his eyes. After a brief meeting with Harding in the capital, Debs made it home to Terre Haute before year’s end. 50,000 people welcome him home. He was 66 years old.

Debs was weakened by his prison experience and no longer a young man. In his final years of life, he was not as much of a public figure—having been weakened by decades of travel and stress—though he did many interviews. He also wrote a series of nationally syndicated stories, in



1922, about his prison experiences and his thoughts on incarceration as a system. David Karsner, a long-time collaborator and socialist journalist, brought these together and a few more essays, released the year after Debs's death, in 1927, as *Walls and Bars*.

There are countless fascinating aspects of this book, but the basic argument was that the class bias embedded in prisons meant that to identify those who were imprisoned as poor was redundant. He explained why prisons were so unjust for the poor but also that the rich rarely went to prison; instead, “the prison as a rule, to which there are few exceptions, is for the poor.” For those who believe in equality, the U.S. prison system must be a devastating indictment, for all one need do was look at the prison population—Exhibit A for America's massive inequalities and unfairness. Hence, prisons “should not merely be reformed but abolished.” And the only way to do that would be revolutionary change to the economic system. Only socialism could succeed in “taking the jail out of man as well as taking man out of jail.”<sup>121</sup>

In his final years, Debs grew weaker. He and his loyal wife still hosted many people at his home in Terre Haute, but on multiple occasions he checked into sanitariums to rest and recover. Debs spent a lot of time, including his final weeks, at one such place in Elmhurst, Illinois, where he passed away at the age of 70. Many thousands of people gathered, soon after, in Terre Haute outside of his house where the funeral ceremony was held in 1926.

One way to reflect upon Debs's long and impressive life is to consider his increasing radicalization. In his typical fashion, Winston Churchill cynically remarked that, as people age they “naturally” become more conservative. However, an analysis of Debs contradicts Churchill's claim. Ultimately, since capitalism was the root cause of society's great ills including

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<sup>121</sup> All quotes from Debs, *Walls and Bars*.

unemployment, poverty, war, and prison, the only answer was to move to socialism. Thus, over the course of his life, Debs traveled the “opposite” path and embraced ever-more left-wing, radical solutions to the world’s problems such as revolutionary unionism and Social Democracy. By the mid-1890s, the solution for Debs became clear, and it remained so for him until his death.

It also is fascinating that, in 2021, Debs is better known and more respected than since the 1960s or, maybe, the 1930s. In 2021, the Democratic Socialists of America has increased to nearly 100,000 members in less than a decade; DSA members now serve in the U.S. House of Representatives and in elected office in many cities and states. So, too, the IWW which is larger today than probably since the 1930s. In spring 2021, when this essay was composed, the country was gripped by a widely publicized (soon-failed) campaign to organize a union among Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama. That a majority-Black workforce in one of the poorest states in the country took on the most powerful corporation in America is a sign of the times. In another, many Americans, particularly in the younger Millennial generation and Generation Z, have a more favorable opinion of socialism than capitalism. If Debs was alive today he would be truly excited because, like many Socialists, he was a hopeful person. As he once declared, “I am for socialism because I am for humanity.”<sup>122</sup> His life continues to provide both lessons and light.

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<sup>122</sup> Debs, “Open letter to the American Railway Union,” *Chicago Railway Times*, January 1, 1897.

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