



Eugene V. Debs

Eugene Victor Debs	
	
 <div>Debs in 1897</div>	
Born	November 5, 1855 (1855-11-05) <div>Terre Haute, Indiana</div>
Died	October 20, 1926 (aged 70) <div>Elmhurst, Illinois</div>
Known for	Socialism
Spouse(s)	Kate Metzger (m. 1885)
Parents	Jean Daniel Debs (1820-1906)

Eugene Victor Debs (November 5, 1855 – October 20, 1926) was an American union leader, one of the founding members of the International Labor Union and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), as well as candidate for President of the United States as a member of the Social Democratic Party in 1900, and later as a member of the Socialist Party of America in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920.^[1] Through his presidential candidacies as well as his work with labor movements, Debs would eventually become one of the best-known Socialists in the United States.

In the early part of his political career, Debs was a member of the Democratic Party of the United States. It was during this time that he was elected as a member of the Indiana General Assembly, which signaled the beginning of his career as a politician. After working with several smaller unions including the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Debs was instrumental in the founding of the American Railway Union, the nation's first industrial union. As a member of the ARU, Debs was involved and later imprisoned for his part in the famed Pullman Strike, when workers struck the Pullman Palace Car Company over a pay cut. The effects of the strike resulted in President Grover Cleveland calling in members of the United States Army into Chicago, Illinois, which led to Debs' arrest and imprisonment.

Debs' political views turned to socialism after he read the works of Karl Marx. He grew to be one of the most influential

Socialists, the reputation helping him to garner five nominations for president. During the latter part of his life, Debs was imprisoned once more after being arrested and convicted under the Espionage Act of 1917 during the First Red Scare for speaking against American involvement in World War I. He was later pardoned by President Warren G. Harding, and died not long after being admitted to a sanitarium.

Early life



Eugene V. Debs Home and museum in Terre Haute, Indiana

Eugene Debs was born on November 5, 1855, in Terre Haute, Indiana to parents Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie Bettrich Debs, who both immigrated to the United States from Colmar, Alsace, France. His father, Jean Daniel, who was born to a prosperous family in France, owned a textile mill and meat market. Eugene Debs was named after the French authors Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo.^[2] Debs dropped out of high school at age of 14 to work as a painter in railroad yards. In 1870, he became a boilerman. During his time as a boilerman, he attended a local business school during the night.^[3] He returned home in 1874 to work as a grocery clerk. The next year he became a founding member and secretary of a new lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.^[3] He rose quickly in the Brotherhood, becoming first an assistant editor for their magazine

and then the editor and Grand Secretary in 1880. At the same time, he became a prominent figure in the community; in 1884 he was elected to the [Indiana General Assembly](#) as a [Democrat](#), serving for one term.^[3]

The railroad brotherhoods were comparatively conservative unions, more focused on providing fellowship and services than in collective bargaining. Debs gradually became convinced of the need for a more unified and confrontational approach. After stepping down as Brotherhood Grand Secretary in 1893, he organized one of the first industrial unions in the United States, the [American Railway Union \(ARU\)](#). The Union successfully struck the [Great Northern Railway](#) in April 1894, winning most of its demands. Eugene Debs married Kate Metzel on June 9, 1885. The couple had no children.^[3] Their home stills stands in Terre Haute, within [Indiana State University](#).

Pullman Strike

See also: [Pullman Strike](#)



Striking American Railway Union members confront Illinois National Guard troops in Chicago, Illinois, during Debs' Rebellion.

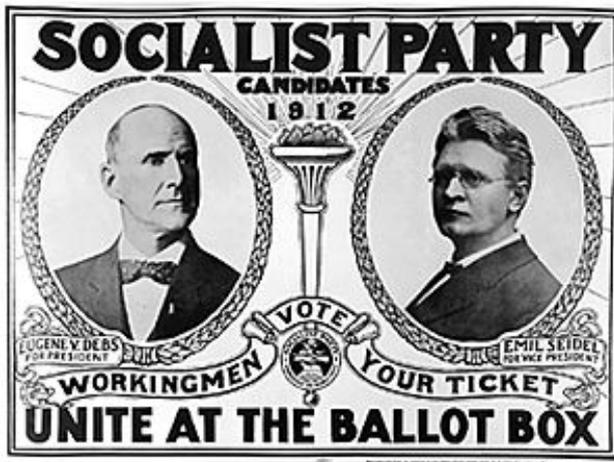
Debs became involved in the [Pullman Strike](#) in 1894, which grew out of a compensation dispute by the workers who constructed the train cars made by the [Pullman Palace Car Company](#). The Pullman Company, due to falling revenue caused by the economic [Panic of 1893](#), had cut the wages of its employees by 28%. The workers, many of whom were already members of the [American Railway Union](#), appealed to the Union at its convention in [Chicago, Illinois](#) for support.^[1] Debs tried to persuade the Union members who worked on the railways that the boycott was

too risky, given the hostility of both the railways and the federal government, the weakness of the Union, and the possibility that other unions would break the strike. The membership ignored his warnings and refused to handle Pullman cars or any other railroad cars attached to them, including cars containing U.S. mail.^[4] Debs finally decided to take part in the strike, which was endorsed by almost all members of the ARU in the immediate area of Chicago. Strikers fought by establishing boycotts of Pullman train cars, and with Debs' eventual leadership, the strike came to be known as "[Debs' Rebellion](#)".^[2]

The U.S. federal government intervened, obtaining an [injunction](#) against the strike on the theory that the strikers had obstructed the U.S. Mail, carried on Pullman cars, by refusing to show up for work. President [Grover Cleveland](#) sent the [United States Army](#) to enforce the injunction. The entrance of members of the Army was enough to break the strike; 13 strikers were killed, and thousands were blacklisted.^[2] An estimated \$80 million worth of property was damaged, and Debs was found guilty of contempt of court for violating the injunction and sent to federal prison.^[2] Debs was represented by [Clarence Darrow](#), hitherto a [corporate lawyer](#) for the railroad company, who "switched sides" to represent Debs. Darrow, a leading American lawyer and civil libertarian, had resigned his corporate position in order to represent Debs, making a substantial financial sacrifice in order to do so. A [Supreme Court](#) case decision, *In re Debs*, later upheld the right of the federal government to issue the injunction.

Socialist leader

At the time of his arrest for mail obstruction, Debs was not yet a [socialist](#). However, while jailed in [Woodstock, Illinois](#), he read the works of [Karl Marx](#), whose ideological stances widely influenced socialism.^[5] After Debs' release from prison in 1895, he started his Socialist political career. Already famous for his work as a union leader with the [American Railway Union](#), Debs continued to gain popularity when he helped to found the [Socialist Democratic Party of the United States](#), also called the [Social Democratic Party](#). Debs was elected Chairman of the Executive Board of the National Council, the board which



Campaign poster from his 1912 Presidential campaign, featuring Debs and Vice Presidential candidate Emil Seidel

governed the party. Although the party did not have a sole figure that governed its actions, Debs' position as chairman and his notoriety gave him the status of party figurehead.^[6] Debs' popularity with the party led to his nomination as a candidate for President of the United States in 1900 as a member of the Social Democratic Party. Along with his running mate Job Harriman, Debs received 87,945 votes—0.6% of the popular vote—and no electoral votes.^[7] He was later the Socialist Party of America candidate for President in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920, the final time from prison. In his showing in the 1904 election, Debs received 402,810 votes, which was 2.98% of the popular vote. Debs received no electoral votes, and, with vice presidential candidate Benjamin Hanford, ultimately finished third overall.^[8] In the 1908 election, Debs again ran on the same ticket as Benjamin Hanford. While receiving a slightly higher number of votes in the popular vote, 420,852, he received 2.83% of the popular vote. Again Debs received no electoral votes.^[9] Debs received 5.99% of the popular vote (a total of 901,551 votes) in 1912, while his total of 913,693 votes in the 1920 campaign remains the all-time high for a Socialist Party candidate.^[10] Running alongside Emil Seidel, Debs again received no electoral votes.^[11]

Although he received some success as a third party candidate, Debs was largely dismissive of the electoral process; he distrusted the political bargains that Victor Berger and other "Sewer Socialists" had made in winning local offices. He put much more value on organizing workers into unions,

favoring unions which brought together all workers in a given industry rather than unions organized by the craft skills workers practiced. Debs saw the working class as the one class to organize, educate, and emancipate itself by itself.^[12]

Founding the IWW

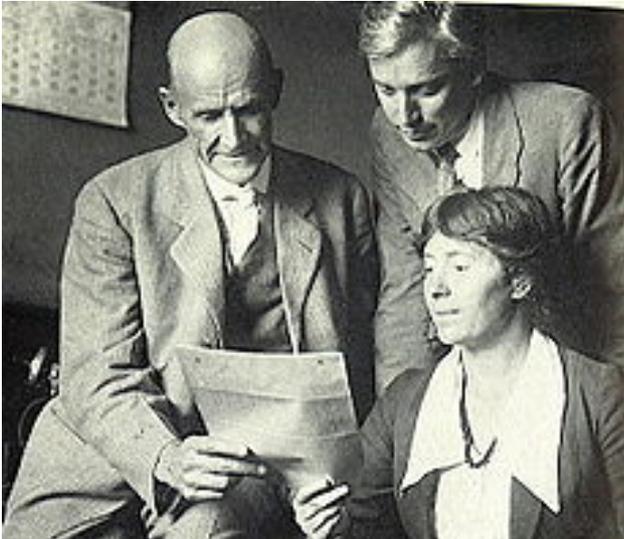
After his work with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the American Railway Union, Debs' next major work with organizing a labor union came during the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World. On June 27, 1905, in Chicago, Illinois, Debs and other influential union leaders such as Big Bill Haywood, leader of the Western Federation of Miners, and Daniel De León, leader of the Socialist Labor Party, held what Haywood called the "Continental Congress of the working class". Haywood stated: "We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class..."^[13] and for Debs: "We are here to perform a task so great that it appeals to our best thought, our united energies, and will enlist our most loyal support; a task in the presence of which weak men might falter and despair, but from which it is impossible to shrink without betraying the working class."^[14]

Socialists split with the IWW

Although the IWW was built on the basis of uniting workers of industry, a rift began between the union and the Socialist Party. The split began when the electoral wing of the Socialist Party led by Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit became irritated with speeches by Haywood.^[15] In December 1911, Haywood told a Lower East Side audience at New York's Cooper Union that parliamentary Socialists were "step-at-a-time people whose every step is just a little shorter than the preceding step." It was better, Haywood said, to "elect the superintendent of some branch of industry, than to elect some congressman to the United States Congress."^[16] In response, Hillquit attacked the IWW as "purely anarchistic..."^[17]

The Cooper Union speech was the beginning of a split between Bill Haywood and the Socialist Party, leading to the split between the factions of the IWW, one faction loyal to the Socialist Party, and the other to Haywood.^[18] The rift presented a problem for

Debs, who was influential in both the IWW and the Socialist Party. The final straw between Haywood and the Socialist Party came during the **Lawrence textile strike** when, disgusted with the decision of the elected officials in Lawrence, Massachusetts to send police who subsequently used their clubs on children, Haywood publicly declared that "I will not vote again" until such a circumstance was rectified.^[19] Haywood was purged from the National Executive Committee by passage of an amendment that focused on the **direct action and sabotage** tactics advocated by the IWW.^[20] Debs was probably the only person who might have saved Haywood's seat.^[21] In 1906, when Haywood had been on trial for his life in Idaho, Debs had described him as "the Lincoln of Labor" and called for Haywood to run against **Theodore Roosevelt** for president of the United States.^[22] But times had changed and Debs, facing a split in the Party, chose to echo Hillquit's words, accusing the IWW of representing anarchy.^[23] Debs thereafter stated that he had opposed the amendment, but once it was adopted, it should be obeyed.^[24] Debs remained friendly to Haywood and the IWW after the expulsion, despite their perceived differences over IWW tactics.^[25]



Eugene V. Debs with Max Eastman and Rose Pastor Stokes in 1918.

Prior to Haywood's dismissal, the Socialist Party membership had reached an all-time high of 135,000. One year later, four months after Haywood was recalled, the membership dropped to 80,000. The reformists in the Socialist Party attributed the decline to the departure of the "Haywood element," and predicted that the party would recover. But it

did not. In the election of 1912, many of the Socialists who had been elected to public office lost their seats.^[26]

Leadership style

Debs was noted by many to be a charismatic speaker who sometimes called on the vocabulary of Christianity and much of the oratorical style of evangelism—even though he was generally disdainful of organized religion.^[27] As **Heywood Broun** noted in his eulogy for Debs, quoting a fellow Socialist: "That old man with the burning eyes actually believes that there can be such a thing as the brotherhood of man. And that's not the funniest part of it. As long as he's around I believe it myself."^[28]

Although sometimes called "King Debs",^[29] Debs himself was not wholly comfortable with his standing as a leader. As he told an audience in Utah in 1910:

" I am not a Labor Leader; I do not want you to follow me or anyone else; if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I led you in, some one else would lead you out. You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition."^[30]

Later life and death



Debs delivering a speech in Canton in 1918

On June 16, 1918, Debs made a speech in Canton, Ohio in opposition to World War I

urging resistance to the military drafts of World War I. During the Palmer Raids, part of the First Red Scare in which people who were suspected of being radical leftists were arrested under fear that they would cause anarchism, Debs was arrested for violating the Espionage Act of 1917.^[31] The period was characterized by supporters of communism and socialism being arrested and detained under suspicion of sedition. Deb's speeches against the Wilson administration and the war earned the undying enmity of President Woodrow Wilson, who later called Debs a "traitor to his country."^[32]

Debs was convicted and sentenced to serve ten years in prison. He was also disenfranchised for life.^[1] Debs presented what has been called his best-remembered statement at his sentencing hearing:

" Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.^[33]

Debs appealed his conviction to the Supreme Court. In its ruling on *Debs v. United States*, the court examined several statements Debs had made regarding World War I and Socialism. While Debs had carefully guarded his speeches in an attempt to comply with the Espionage Act, the Court found he still had the intention and effect of obstructing the draft and recruitment for the war. Among other things, the Court cited Debs's praise for those imprisoned for obstructing the draft. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. stated in his opinion that little attention was needed since Debs' case was essentially the same as that of *Schenck v. United States*, in which the Court had upheld a similar conviction.^[34]

Debs went to prison on April 13, 1919.^[3] In protest of his jailing, Charles Ruthenberg led a parade of unionists, socialists, anarchists and communists to march on May 1 (May Day) 1919, in Cleveland, Ohio. The event quickly broke into the violent May Day Riots of 1919. Debs ran for president in the 1920 election while in prison in Atlanta, Georgia, at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. He received 913,664 write-in votes (3.4%)^[35] the



Clifford Berryman's cartoon depiction of Debs' presidential run

highest number of votes for a Socialist Party presidential candidate in the U.S. and slightly more than he had won in 1912, when he obtained 2.2% of the vote^[36].^[3] This stint in prison also inspired Debs to write a series of columns deeply critical of the prison system, which appeared in sanitized form in the Bell Syndicate and was collected into his only book, *Walls and Bars*, with several added chapters. However, Debs died before the book's completion, and it was published posthumously.^[1]

Learning of Deb's ill health, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer prepared a clemency petition on Debs's behalf for a presidential pardon in order to free Debs from prison, feeling it would damage the administration if he died in custody. ^[37] Upon being given the petition, President Wilson replied "Never!" and wrote 'Denied' across it.^[32]

On December 25, 1921, Republican President Warren G. Harding commuted Debs' sentence to time served; Debs was released from prison and was warmly greeted by President Harding at the White House: "I have heard so damned much about you, Mr. Debs, that I am very glad to meet you personally." In 1924, Debs was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Finnish Socialist Karl H. Wiik on the ground that "Debs started to work actively for peace during World War I, mainly because he considered the war to be in the interest of capitalism."^[38]

In the fall of 1926, Debs was admitted to a sanitarium in Elmhurst, Illinois. ^[1] He died

on October 20, 1926, at the age of 70 in Elmhurst.^{[1][39]}

Legacy

Eugene Debs helped motivate the American Left as a measure of political opposition to corporations and World War I. American socialists, communists, and anarchists honor his compassion for the labor movement and motivation to have the average workingman build socialism without large state involvement.^[40] Several books have been written about his life as an inspirational American socialist.^[41] On May 22, 1962 *Debs' Home* was purchased by the Eugene V. Debs Foundation for \$9,500 and the work of making it into a Debs Memorial was started. In 1965 it was made an official historic site of the state of Indiana, and in 1966 it was made an official National Historic Landmark of the National Parks system of the Department of Interior of the United States, the preservation of the museum is monitored regularly by the National Park Service ^[42].

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- [18] Roughneck, The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood, Peter Carlson, 1983, pages 159.
- [19] Roughneck, The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood, Peter Carlson, 1983, pages 183.
- [20] Roughneck, The Life and Times of Big Bill Haywood, Peter Carlson, 1983, pages 200.
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Further reading

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External links

- Eugene V. Debs Foundation Museum and memorial in Deb's home from 1890 till death in 1926

Party political offices		
Preceded by —	Socialist Party of America Presidential candidate 1900 (lost), 1904 (lost), 1908 (lost), 1912 (lost)	Succeeded by Allan L. Benson
Preceded by Allan L. Benson	Socialist Party of America Presidential candidate 1920 (lost)	Succeeded by Robert M. La Follette, Sr. (Progressive Party)

- Eugene V. Debs at *Encyclopædia Britannica*
- Eugene V. Debs Internet Archive on the Marxists Internet Archive
- Eugene Debs Page from the Antiauthoritarian Encyclopedia
- Eugene V. Debs at the Open Directory Project
- Eugene Debs on the IWW Memorial Page
- Socialist Party USA
- Other photos of Debs

Persondata

NAME Debs, Eugene Victor

ALTERNATIVE NAMES	King Debs
SHORT DESCRIPTION	U.S. labor and political leader
DATE OF BIRTH	November 5, 1855
PLACE OF BIRTH	Terre Haute, Indiana, United States
DATE OF DEATH	October 20, 1926
PLACE OF DEATH	Elmhurst, Illinois, United States

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