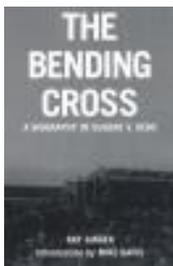


Eugene Debs and American socialism

Review by Bill Roberts



**The bending cross:
A Biography of Eugene V. Debs**

By Ray Ginger

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CHILDREN IN the United States are routinely taught that Abraham Lincoln of Illinois freed the slaves. But few children learn that Eugene Victor Debs of Indiana devoted his life to ending wage slavery. Ray Ginger's wonderful biography of Debs—*The Bending Cross*—first published in 1949, and reprinted by Haymarket Books in 2007—introduces readers to a working-class hero as well as a period of immense struggle from below often treated as a footnote in most U. S. histories.

Some of Debs' contemporary admirers compared him to Lincoln. John Swinton, after observing Debs address a capacity crowd in 1894, wrote in his weekly paper,

Debs in Cooper Union reminded me of Lincoln there. As Lincoln of Illinois became an efficient agent of freedom, so perchance might Debs, of Indiana, become in the impending conflict for the liberation of labor. Let us never forget Lincoln's great words, "Liberty before property; the man before the dollar."

This observation followed the great Pullman strike that year, which brought Debs to national attention in the labor movement and set him on the road to

socialism. It also set him on the road to jail. Debs was sentenced to six months in the Woodstock, Illinois, jail for his role in the Pullman strike, and again, near the end of his life, he was sent to a federal prison for his open opposition to the First World War, earning him Democratic president Woodrow Wilson's undying enmity:

I will never consent to the pardon of this man. While the flower of American youth was pouring out its blood to vindicate the cause of civilization, this man, Debs, stood behind the lines.... This man was a traitor to his country and he will never be pardoned during my administration.

As Mike Davis makes clear in his introduction to this edition, "the dramatic collision between Wilson and Debs...was one of the great moral-political confrontations in modern American history, pitting self-righteous Progressivism against defiant Socialism."

Debs, who devoted his life to the emancipation of laboring men and women internationally, was the American working class's best spokesman for socialism. As Ginger sums it up, Debs

had come to believe that devotion to the oppressed must be shown by resistance to the oppressors. This contention that modern society holds two social classes, two conflicting interests, lay at the root of his entire program. Born on November 5, 1855, Debs' life begins in the era of the Civil War. He died on October 20, 1926, shortly after the First World War. This period was full of social upheaval and Debs played a key role in helping to shape the class struggle and the radical politics that emerged in this era.

His political development was formed by the labor movement that he embraced, as well as the international revolutionary upsurge following the First World War, leading him to acknowledge that "from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, I am a Bolshevik and proud of it." Ginger's story of how this Midwest son of a small merchant evolved into a self-conscious revolutionary socialist makes *The Bending Cross* an excellent introduction to a period of American working-class history when socialism had mass appeal and new forms of working-class organization were being forged.

Between 1860 and 1900 the U.S. underwent enormous economic upheaval, transforming it from an agricultural into an industrial nation. In that period the value of U.S. manufacturing output increased more than five-fold. The working class grew from 1.5 to 5.5 million—the majority of them immigrants. Workers were more and more concentrated in heavy industry like the massive steel mills in Cleveland and Pittsburgh, but lumber mills and railroad construction also attracted thousands, as did the lure of land in the Great Plains and the West following the Civil War.

Railroads expanded rapidly and opened up the country. Boom cities like Chicago emerged. Massive trusts and combinations of wealth were created. Men like John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie—derided as "robber barons"—became synonymous with this unregulated, winner-take-all period of accumulation. Wealth concentrated in the hands of a few led to

suffering for the majority of workers who were the victims of the many economic depressions that punctuated this era.

The bosses of this Gilded Age didn't extract value from their workers without struggle. For example, in 1877 a strike wave hit the railroads and the mines—reaching insurrectionary levels in some places—after the bosses cut wages by 25 percent.

Eugene Debs grew up in Terre Haute, Indiana, a town that served the corn-growing and hog-raising farmers and was tied by railroads to the Midwest industrial centers. Here he got his first job for the railroad painting signs, which put him in touch with an industry and way of life that soon captivated him.

Shortly before Christmas in 1871, Debs got his big chance, replacing a drunken railroad fireman on the Indianapolis run.

Debs' father, influenced by the French Revolution, read French and German classics to his children. Debs was named Eugene Victor after the French writers Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo. Debs' favorite book was Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which he read over and over throughout his life, both in French and English. The brutalization of poverty—the theme of Hugo's masterpiece—was something he never forgot. Anecdotes about Debs' personal sacrifices for the downtrodden reveal an inner character that is consistent with his public persona. For example, he once gave his only overcoat to a poor worker whose luck had run out. Often, after delivering an inspiring speech to a group of workers, Debs could be found in a local bar or café treating a worker or two to drinks and a meal.

The shape of the class struggle

Class organization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was dominated by craft unions that organized only skilled workers. They were conservative, white, mostly native-born, and male. Many operated as insurance cooperatives providing burial policies for their members rather than as organs of class struggle. The railroads epitomized this kind of organization. There were twenty different brotherhoods—engineers, firemen, brakemen, switchmen, and so on. There were no unions for unskilled laborers.

Class struggle was high, but class-consciousness was low. Struggles were largely sectional—with little solidarity between different craft organizations—and there was little continuity from one struggle to the next. Other conditions hampered workers' struggles too. For example, the many languages of the myriad of immigrants interfered with worker solidarity; and above all, the wedge of racism sabotaged unity. "Your bourgeoisie," wrote Frederick Engels to a colleague in the United States, "knows much better even than the Austrian government how to play off one nationality against the other."

This was the environment that shaped Debs' thinking in his position as head of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF), a small organization that did little more than provide cheap life insurance to its members. Debs' job was largely clerical.

When the railroad workers erupted in a nationwide revolt against wage cuts in

1877, the BLF stood on the sidelines, even though many firemen joined the strike. The struggle turned into a general strike in St. Louis. As the strike spread, state militias and eventually federal troops were called out. When it was all over, more than 100 workers had been killed and several hundred wounded.

Debs was shocked by the events. He drew the following conclusion in a speech to the 1877 BLF convention:

A strike at the present time signifies anarchy and revolution...Does the Brotherhood encourage strikers? To this question we must emphatically answer, No, brothers. To disregard the laws which govern our land? To destroy the last vestiges of order? To stain our hands with crimson blood of our fellow beings? We again say, No, a thousand times No!

At this time, Debs favored arbitration of disputes between labor and capital, which he did not consider to be “natural” or “necessary” conflicts. The conventional wisdom argued that if workers showed how valuable their skills were by working hard, the railroad bosses would give them raises. Instead the bosses cut workers’ wages at the first sign of profit erosion.

Debs internalized this lesson even as he led the BLF away from confrontation. What was needed was more coordination between the brotherhoods, so that the bosses would face a united, even if passive, work force. Debs now worked tirelessly to achieve a degree of unity among the brotherhoods. He was continuously frustrated by the effort. Jurisdictional disputes, leadership fiefdoms, and other divisions made disunity the norm.

In 1885, delegates to the BLF convention, “tired,” writes Ginger, “of the blacklist, yellow-dog contracts, unemployment, and long hours”—overturned its no-strike clause in its constitution and voted to raise \$15,000 for a strike fund. Fed up with the union leaders’ support for labor-capital cooperation, delegates tossed out all the BLF’s officers except two. Debs was one of the two. Though he still cautioned at this time against strikes, he now favored them when necessary. Debs was delegated to present joint action to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. The engineers rejected the proposal and provoked Debs to write a sharp condemnation in the firemen’s magazine in which he called the head of the engineer’s brotherhood a member of “labor’s aristocracy.”

The Haymarket affair had a profound influence on Debs. He watched closely the trial of the eight Haymarket anarchists, leaders of the struggle for the eight-hour day that in Chicago had produced a strike of 40,000 workers on the first May Day, in 1886. They were framed for the killing of several policemen by a bomb—who threw it has never been established—at Haymarket Square at a labor demonstration on May 4 called to protest the murder by the police of a striking worker at McCormick Reaper Works the previous day. The anarchist leaders were given a show trial that ended in four of them—Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel, and Samuel Fielden—being hanged. Though at this time he had no sympathy for their politics, at the final hour Debs penned

an article in their defense, arguing that if the Haymarket eight were convicted, “free speech is as dead in America as it is in Russia.”

In 1888, Debs threw all his energy into a strike of engineers and firemen on the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. When an injunction was threatened against the strike, the leaders of the engineers and conductors pulled out of the strike, leaving the firemen to go down in defeat. The strike helped convince Debs of the necessity for federation of all the separate craft unions—a task that despite his tireless efforts he was unable to accomplish because of the internecine conflicts among various craft unions.

By now he had become more sympathetic to strikes, defending them in 1888 as “a weapon of the oppressed.” By the end of 1892, after the brutal defeats of the Homestead steel strike in Pennsylvania and the silver miners’ strike in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho—state and federal troops, respectively, were used to break them—Debs had become a staunch advocate of the strike weapon. “What is a strike?” he wrote. “The answer is war. And what is war? Resistance to wrong.”

After seventeen years of service in the BLF, Debs finally decided to quit in 1892 after a switchmen’s strike in Buffalo went down to defeat when the other brotherhoods failed to support them. Debs quit his position as secretary-treasurer of the BLF but under popular pressure stayed on as editor of the *Magazine*. He used his pen to blast the brotherhood’s shoddy record of disunity in the face of the employers, in an article titled “Farewell, 1892”: The old year bears away in its archives the switchmen strike at Buffalo, where organized labor was *struck down* because organized labor was deaf to the appeals of organized labor for help.

Industrial unionism

In 1893, Debs and fifty railroad workers from various crafts met in Chicago to establish the American Railroad Union (ARU). The union was open to all white railroad workers—a racial clause Debs, and many other union members, opposed in what Debs described as “a fierce and protracted debate.” Debs later recalled that the decision to exclude Blacks “was one of the factors in our defeat” during the Pullman strike.

The ARU was wildly successful, signing up 150,000 workers in the first year. This was twice as big as the craft unions combined. It even won a strike against the Great Northern Railroad in its first year. Although it was modeled on the service structure of the craft unions, the cross-jurisdictional, industrywide organization gave the ARU strength that had not been possible with the craft model.

The emergence of the ARU was viewed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its leader, Samuel Gompers, as a dual union and set up a tension between the two labor leaders that would erupt whenever the labor movement was confronted on which way forward. The AFL (initially called the Federated Trades and Labor Council) had been formed in 1881 as a national organization of craft-based unions, and had grown to 175,000 members by

1892. Its motto was “pure and simple unionism,” focusing on questions of economic benefits to the exclusion of all other issues.

An open break with Gompers occurred in 1902 at the convention of the Western Federation of Miners. After the AFL refused to organize Black and unskilled workers, Debs went after Gompers and the other AFL leaders for maintaining an alliance with the bosses in the National Civic Federation. By maintaining the craft model and “pretending that the workingmen had friends among the industrialists,” Gompers was “undermining the very basis of the labor movement,” Debs argued. His arguments carried the convention and the delegates adopted his proposals “to change the name to the American Labor Union, declare in favor of socialism and begin a nation-wide campaign to organize industrial unions.”

Debs had embarked on the industrial model for organizing labor ten years before this showdown with the AFL. It was the logical conclusion based on his experiences as head of the BLF and the early success of the ARU. It also followed from his basic orientation toward workers’ self-emancipation. Yet even after the successful Great Northern strike, he did not see militant confrontation as the way forward for the ARU. Nevertheless, the ARU confronted its biggest test in 1894, less than a year after its founding.

The Debs rebellion

Located just south of Chicago, Pullman was every inch a company town—food, clothing, and housing were available only through the Pullman Sleeping Car Company. Workers rented Pullman homes, bought food in Pullman stores, and slaved in Pullman’s factory. Pullman presented the town as an idyllic paradise. When Debs visited Pullman, however, workers told him harrowing stories of brutal foremen, ten-hour days, and wages so low once rent was deducted that workers could not buy necessities for their families. As the depression of 1893 took hold, George Pullman began to cut wages. He eventually drove them down to the point where workers had to fight back or starve.

Though not officially members of the ARU, the Pullman workers sought solidarity from the union. Reluctant at first, Debs quickly saw that support for the striking workers, through a boycott of Pullman cars across the entire country, would be a major step toward building labor solidarity at a time when labor was in retreat. Carried away by the enthusiasm of the ARU delegates and the Pullman strikers’ dire straits, Debs set the tone for a groundswell of labor solidarity. At one point in his inspiring oratory, Debs allowed himself to look beyond the current situation to a future when labor’s hosts, marshaled under one conquering banner, shall march together and fight together, until working men shall receive and enjoy all the fruits of their toil...Such an army would be impregnable. No corporation would assail it. The reign of justice would be inaugurated. The strike would be remanded to the relic chamber of the past. An era of goodwill and peace would dawn. Before the new era could be realized, however, an immense struggle had to

be organized and Debs rose to the challenge. As he put it to the railroaders, “The struggle with the Pullman Company has developed into a contest between the producing classes and the money power of the country.” The ARU organized a boycott of Pullman cars nationwide, which eventually involved more than a hundred thousand workers. Its success was evident in the forces organized to stop it—newspapers, police, courts, and federal troops. The railroad companies retaliated against the union’s decoupling of Pullman cars from trains by insisting that no train would run without a Pullman car attached to it.

When Debs asked the AFL and the railroad brotherhood leaders for assistance in the strike, he was stonewalled. According to Ginger, all the AFL unions except the mine workers refused support, and “most of the Brotherhoods worked against the boycott,” instructing their members to stay at work.

Besides the efforts of the AFL and the railroad brotherhoods to dissuade their members from participating, the boycott and strike were daily denounced by the bosses’ newspapers with provocative and scurrilous headlines—“Thirsty for Blood,” “Wild Riot in Chicago,” and “Anarchy is Rampant”—which painted a dire situation needing immediate action from law enforcement. Nevertheless, support continued to grow. Central labor councils from Chicago to New York endorsed the boycott.

Debs worked night and day to coordinate the struggle. His main argument that “every concession the railway companies have ever made has been wrung from them by the power of organized effort” resonated with most workers, even the conservative skilled sectors. Debs’ instructions were straightforward: “Use no violence. Stop no trains. Elect a strike committee and send me the name of the chairman.” Debs wanted to spread the boycott, and therefore he worked to avoid any appearance of unruliness that would give authorities an excuse to intervene through the courts or with armed force.

The very success of the boycott became the excuse for national intervention against it. Scare headlines and stories in major papers had not blunted solidarity. Even Chicago newsboys wore strikers’ ribbons and often dumped papers denouncing the boycott into sewers.

Pullman and the other railroad bosses eventually made their appeal to President Grover Cleveland’s attorney general, who persuaded the president that federal force was necessary on the grounds that the boycott was stopping mail trains—a federal offense. Yet it was the employers themselves who were deliberately attaching Pullman cars to mail trains in an effort to get strikers to stop mail trains, and who themselves were refusing to move mail trains without Pullman cars attached to them.

State governors had already ordered out their militias to break the strike, and as the strike progressed, the number of scabs grew. On July 2, a federal judge in Chicago issued an injunction forbidding strike leaders from doing anything to promote the boycott. The injunction was used as a green light to arrest

strikers, not just leaders. Two days later, Debs looked out of a Michigan Avenue window in Chicago and saw federal troops camped along the lakefront. “Six thousand state and Federal troops, five thousand deputy marshals, and thirty-one hundred policeman” patrolled the rail yards—in spite of the fact that there had been little violence, no property damage, and no obstruction of mail trains in Chicago up to this point.

The presence of federal troops inflamed the strikers and their supporters, and within a day scores were injured when troops conducted a bayonet charge against angry protesters. Riots and arson began to break out, some by strike supporters, whom Debs attempted to rein in, and others by railroad men out to stain the strike’s image. Strikers were also inflamed by the fact that “labor spies, professional strikebreakers, racketeers, petty gangsters, [and] the flotsam and jetsam of the city” were deputized as federal marshals to help break the strike.

A vendetta against Debs escalated in the press. Stories appeared attacking his character. He was often referred to as a “dipsomaniac” and a “dictator.” After nearly four weeks, “Debs’ strike,” as the press called it, had succeeded like no other labor struggle in U.S. labor history, but without a new surge of forces and the willingness of the labor movement to escalate the fight, there was little the ARU, the Pullman strikers, or Debs could do. They had played their hand brilliantly, but would now have to pay the consequences of a labor movement not prepared to go the full distance.

Debs and two other leaders were indicted for conspiracy to interfere with interstate commerce, arrested, tried, and jailed. The “Debs rebellion”—another press characterization—was defeated. Still, it showed the value of industrial unionism. And while the resulting blacklist of thousands of workers and the jailing of its leader, Debs, killed the ARU, its short existence opened a new chapter for American working-class organization. The Pullman strike demonstrated that class struggle had reached a new level both of determination and consciousness.

The lessons of defeat

One lesson, which Debs absorbed into his bones, was how the press, the courts, the police, and the army—not to mention the AFL craft union leaders—had all conspired with Pullman to crush the strike. Another lesson Debs learned was that the two main political parties worked against labor and for the employers. Prior to this struggle, Debs had not only been a supporter of the Democratic Party, but had also run (and won) a post as a state representative in Indiana. “I am a Populist,” Debs told workers at the last strike meeting, “and I favor wiping out both old parties so they will never come into power again. I have been a Democrat all my life and I am ashamed to admit it.”

Debs had many visitors while serving his six months in jail, including Victor Berger, who published a German socialist newspaper in Milwaukee, and the British trade unionist and socialist Keir Hardy. Each visitor provided an

opportunity to discuss the lessons of the strike and more importantly its wider implications. While in jail, Debs was introduced to Marx and other socialist writers. Although guided more by his instinct than theoretical outlines, Debs found explanations in these writings and discussions that corroborated his experiences.

In an article he wrote in 1902, “How I became a socialist,” Debs describes his political outlook as he went into the Pullman strike:

Up to this time I had heard but little of Socialism.... I was bent on thorough and complete organization of the railroad men and ultimately the whole working class, and all my time and energy were given to that end.

But the strike forced him to make the leap from industrial unionism to the idea of socialism—for a commonwealth of labor. “In the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed,” he wrote. “This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name.”

In 1897, Debs produced his own manifesto in the *Railway Times*: “The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity.”

Debs still wasn’t sure how socialism was to be achieved. For a brief time he endorsed the idea that socialism could be achieved through the establishment of socialistic communes. Before the Pullman strike he had signed a statement in favor of the “collective ownership of the means of production and distribution.” Even after declaring for socialism, however, Debs naively wrote to John D. Rockefeller asking him to finance a cooperative commonwealth “where millionaires and beggars...will completely disappear, and human brotherhood will be inaugurated to bless and make the world more beautiful.” It would take Debs a few more years to fully understand that socialism would require an uncompromising revolutionary opposition to the capitalists. But once Debs committed to socialism he never wavered in his advocacy. He was tireless in his efforts—often speaking twenty or more times a day—as he traveled around the country talking to workers on strike, or campaigning for the Socialist Party (SP), which he helped found in 1901.

The Socialist Party

Debs looked at working-class struggle not as a theoretician, but as one who was directly involved—giving voice to the collective struggle, or as he told a gathering of Philadelphia workers, “I look into your faces. I catch your spirit. I am simply the tongue of the working class, making this appeal from the working class.”

It was this perspective that guided Debs in the SP. He believed that the party should embrace all elements of the class and that his job was to seek to unify these elements as he did in the class struggle. If Debs had a theory for revolutionary social change, it was one of osmosis—by engaging in struggle and hearing the right arguments, socialism will be made self-evident. It was his firm belief in the goodness of man that supported his optimism and inclusiveness. More than once he was reported to have forked over his last

dollar to a poor worker. Debs led with his heart often to the exclusion of developing an underlying plan or theory of what was necessary to achieve his vision of a better world. In his introduction to the book, Mike Davis notes this weakness among radical American labor leaders like Debs, who “tended to imbibe everything except theory, and had little interest in the complex details of capitalist reproduction and economic crisis.”

The SP was a broad party of the left. It included some whose loyalties to the working class were at best ambivalent—small proprietors, dentists, and farmers, for example. This inclusiveness prevented the SP from developing into a party of workers, conscious of their historical task.

Nevertheless, the founding of the SP was, by any measure, an advance for working-class political development and the socialist movement. Between 1901 and 1912, when Debs received nearly a million votes for president as the SP candidate, the party demonstrated that socialism was not an alien idea to the working class.

In the 1912 campaign, Debs toured the country on a leased train dubbed the “Red Special.” He spoke to more than 500,000 people and the subscription base of the party paper, the *Appeal to Reason*, grew by 50,000. More important, the campaign outlined a sharp challenge to the capitalist parties that was hard to ignore. As the St. Louis Mirror saw it, the election was “between capitalism and socialism.”

Unfortunately, this was the high point of the SP. From the beginning there was always a right and left wing in the party, and both operated more or less independently. The right wing was more interested in electoral success and saw workplace struggle as a diversion from that goal. Its politics were a far cry from *The Communist Manifesto*, with its call for working-class internationalism. Leading SP member, Victor Berger, for example, was a xenophobic racist. “There can be no doubt,” he wrote in 1902, “that negroes and mullatoes constitute a lower race.”

The left wing of the SP supported immigrant rights, opposed racial discrimination, and saw economic struggles as the way forward. It was out of this wing that the syndicalists, who founded the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies), came from in 1905.

The left wing had its own publication—the *International Socialist Review*—that took up arguments against the right wing of the party. It was in the *ISR* that Debs forcefully, but ineffectively, took up the argument to abolish “Negro exclusion” in the party. He was a staunch supporter of racial equality, and refused to speak in the South to segregated audiences.

Yet because he saw the SP as a party of the “whole working class,” Debs opposed a 1903 proposal in the party to make a special effort to champion the rights of Blacks. Debs wrote, “We have nothing special to offer the Negro, and we cannot make separate appeals to all races.” Ginger writes, He always insisted on absolute equality. But he failed to accept the view that special measures were sometimes needed to achieve this equality. After Debs

had decided that the main problem was the emancipation of the workingmen, he refused to be concerned with lesser problems, although he himself had argued that white workers would never be free so long as Negroes were oppressed.

Once Debs understood the class nature of society, he was unwavering in his efforts to organize workers to fight for their own interests. He saw through the various schemes the bosses devised to trick workers. Whether it was labor participation with bosses in civic clubs or the divided union structure of the craft model, Debs refused to be duped. When Theodore Roosevelt, in 1904, proposed trust busting and public ownership as a solution to curbing the destructive behavior of monopolies, Debs cut to the chase:

Every hint at public ownership is now called Socialism, without reference to the fact that there can be no Socialism, and that public ownership means practically nothing, so long as the capitalist class is in control of the national government. Government ownership of public utilities means nothing for labor under capitalist ownership of government.

Because Debs had a vision of what a society organized for workers should look like: “The end of class struggle and class rule, of master and slave, of ignorance and vice, of poverty and shame, of cruelty and crime—the birth of freedom, the dawn of brotherhood, the beginning of MAN”—he often got the cart before the horse. For example, he thought it was necessary to get unions committed to a socialist society. Thus, even with the SP divided about the nature of socialism, he sought to get SP members in the AFL to push for the federation to adopt a socialist plank. When that wasn’t successful, Debs and other left-labor activists like Big Bill Haywood and Mother Jones set out to challenge the AFL with a new organization.

IWW

In January 1905, a group of radical and socialist trade unionist delegates met in Chicago “to discuss ways and means of uniting the working people of America on correct revolutionary principles.” This body set out to form a new, revolutionary industrial union. To that effect, a conference was called for in June, which 200 delegates attended. The conference drew together representatives of the Western Federation of Miners, the left wing of the SP, and various other forces.

The establishment of the Industrial Workers of the World was a big step forward for the labor movement. Workers were straining for leadership and the IWW held within its ranks some of the best class fighters of the day—Mother Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Big Bill Haywood, Lucy Parsons, and Eugene Debs. The Wobblies proposed that the working class, in order to challenge capitalism, must be organized into one big industrial union, as a means both to challenge employers and to establish a socialist commonwealth.

While clearly a challenge to the AFL, Debs and the other founders of the IWW saw no other way to organize the thousands of workers left out of the old craft federation. To the charge that the IWW would split the labor movement, Debs

countered that the labor movement was already divided by power struggles and he preferred a split over principles of brotherhood and solidarity. Debs denied he was abandoning the labor movement, as charged by AFL leaders as well as by most of the SP leadership. "I have simply joined a labor union that suits me. That's all," was his retort.

Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit now openly attacked Debs in their publications, calling him a "fine fellow" but implied he was "a bigot and a fool." Debs discounted the leadership and instead looked to the ranks to put things in order. His best known formulation of this attitude was delivered in a speech in Detroit in 1906, when he intoned:

I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in someone else could lead you out. You must use your heads as well as your hands and get yourselves out of your present condition.

Bureaucratic self-serving leadership is one thing. Leadership forged in common struggle selected democratically is something else. There were many times in the SP when Debs seems to be unmindful of this difference, thus handing leadership to the right wing through his unwillingness or indifference to leading a fight for his kind of leadership.

Though always willing to use his pen and words for the cause, Debs was not an organizational man, and never attended conventions to fight for his positions inside the party. He also stayed aloof from factional fights. In those rare moments when he took up an internal fight to defend left-wing policies, he was loath to carry the fight to the end.

For example, in 1910, the party's Committee on Immigration proposed at a party convention in Chicago a resolution supporting the exclusion of Asians from the United States. Debs, who was not in attendance, sent the convention a "forceful denunciation" calling the resolution "unsocialistic, reactionary," and "outrageous." If socialism, he argued, does not "stand staunchly, unflinchingly, and uncompromisingly for the working class and for the exploited and oppressed masses of all lands, then it stands for none and its claim is a false pretense and its profession a delusion and a snare." But Debs' note arrived too late and had to be printed later in the ISR. Also at this convention, the right-wing delegates won a resolution committing the SP to avoid any interference with the policies or structure of the AFL.

Although the IWW led some brilliant strikes and campaigns, from the Lawrence textile strike in 1912 to the free speech fights in the West, it was not able to achieve dominance in any single industry and form successful industrial unions. It was prevented from doing so not only by the vicious resistance of the employers and sabotage of their actions by the AFL leadership, but also because the IWW refused to sign contracts and take on other forms of union organizing that were necessary to form more or less stable organizations.

The IWW was further hampered from winning over AFL workers because it tried to be both a trade union and a revolutionary organization. But unions aim

to embrace all workers who wish to defend their most basic common interests, whereas revolutionary organizations embrace only the most class-conscious, radical workers who seek an end to capitalism. The IWW could not be both. The motivation of the IWW's founders—to build fighting industrial unions at a time when the AFL organized only skilled workers on a craft basis—was what drew Debs to the IWW. However, he quickly realized that dual unionism meant handing the leadership of the bulk of the organized labor movement over to conservative pure-and-simple unionists of the AFL like Samuel Gompers.

Politically, the IWW was also unattractive to Debs because it opposed political action, including electoral campaigns, something Debs thought necessary to achieve socialism. Debs soon grew discouraged at the direction taken by the IWW. As Ginger writes, “It was inevitable that Eugene Debs, who insisted on both industrial unions and the Socialist Party as the cornerstone of sound policy, would resign from the IWW.” But instead of stating his reasons for leaving, Debs simply quit paying his dues, not wanting to formally break with Haywood and others with whom he had worked for years.

The IWW's reputation for leading struggles made it a special target in the period of reaction following the First World War. Hundreds of militants were jailed and foreign-born activists, whether members of the IWW or not, were subject to deportation. After 1920 the IWW was effectively gone. Many of its best militants went on to help found the U.S. Communist Party, but not Debs.

Imperial war and the fight for socialism

In his lifetime, Debs opposed two imperialist wars—the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the First World War. He saw these wars as bosses' wars and found nothing in them for the working classes of the belligerents but suffering and false consciousness.

As the buildup to the First World War intensified, Debs appealed to the SP to launch an assault “against war and all that makes war.”

Debs was no pacifist though. Long before the First World War, Debs showed his willingness to take up arms in defense of the labor movement. In 1906, responding to Pinkerton detective James McParlan's vow that the Western Federation of Miners leaders Big Bill Haywood, Charles Moyer, and George Pettibone—falsely accused of assassination by Idaho authorities—would “never leave Idaho alive,” Debs wrote an impassioned response in the spirit of his hero John Brown, the militant abolitionist:

Nearly twenty years ago the capitalist tyrants put some innocent men to death for standing up for labor. They are now going to try it again. Let them dare! There have been twenty years of revolutionary education, agitation, and organization since the Haymarket tragedy, and if an attempt is made to repeat it, there will be a revolution and I will do all in my power to precipitate it.... If they attempt to murder Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone and their brothers, a million revolutionists will meet them with guns.

Due in no small part to Debs' campaigning skills, the three were acquitted.

In 1914, in Ludlow, Colorado, in a particularly vicious battle between one of the Rockefeller properties and the Western Federation of Miners, the state militia machine-gunned picketers' tents without warning, killing several women and children. Debs, who was in full-stride against the war, did not hesitate to take up the miners' cause. In an article in the *International Socialist Review*, he urged the miners to raise a "Gunmen Defense Fund," "sufficient to provide each member with the latest high-power rifle, the same used by corporation gunmen, and 500 rounds of cartridges."

Debs was clear about which war he was prepared to fight: "I am not a capitalist soldier; I am a proletarian revolutionist.... I am opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul, and this the world-wide war of the social revolution."

In spite of international splits as well as divisions in the American left, the antiwar movement was vigorous. In 1917, Cleveland saw its biggest-ever May Day parade with banners that denounced the war and the capitalist class. But the event that agitated the prowar forces the most was the Russian Revolution in October 1917. Debs hailed the revolution and urged workers everywhere to follow the example of the best antiwar movement ever.

Later, during his trial for antiwar agitation, Debs defended the "Bolsheviki." He told a reporter that the SP antiwar platform did not go far enough, that the "success of the Bolshevik movement in Russia was something on which to model and base the ideals for this country—the ideals espoused by the Socialists."

The Canton speech

Of the thousands of speeches Debs made in his life, the one in Canton, Ohio, on June 16, 1918, is perhaps his finest. It was delivered in a small park across from the jail, where three SP antiwar activists were imprisoned, to 1,200 people attending the party's state convention.

It denounced the war profit makers, and reaffirmed Debs' solidarity with Lenin and Trotsky and the recently concluded peace they had made with Germany. Near the beginning of the speech Debs characterizes the leadership of the capitalists as represented in Congress, as those who are proud to rise from the ranks into positions of "eminence and distinction.... I would be ashamed to admit that I had risen from the ranks. When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks."

Further on he confesses, "The little that I am, the little that I am hoping to be, I owe to the Socialist movement. It has given me my ideas and ideals; my principles and convictions, and I would not exchange one of them for all of Rockefeller's bloodstained dollars."

Although antiwar in its content, Debs only mentioned war once in the entire speech:

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.

More than an antiwar speech, it indicted the capitalist system in all its aspects, including its two-party system:

To turn your back on the corrupt Republican Party and the corrupt Democratic Party—the gold-dust lackeys of the ruling class—counts for something. It counts still more...to join a minority party that has an ideal, that stands for a principle, and fights for a cause.

Furthermore, Debs makes clear that the source of strength of those gathered before him lies with combining political action with industrial strength: “You will never vote the Socialist republic into existence. You will have to lay its foundations in industrial democracy.” Or as he sums it up, “Vote as you strike and strike as you vote.”

Besides the clear antiwar message and class politics, the Canton speech also reflected Debs’ optimistic vision. (He knew that in the audience government stenographers were recording his every word and that he was likely to go to jail.) In the middle of his speech he made clear that “the heart of the International Socialist never beats a retreat” and that he is ever optimistic about a future that will reward all workers.

Debs was arrested, tried, and sentenced to ten years in jail at the age of sixty-three. In his statement to the court he was clear-eyed and resolute: “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.” He spent three years in the Atlanta federal prison before his sentence was commuted by Republican president Warren Harding to time served.

According to Clarence Darrow, who visited Debs in prison, Debs “was loved and idealized by all the inmates.”

From prison, Debs, Prisoner 9653, ran as the presidential candidate for the SP. He received nearly 920,000 votes. During the election campaign, the SP began calling him the “Grand Old Man.” Debs did not like it, and replied in a public statement: “A grand man is not old and an old man is not grand. I am not an old man and do not intend to be. I have no time to get old. The spirit within me and the soul of me, the spirit and soul of socialism, are a sure guarantee against ‘old age.’ I need not seek the gurgling spring of eternal youth. I have found it.”

While Debs declined to join the Communist Party, which was formed while he was in jail, he later acknowledged that was probably a mistake. His loyalty was to the Socialist Party to which he had dedicated his life. Though he admired the party of Lenin, Debs never understood how the Bolshevik Party was built, nor in the end how the SP had evolved into something far from his conception.

Eugene V. Debs’ guiding principle is best revealed in his remarks to the judge before he was sentenced to prison in 1919:

Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest of the earth. ... [W]hile there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

Mike Davis concludes in his introduction to this edition, "Debs was the American Left's better angel, but not alone, and *The Bending Cross* introduces us to a beloved community of kindred spirits." There is no better time to connect with this "community" when today all around is the daily violence, degradation, and disorientation of capitalism in crisis.