

Eugene Debs's May Day Address to Black Workers

In 1923, Eugene V. Debs wrote a powerful May Day address for the black socialist magazine the *Messenger* that called for “the emancipation of all races from the oppressive and degrading yoke of wage slavery.” We republish it here in full, for the first time since it appeared 100 years ago.



American socialist Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926) delivers a public speech. (Getty Images)

In the spring of 1923, the black socialist magazine the *Messenger* published a May Day greeting from leading US socialist Eugene V. Debs.

The Harlem-based magazine had gotten its start in 1917. Edited by two young radicals, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, it vehemently opposed World War I (both editors were briefly taken into police custody for polemicizing against the war) and relentlessly criticized the “Old Crowd” of moderate black leaders. In place of elite-led, accommodationist “racial uplift,” the *Messenger* proposed an unrelenting fight against Jim Crow, lynch law, and economic exploitation using the battering ram

of mass organization.

Debs was an early friend of the *Messenger*, and he shared the magazine's pro-labor, "New Negro" politics. Especially toward the end of his life (he died in 1926), Debs supported a militant struggle for racial equality as part of a broader struggle for worker emancipation. That socialist vision was on full display in his May Day remarks.

Racial domination had kept Africans Americans "in abject servitude beneath the iron heel of his exploiting master," Debs declared. "But our black brother is beginning to awaken from his lethargy in spite of all the deadening influences that surround him . . . and he is coming to realize that his place is in the Socialist movement along with . . . the worker of every other race, creed and color."

Jacobin is pleased to reprint Debs's May Day remarks in full for the first time since they appeared in 1923.

—[Shawn Gude](#)

It is more than gratifying to me in looking over the current *Messenger* to note the high excellence of its contents as a literary periodical and as a propaganda publication. It is edited with marked ability and it contains a variety of matter that would do credit to any magazine in the land.

All my life I have been especially interested in the problem of the Negro race, and I have always had full sympathy with every effort put forth to encourage our colored fellow-workers to join the Socialist movement and to make common cause with all other workers in the international struggle for the overthrow of capitalist despotism and the emancipation of all races from the oppressive and degrading yoke of wage slavery.

Due to the ignorance, prejudice, and unreasoning hatred of the white race in relation to the Negro, the latter has fared cruelly indeed and he has had but little encouragement from the "superior" race to improve his economic, intellectual and moral condition, but on the contrary, almost everything has been done to discourage every tendency on the part of the Negro toward self-improvement and to keep him in abject servitude beneath the iron heel of his exploiting master.

But our black brother is beginning to awaken from his lethargy in spite of all the deadening influences that surround him; he has had his experience in the war and especially since the war, and he is coming to realize that his place is in the Socialist movement along with the white worker and the worker of every other race, creed and color, and the *Messenger* is doing its full share to spread the light in dark places and to arouse the Negro masses to the necessity of taking their place and doing their part in the great struggle that is to emancipate the workers of all races and all nations from the insufferable curse of industrial slavery and social degradation.

May Day is now dawning and its spirit prompts me to hail the *Messenger* as a herald of light and freedom.

On May Day the workers of the world celebrate the beginning of their international

solidarity and register the high resolve to clasp hands all around the globe and to move forward in one solid phalanx toward the sunrise and the better day.

On that day we drink deeply at the fountain of proletarian inspiration; we know no nationality to the exclusion of any other, nor any creed, or any color, but we do know that we are all workers, that we are conscious of our interests and our power as a class, and we propose to develop and make use of that power in breaking our fetters and in rising from servitude to the mastery of the world.