

Eugene Debs: The Red Flag "Is a Sign of Terror to Every Tyrant"

In 1907, Eugene Debs waxed poetic about the red flag, calling it "a sign of terror to every tyrant" and "the flag of Universal Freedom." We reprint his article here in full.



A red flag waves during a May Day rally in Madrid, Spain, in 2006. Soman / Wikimedia Commons

A vast amount of ignorant prejudice prevails against the red flag. It is easily accounted for. The ruling class the wide world over hates it, and its sycophants, therefore, must decry it.

Strange that the red flag should produce the same effect upon a tyrant that it does upon a bull. The bull is enraged at the very sight of the red flag, his huge frame quivers, his eyes become balls of fire, and he paws the dirt and snorts with fury.

The reason of this peculiar effect of a bit of red coloring upon the bovine species we are not particularly interested in at this moment, but why does it happen to excite the same rage in the tsar, the emperor, and the king; the autocrat, the aristocrat, and the plutocrat?

Ah, that is simple enough. The red flag, since time immemorial, has symbolized the discontent of the downtrodden, the revolt of the rabble. That is its sinister significance to the tyrant and the reason of his mingled fear and frenzy when the "red rag," as he characterizes it, insults his vision.

It is not that he is opposed to red as a color, or even as an emblem, for he has it in his own flags and banners, and it never inflames his passion when it is blended with other colors; but red alone, unmixed and unadulterated, the pure red that symbolizes the common blood of the human family, the equality of mankind, the brotherhood of the race, is repulsive and abhorrent to him because it is at once an impeachment of his title, a denial of his superiority, and a menace to his power.

Precisely for the reason that the plutocrat raves at the red flag, the proletarian should revere it. To the

plutocrat it is a peril; to the proletarian a promise.

The red flag is an omen of ill, a sign of terror to every tyrant, every robber, and every vampire that sucks the life of labor and mocks at its misery. It is an emblem of hope, a bow of promise to all the oppressed and downtrodden of the earth.

The red flag is the only race flag; it is the flag of revolt against robbery; the flag of the working class, the flag of hope and high resolve — the flag of Universal Freedom.