

How Eugene Debs became a socialist

In 1902, iconic American leader Eugene V. Debs wrote about his journey from moderate labour organiser to militant socialist. To mark the 95th anniversary of his death, we republish his words.



Credit: Fotosearch / Getty Images

Eugene Debs's leap from moderate labour reformer to socialist firebrand is still shrouded in some mystery. Why exactly did a man [who had once fiercely opposed](#) strikes not only begin to lead them but start to view class struggle as the key to winning [a more democratic and just society](#)?

The most persuasive answer is that Debs was forged in the crucible of labour-capital conflict. While we don't have many letters from those years and are thus left guessing about Debs' internal life, we do know that he began to move left in the mid-1880s (after being involved in union politics for about a decade), edged further left over the subsequent years (founding the American Railway Union, an industrial union, in 1893), and by 1 January 1897, was ready to publicly declare himself a socialist (following the volcanic 1894 Pullman Strike, for which he was jailed).

The following is Debs' account of his evolution, first [published in *New York Comrade* in 1902](#).

Although the specifics of his story should be taken with a grain of salt (Debs was never the most reliable narrator), his essay makes clear that the catalyst for his evolution [was anything but abstract theory](#).

—by Shawn Gude

On the evening of February 27, 1875, the local lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was organized at Terre Haute, Ind., by Joshua A. Leach, then grand master, and I was admitted as a charter

member and at once chosen secretary.

“Old Josh Leach,” as he was affectionately called, a typical locomotive fireman of his day, was the founder of the brotherhood, and I was instantly attracted by his rugged honesty, simple manner and homely speech. How well I remember felling his large, rough hand on my shoulder, the kindly eye of an elder brother searching my own as he gently said, “My boy, you’re a little young, but I believe you’re in earnest and will make your mark in the brotherhood.”

Of course, I assured him that I would do my best. What he really thought at the time flattered my boyish vanity not a little when I heard of it. He was attending a meeting at St. Louis some months later, and in the course of his remarks said: “I put a tow-headed boy in the brotherhood at Terre Haute not long ago, and some day he will be at the head of it.”

Twenty-seven years, to a day, have played their pranks with “Old Josh” and the rest of us. When last we met, not long ago, and I pressed his good, right hand, I observed that he was crowned with the front that never melts; and as I think of him now:

Remembrance wakes, with all her busy train,
Swells at my breast and turns the past to pain.

My first step was thus taken in organized labor and a new influence fired my ambition and changed the whole current of my career. I was filled with enthusiasm and my blood fairly leaped in my veins. Day and night I worked for the brotherhood. To see its watchfires glow and observe the increase of its sturdy members were the sunshine and shower of my life. To attend the “meeting” was my supreme joy, and for ten years I was not once absent when the faithful assembled.

At the convention held in Buffalo in 1878 I was chosen associate editor of the magazine, and in 1880 I became grand secretary and treasurer. With all the fire of youth I entered upon the crusade which seemed to fairly glitter with possibilities. For eighteen hours at a stretch I was glued to my desk reeling off the answers to my many correspondents. Day and night were one. Sleep was time wasted and often, when all oblivious of her presence in the still small hours my mother’s hand turned off the light, I went to bed under protest. Oh, what days! And what quenchless zeal and consuming vanity! All the firemen everywhere — and they were all the world — were straining:

To catch the beat
On my tramping feet.

My grip was always packed; and I was darting in all directions. To tramp through a railroad yard in the rain, snow or sleet half the night, or till daybreak, to be ordered out of the roundhouse for being an “agitator,” or put off a train, sometimes passenger, more often freight, while attempting to deadhead over the division, were all in the program, and served to whet the appetite to conquer. One night in midwinter at Elmira, N. Y., a conductor on the Erie kindly dropped me off in a snowbank, and as I clambered to the top I ran into the arms of a policeman, who heard my story and on the spot became my friend.

I rode on the engines over mountain and plain, slept in the cabooses and bunks, and was fed from their pails by the swarthy stokers who still nestle close to my heart, and will until it is cold and still.

Through all these years I was nourished at Fountain Proletaire. I drank deeply of its waters and every particle of my tissue became saturated with the spirit of the working class. I had fired an engine and been stung by the exposure and hardship of the rail. I was with the boys in their weary watches, at the broken engine’s side and often helped to bear their bruised and bleeding bodies back to wife and child again. How could I but feel the burden of their wrongs? How the seed of agitation fail to take deep root in my heart?

And so I was spurred on in the work of organizing, not the fireman merely, but the brakemen, switchmen, telegraphers, shopmen, track-hands, all of them in fact, and as I had now become known as an organizer, the calls came from all sides and there are but few trades I have not helped to organize and less still in whose strikes I have not at some time had a hand.

In 1894 the American Railway Union was organized and a braver body of men never fought the battle of the working class.

Up to this time I had heard but little of Socialism, knew practically nothing about the movement, and what little I did know was not calculated to impress me in its favor. 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.

My supreme conviction was that if they were only organized in every branch of the service and all acted together in concert they could redress their wrongs and regulate the conditions of their employment. The stockholders of the corporation acted as one, why not the men? It was such a plain proposition — simply to follow the example set before their eyes by their masters — surely they could not fail to see it, act as one, and solve the problem.

It is useless to say that I had yet to learn the workings of the capitalist system, the resources of its masters and the weakness of its slaves. Indeed, no shadow of a “system” fell athwart my pathway; no thought of ending wage-misery marred my plans. I was too deeply absorbed in perfecting wage-servitude and making it a “thing of beauty and a joy forever.”

It all seems very strange to me now, taking a backward look, that my vision was so focalized on a single objective point that I utterly failed to see what now appears as clear as the noonday sun — so clear that I marvel that any workingman, however dull, uncomprehending, can resist it.

But perhaps it was better so. I was to be baptized in Socialism in the roar of conflict and I thank the gods for reserving to this fitful occasion the fiat, “Let there be light!” — the light that streams in steady radiance upon the Broadway to the Socialist republic.

The skirmish lines of the ARU were well advanced. A series of small battles were fought and won without the loss of a man. A number of concessions were made by the corporations rather than risk an encounter. Then came the fight on the Great Northern, short sharp, and decisive. The victory was complete — the only railroad strike of magnitude ever won by an organization in America.

Next followed the final shock — the Pullman strike — and the American Railway Union again won, clear and complete. The combined corporations were paralyzed and helpless. At this juncture there were delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes — and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*. This was my first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name.

An army of detectives, thugs and murderers were equipped with badge and beer and bludgeon and turned loose; old hulks of cars were fired; the alarm bells tolled; the people were terrified; the most startling rumors were set afloat; the press volleyed and thundered, and over all the wires sped the news that Chicago’s white throat was in the clutch of a red god; injunctions flew thick and fast, arrests followed, and our office and headquarters, the heart of the strike, was sacked, torn out and nailed up by the “lawful” authorities of the federal government; and when in company with my loyal comrades I found myself in Cook county jail at Chicago with the whole press screaming conspiracy, treason and murder, and by some fateful coincidence I was given the cell occupied just previous to his execution by the assassin of Mayor Carter Harrison, Sr., overlooking the spot, a few feet distant, where anarchists were hanged a few years before, I had another exceedingly practical and impressive lesson in Socialism.

Acting upon the advice of friends we sought to employ John Harlan, son of the Supreme Justice, to assist in our defense — a defense memorable to me chiefly because of the skill and fidelity of our lawyers, among whom were the brilliant Clarence Darrow and the venerable Judge Lyman Trubmull, author of the thirteenth amendment to the constitution, abolishing slavery in the United States.

Mr. Harlan wanted to think of the matter over night; and the next morning gravely informed us that he could not afford to be identified with the case, “for,” said he, “you will be tried upon the same theory as were the anarchists, with probably the same result.” That day, I remember, the jailer, by way of consolation, I suppose, showed us the blood-stained rope used at the last execution and explained in minutest detail, as he exhibited the gruesome relic, just how the monstrous crime of lawful murder is committed.

But the tempest gradually subsided and with it the bloodthirstiness of the press and “public sentiment.” We were not sentenced to the gallows, nor ever to the penitentiary — though put on trial for conspiracy — for reasons that will make another story.

The Chicago jail sentences were followed by six months at Woodstock and it was here that Socialism gradually laid hold of me in its own irresistible fashion. Books and pamphlets and letters from socialists came by every mail and I began to read and think and dissect the anatomy of the system in

which workingmen, however organized, could be shattered and battered and splintered at a single stroke. The writings of Bellamy and Blatchford early appealed to me. *The Cooperative Commonwealth* of Gronlund also impressed me, but the writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped, not merely 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.

It was at this time, when the first glimmerings of Socialism were beginning to penetrate, that Victor L. Berger — and I have loved him ever since — came to Woodstock, as if a providential instrument, and delivered the first impassioned message of Socialism I had ever heard — the very first to set the “wires humming in my system.” As a souvenir of that visit there is in my library a volume of *Capital*, by Karl Marx, inscribed with the compliments of Victor L. Berger, which I cherish as a token of priceless value.

The American Railway Union was defeated but not conquered — overwhelmed but not destroyed. It lives and pulsates in the Socialist movement, and its defeat but blazed the way to economic freedom and hastened the dawn of human brotherhood.