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# Eugene V. Debs: The Transformational Years

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When discussing the transitory period of Eugene V. Debs' life, in which he moved from being a conservative labor leader to a far more radical, yet still pragmatic socialist, it is important to initially consider his formative years for a better understanding of how Debs developed into the influential leader he became. While the focus of this paper will be 1891-1900, the years between his resignation from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Fireman and his first presidential nomination (running on the Socialist Party platform), it is essential to first concisely examine the early years of Debs' life.

Eugene V. Debs was born on November 5, 1855, to Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie Bettrich Debs, immigrants from German Alsace who settled in Terre Haute, Indiana, six years prior to Debs' birth.<sup>1</sup> Jean Daniel Debs was hardly rich, running a small grocery store in Terre Haute, yet Debs was not brought up in the midst of the working poor, the plight of whom affected him so strongly later in life.<sup>2</sup> Debs' father was familiar with and fond of the works of French and German romantic authors, particularly Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo--- hence Debs' full name, Eugene Victor Debs.<sup>3</sup> Debs' father frequently read these writers' works aloud to his son, and it is easy to imagine the impact these authors, both proponents and protectors of the working class, had on the young Debs.<sup>4</sup> Debs later wrote, "Victor Hugo prophesied that the present century would abolish poverty.... He foresaw the day when all the earth would be fair and beautiful, and all mortals brethren."<sup>5</sup>

As a child, Debs worked in his father's grocery store, but the work failed to grasp his interest.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when he was fourteen, he chose to leave school to work for the Vandalia Railroad, a decision which displeased his parents but didn't cause a lasting rift.<sup>7</sup> His employment with the Vandalia Railroad terminated in 1874, during the financial panic, so he moved to St.

Louis, where he got a job as a locomotive fireman--- the job which would inspire and influence much of his early career as a labor leader.<sup>8</sup> Debs also held this job fairly briefly. His mother had always been concerned about the dangerous nature of his occupation, and, following the tragic death of a friend who was crushed by a train in the course of his employment, her anxiety increased and Debs left his job.<sup>9</sup> These initial experiences gave Debs his first impressions of working class lives that were founded in reality, instead of in books. The significance of these first two periods of work, though short, must not be understated. At the age of 20, on the evening of February 27, 1875, Debs joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.<sup>10</sup> The grand master of the chapter, Joshua A. Leach, commented months later of Debs, "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."<sup>11</sup> The remark proved prescient as Debs quickly rose through the ranks, becoming first the secretary and assistant editor of the chapter's magazine, then the grand secretary and treasurer of the organization.<sup>12</sup> Debs summed up these years of work for the Brotherhood saying "With all the fire of youth I entered upon the crusade which seemed to fairly glitter with possibilities.... My grip was always packed; and I was darting in all directions."<sup>13</sup>

Debs took a conservative, cautious position on labor in his early career. Strikes were "a terrible weapon, to be used *only* when a terrible wrong exists," and boycotting in America was "a mistake, a stupid error, a total misapprehension of conditions, situation, institutions and rights."<sup>14</sup> His position emphasized the importance of unity and (a frequently-used term in Debs' earlier speeches) *manhood*.<sup>15</sup> However, Debs later said,

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 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 could the seed of agitation fail to take deep root in my heart?<sup>16</sup>

It is difficult to be sure how much of this was truly Debs' feeling at the time, and how much was Debs' later remembrances tinted by his current socialistic beliefs emphasizing the significance of the proletariat, but the trend toward socialism was present in his increasingly egalitarian, communal, unity-oriented beliefs, although he often protested that he was in favor of federation, not amalgamation--- he wanted all railway unions to join together, but he didn't want their individual identities to be obliterated.<sup>17</sup>

The notions of federation and unity sparked Debs' remarkable capacities for enthusiasm, drive, and passion. Federation became his major goal.<sup>18</sup> In his view, "United for mutual protection, workingmen of America would be invincible... peace and prosperity would reign supreme."<sup>19</sup> For a brief period of time, it looked as if his goal of federation might be possible under the umbrella of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, as the Firemen combined with the Brakemen and Switchmen to form the Supreme Council of the United Orders of Railway Employees.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately for Debs' grand vision, internal bickering and sniping led to the premature demise of the Supreme Council, which proved to be the final straw for Debs' commitment to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.<sup>21</sup> In 1891, Debs declared his intention to resign from the Brotherhood, but Debs always had difficulties cutting ties with men he still esteemed, even though he disagreed with them on major points.<sup>22</sup> Thus, he remained the editor of the Brotherhood's magazine until 1894, but resigned his positions as secretary and treasurer.<sup>23</sup>

This move, separating himself from the conservative Brotherhood, was Debs' first step toward eventual socialism, but he certainly wasn't labeling himself a socialist yet. Instead, Debs

turned his mind more fully to federation, hoping to further the cause of labor in ways his more conservative brethren were unready for. In 1893, Debs coordinated the formation of the American Railway Union.<sup>24</sup> All (European-American) railway workers, excepting railroad management, were free to join the ARU.<sup>25</sup> Debs was the natural choice for the post of President of the ARU, and with characteristic optimism and confidence in the eventual success of his ventures, he began speaking tours and organizing trips designed to convince workers to join the ARU.<sup>26</sup> While the constant travel and work must have been tiring, Debs seemingly didn't find the task at hand overly strenuous--- he was too happy with the results he was receiving.<sup>27</sup> Discontented railroad laborers joined the ARU in large masses in both the latter half of 1893 and the early months of 1894.<sup>28</sup> Debs said "a braver body of men never fought the battle of the working class," referring to the new ARU recruits.<sup>29</sup>

When James J. Hill, the owner of the Great Northern Railroad, cut the wages of his workers drastically without notice, the ARU was unwilling to ignore the issue at hand.<sup>30</sup> Hill had, in the last year, cut his workers' wages three times, and each time, the respective Brotherhoods, unwilling to involve themselves in potential trouble, recommended the workers passively accept the wage cuts.<sup>31</sup> The dissatisfied workers had joined the ARU, and clamored for a strike.<sup>32</sup> When the ARU declared support for the Great Northern workers, James Hill declared he would fire any of his workers with any connection to the ARU.<sup>33</sup> Despite his threat, the strike continued, paralyzing the Great Northern railway line. This state of affairs was unacceptable to Hill, and although he tried to cling to the upper hand in communications with Debs, he was forced to accept almost all of his workers' demands.<sup>34</sup> The strike only lasted slightly over two weeks.<sup>35</sup>

This victory gave the ARU the confidence to get involved in the more significant Pullman strike. The employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company were economically

devastated by the depression battering the United States throughout the 1890s.<sup>36</sup> Pullman workers were required to endure the hardships labor was customarily expected to face--- wage cuts, unsatisfactory living conditions, and arbitrary layoffs--- but the Pullman Company was noteworthy for the oppression of employees.<sup>37</sup> Employees of the company were supposed to live in a “company town” in Pullman Illinois, and thus the managers of the company were able to set the rents for housing, the prices for food, etc., to whatever they liked.<sup>38</sup> Debs, prior to the Pullman strike of 1894, expressed loathing for George Pullman, the man who had designed the layout of the company with supposedly “utopian” ideals supporting his vision, and the company in general. “The term ‘Pullman,’ has become at last the synonym of almost anything odious that heartless, crushing, degrading monopoly suggests to the minds of honorable men,” Debs wrote in an editorial in January 1887.<sup>39</sup> Debs attacked the personal integrity of the managers of the Pullman company, derogatively referring to them as “cringing, fawning lickspittles.”<sup>40</sup> Ironically, in this article, Debs also bemoaned the fact that these oppressive measures lent fodder to socialists and anarchists bent on the destruction of the status quo.<sup>41</sup>

However, Debs’ view of strikes and the status quo had changed by May 1894, when Pullman employees, after attempting arbitration with the company heads, chose to strike.<sup>42</sup> Because many of the strikers were dues-paying members of the ARU, Debs had an interest in their welfare.<sup>43</sup> The ARU didn’t immediately recognize and support the strike, but Debs did almost immediately travel to Pullman, Illinois to gather a sense of what was occurring at the site of the conflict.<sup>44</sup> Fortunately for the Pullman strikers, the national convention of the ARU happened to be scheduled soon after the strike commenced, and whether or not the ARU ought to support the strike was a major subject for debate.<sup>45</sup> The majority felt ARU members ought to refuse to work with/on, in any capacity, railroad cars manufactured by Pullman as a display of

support.<sup>46</sup> Debs, after his visit to Pullman, was convinced of the justness of the strikers' cause, yet he expressed concern about precipitate action, and favored a cautious approach. This display of restraint was due to his worry that the new, undeveloped ARU couldn't hold together under the pressure of a major strike.<sup>47</sup> Also, the union hadn't yet collected dues specifically set aside to support strikes and strikers, so financially, the ARU was unprepared.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Debs recommended a temperate policy: putting together a committee representing the ARU which could politely negotiate with George Pullman.<sup>49</sup> However, the committee yielded no positive results.<sup>50</sup> After a second attempt at committee-led arbitration failed, Debs lessened his restraint on the union, and members of the ARU present at the convention voted unanimously to commence a general boycott on June 25, 1894.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps due to Debs' cautionary suggestions, the ARU switchmen alone were told to refuse to switch railroad cars manufactured by Pullman. Then, if they were fired or in any way harmed by this action, all other ARU members would commence a sympathy strike.<sup>52</sup>

The boycott soon spiraled into a nearly nationwide strike. Approximately one hundred thousand men (and probably more) joined in the strike, almost paralyzing all railway service west of Chicago. Debs consistently pressed for nonviolence, and was largely successful in ensuring that the union men did not harm property owned by a railway.<sup>53</sup>

Even though the labor unity displayed during the Pullman strike was tremendous, the strike was doomed. The fledgling union couldn't withstand the force unleashed upon it by railway corporations, because railway companies enjoyed the unquestioning support of the federal government.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the Attorney General serving at the time, Richard Olney, had previously worked as a lawyer who represented several railroads.<sup>55</sup> Olney's prestige among railroad owners was such that he served on the Board of Directors for more than one railroad



line.<sup>56</sup> Olney appointed Edwin Walker, a lawyer representing one of the railroads entangled in the Pullman strike, to “deal with” the strike.<sup>57</sup> The federal government was hardly an unbiased observer--- it was forcefully trying to destroy the ARU.

The second-most crushing weapon the federal government could employ was used on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, approximately two months into the Pullman strike.<sup>58</sup> The weapon was an injunction, which banned leaders of the strike from any further association with the strikers.<sup>59</sup> This demand was unthinkable for the strike leaders, who couldn’t bring themselves to abandon the men they were leading.<sup>60</sup> Debs, and several other union leaders, after due consultations with lawyers, chose to ignore the injunction--- a decision a few of them may have regretted later.<sup>61</sup> Frustrated in their attempt to destroy labor unity and focus, the federal government realized further action was necessary to crush the strike. Governor John Peter Altgeld of Chicago insisted federal troops were not necessary, but in spite of his objections, President Grover Cleveland sent federal troops to Chicago.<sup>62</sup> The troops arrived, ironically, the evening before Independence Day, 1894.<sup>63</sup> Initially, Debs was happy to see the troops, as he hoped they would help the strike proceed nonviolently.<sup>64</sup> Soon, though, he realized the troops were sent to enforce the injunction he had earlier ignored, and if he and the other strike leaders were removed from their posts, the strike would quickly disintegrate.<sup>65</sup> In Debs’ own words, the unexpected appearance of federal militiamen in the conflict marked the moment the Pullman strike was turned to “a conflict in which the organized forces of society and all the powers of the municipal, State, and Federal governments were arraigned against us.”<sup>66</sup>

The head of the military forces in Chicago, General Nelson A. Miles, detested Debs and sought to bring down the labor leader’s organization at any cost. Even though no violence greeted Miles upon his arrival, he instantly called for reinforcements when he reached his

destination.<sup>67</sup> As antagonism between labor and management heated up, Debs started to become more concerned about the potential for violence. Thus, on July 6<sup>th</sup>, Debs attempted to call off the strike, likely in the midst of panic.<sup>68</sup> Debs realized “Things were assuming too serious a phase, and a point had been reached when, in the interests of peace.... We must declare the strike off.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, Debs and other associated labor leaders drafted a proposal, promising Pullman and the heads of other Chicago-based railroad corporations that they would end the strike, if the management of the aforementioned corporations would swear to take back the employees who had struck, without any negative consequences for the workers.<sup>70</sup> This attempt at compromise was met with silence.<sup>71</sup>

As the situation became more serious, Debs, on July 8<sup>th</sup>, held a meeting of Chicago union men and, throwing caution to the wind, suggested a general strike, to compel Pullman to accept their terms.<sup>72</sup> However, caution reigned amongst the union men, and it was decided to attempt negotiation a final time. If arbitration was met with equivocation again, a general strike would be declared in two days.<sup>73</sup> Negotiation was indeed rejected---railway management had the support of the federal government, and was happy to defeat the ARU in a war of attrition.<sup>74</sup> The ARU, while weakening, prepared its forces for a general strike. Unfortunately, two days after the Chicago union meeting, Debs and other labor organizers were arrested, charged with “conspiracy to obstruct a mail train,” and jailed.<sup>75</sup> On the following day, the general strike was begun in a dispiritingly lackluster fashion.<sup>76</sup> Only 25,000 men walked off their job---a significant portion of the labor force, but not the number Debs had counted on.<sup>77</sup> “As soon as the employees found that we were arrested and taken from the scene of action, they became demoralized, and that ended the strike,” Debs later wrote.<sup>78</sup> However, this was not the only force inflicting a death blow on the Pullman strike. Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, refused

to lend the support Debs felt sure would be given by the AFL.<sup>79</sup> Gompers advised AFL men considering or involved in sympathy strikes to return to their jobs, as the Pullman strike was “impulsive,” and the whole business was “unwise and contrary to the best interests of the working people.”<sup>80</sup> Debs felt that Gompers’ refusal proved Gompers to be a backstabber--- particularly since after the strike, when Debs was lauded as a hero by thousands; Gompers made a concerted effort to realign himself with Debs.<sup>81</sup>

The combination of these two forces obliterated the Pullman strike, but Debs was still in the midst of tension caused by the strike, and, according to his writings at a slightly later date, the pressure led to a revelation:

At this juncture there was 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*.<sup>82</sup>

Debs admitted he didn’t then know the name for his newly-awakened passion was *socialism*.<sup>83</sup> Still, Debs declared he was “...baptized in socialism in the roar of conflict.”<sup>84</sup>

Debs surely didn’t have much time after the collapse of the strike and the commencement of his trials to contemplate his developing socialistic worldview. Along with other strike leaders, Debs was imprisoned at the Chicago Cook County Jail.<sup>85</sup> The ARU had no funds left to provide money to pay lawyers’ fees, so their legal entanglement appeared dire.<sup>86</sup> A week after Debs’ arrest, he, along with several others, were additionally charged with contempt of court, because they ignored the original injunction ordering them to desist their unsettling activities. All the prisoners in question refused to post bail.<sup>87</sup> There was a brief trial, which ended prematurely when a prosecuting lawyer became seriously ill.<sup>88</sup> Debs, quite sick himself, managed to go home

to Terre Haute for a brief respite of two weeks before yet another trial.<sup>89</sup> The other strike leaders were given the penalty of three months in prison for contempt of court--- Debs was given double that sentence.<sup>90</sup> The sentence was appealed, but the appeal was insignificant when compared to the looming trial for conspiracy, which again was ended prematurely, when a member of the jury fell ill.<sup>91</sup> The case was never again reopened.<sup>92</sup> This trial was particularly significant, for it was the occasion on which Debs met Clarence Darrow, who had left a job working as a railroad company's lawyer to defend Debs.<sup>93</sup>

Infighting among the ARU had weakened the union terribly.<sup>94</sup> Debs himself participated in the internal division, refusing to support the men of the Great Northern again when Hill announced an intention to cut wages, because the workers associated with the Great Northern had been underwhelming in their support for the Pullman strike.<sup>95</sup> When a representative of the Great Northern laborers requested ARU funding for another strike, Debs was furious. "We put up all the money we had for them in '94 and as soon as they got their pay raises they let the order go to the devil," he wrote his brother, Theodore.<sup>96</sup> Unable to let the treachery go, Debs said in a letter, "Were I guilty of such a crime I am inclined to believe I would commit suicide."<sup>97</sup> After a whirlwind, exhausting speaking tour designed to reinforce the ARU and build funds for the workers now unemployed due to their undesirable reputation as strikers, Debs was incarcerated in Woodstock Prison in June, 1895.<sup>98</sup> His jail term wasn't as uncomfortable as many thought it must have been--- the sheriff present, George Eckert, also traced his lineage to Alsace and felt kinship for Debs, and endeavored to make Debs' time in jail agreeable.<sup>99</sup>

This is the time in which many—including Debs himself--suggest he was irrefutably converted to socialism.<sup>100</sup> It is known Debs read a great deal of literature considered socialistic in prison. He was particularly inspired by the works of Karl Kautsky, Lawrence Gronlund, and Karl

Marx (specifically *Das Kapital*, given to him by a later associate, Victor Berger)<sup>101</sup> *Das Kapital* “set the ‘wires humming in my system,’” according to Debs.<sup>102</sup> However, directly after the Pullman strike, Debs categorically denied being a socialist. To the U.S. Strike Commission, Debs declared support for a “cooperative commonwealth,” but also stated “No sir; I do not call myself a socialist... I believe in the cooperative commonwealth upon the principles laid down by Lawrence Gronlund.”<sup>103</sup> This statement triggers debate among biographers of Debs, some of whom feel that, since he denied socialism here, his later tales of dramatic post-Pullman conversion were perhaps embellished.<sup>104</sup> However, others argue that since Debs clearly supported Gronlund, who was a socialist, Debs had implicitly accepted socialism, but was unwilling to jeopardize the unity of the ARU by supporting a polarizing issue.<sup>105</sup> Also, Debs was, at this point in his career, hardly an expert in socialistic theory. Perhaps he just didn’t want to throw his weight behind a topic he didn’t fully understand.<sup>106</sup>

After six months, during which his letters to his brother Theodore became steadily more frustrated and frenetic, Debs was released from prison.<sup>107</sup> Approximately one hundred thousand supporters greeted him in Chicago upon his release, which touched him greatly.<sup>108</sup> Debs spoke about the need for liberty in stirring terms, but nothing in his speech could be construed as distinctively socialistic.<sup>109</sup> On November 23, 1895 the day of his arrival in Terre Haute, Debs delivered a speech in which he criticized the federal government for its unquestioning support of corporations at the expense of the people.<sup>110</sup> “Certain it is that the united voice of labor in this country would be insufficient to name a federal judge.... Money talks,” he declared.<sup>111</sup> At his speech’s conclusion, Debs stated “There is something wrong in this country; the judicial nets are so adjusted as to catch the minnows and let the whales slip through and the federal judge is as far removed from the common people as if he inhabited another planet.”<sup>112</sup> This emphasis on the

control of power by the government and the comparative powerlessness of the “common people,” as well as the separation between the two groups, indicates Debs’ burgeoning class consciousness--- certainly a far cry from the emphasis on unity and acceptance of the status quo of his younger days.

Debs was, at this point in his life, understandably disillusioned by the Democratic party-- - the party which elected Grover Cleveland, who had played a part in crushing the Pullman strike.<sup>113</sup> Thus, Debs commenced a brief flirtation with the Populist Party, throwing his support behind presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who was supported by Democrats and Populists.<sup>114</sup> However, Bryan, despite enormous popularity, lost the election, and Debs lost patience with the Populists as well.<sup>115</sup> Even when Debs was supporting Populism, Debs’ socialistic worldview was asserting itself. Debs said that once workers had united on the question of the coinage of free silver (an important issue in the Populist platform), they “could press forward in a solid phalanx in the crusade... until the whole capitalistic system is abolished and the co-operative commonwealth has become an established fact.”<sup>116</sup> The overthrow of capitalism was not part of the Populist platform, thus Debs was surely detailing his own beliefs rather than the Populists’, thus demonstrating his weak attachment to the Populist Party.<sup>117</sup>

Climactically, Debs, on January 1, 1897, chose to turn over a new leaf.<sup>118</sup> He wrote that the recent presidential election “convinced every intelligent wage worker that in politics, per se, there is no hope of emancipation from the degrading curse of wage slavery.”<sup>119</sup> After years of careful thought that had begun with the Pullman strike, Debs declared himself a Socialist. He bluntly said, “The issue is, Socialism vs. Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity... Money constitutes no proper basis of civilization. The time has come to regenerate society--- we are on the eve of a universal change.”<sup>120</sup>

True to Debs' commitment to nonviolence and unity, he didn't endorse Marxian socialism--- he instead supported the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth, which had been created two years before.<sup>121</sup> The Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth emphasized the need to educate the American public about socialism and to unite all unions.<sup>122</sup> These are goals now typically associated with socialism, but the Commonwealth had another less stereotypically socialistic goal. The Commonwealth was dedicated to establishing a utopian socialist state in the West. From that utopia, the rest of America could observe the greatness of socialism, and socialism would proliferate through the United States as its advantages were seen through example.<sup>123</sup> Debs was impressed with this idea because he saw the utopian community as a place where workers who were out of a job due to their involvement with the Pullman strike could seek protection.<sup>124</sup> Debs joined the Brotherhood as a national organizer, but he soon came to the conclusion the association had stagnated almost before it had begun.<sup>125</sup> Parting from the Brotherhood didn't mean he left behind those ideas--- far from it. Instead, he integrated the beliefs of the Brotherhood into his (now defunct) American Railway Union, setting a date for a convention discussing communalism for June 15, 1897.<sup>126</sup> Debs described his vision for a utopian socialist community, saying "The movement to be launched at Chicago contemplates the unification of all workers, organized and unorganized, and all others, regardless of sex or color, who favor a change in our social and industrial affairs..."<sup>127</sup> The early utopian colonists, likely young, idealistic bachelors, would observe strict, pseudo-military discipline, but Debs thought "They will be men of much fibre, and the conviction that they are the progenitors of a new humanity will burn and glow in their breasts with such intensity, that come what may, they will have the courage and fidelity to stand and withstand until success is achieved."<sup>128</sup> Debs foresaw

great things coming from this community of socialists, believing the socialist movement would soon gain power, and, by the next presidential election in 1900, be a force to be reckoned with.<sup>129</sup>

At the convention held June 15, Debs persuaded the (very few) members of the ARU who attended to disband the ARU and instead join the organization Debs called the Social Democracy of America.<sup>130</sup> Debs was elected to chair the Executive Board of the Social Democracy.<sup>131</sup> However, not everyone was pleased with the direction Debs was taking, and Debs, being inclined to compromise, made an effort to incorporate other Socialists' core beliefs into his organization. For example, upon the prompting of Victor Berger, who later became the socialist mayor of Milwaukee, the SDA developed a specific political program--- an unpopular move among many communalists, who felt Socialists should lead by example, not by gleaning votes.<sup>132</sup> The goals of the SDA included:

... public ownership for all industries controlled by monopolies, trusts, and combines; of transportation and communication facilities; and of mines, oil wells, and mineral deposits. It also called for shorter working hours... a public works program for the unemployed, for a postal savings bank; for initiative, referendum, and recall; and for proportional representation.<sup>133</sup>

Despite Debs' persistence and optimism, this organization also soon crumbled.<sup>134</sup> The rift between those who favored the formation of a utopian society and those who supported political activism was too large.<sup>135</sup> Also, Debs' sudden indecisiveness about the greater focus of the SDA caused confusion. Initially, he was invested in communalism, but he soon revoked some of his more extreme statements on the topic, saying he felt the utopia-focused portion of the SDA's plans had been overstressed, and that he thought it would be beneficial to concentrate on political action, to the exclusion of a utopian community if necessary.<sup>136</sup> The tension between the two



rival perspectives increased quickly, and Debs, not at his best in the midst of internal tension, prevaricated.<sup>137</sup> The tension reached its climax at the second national convention of the SDA, in which the representatives supporting political action stormed out in protest.<sup>138</sup> Debs gave a speech at the convention which seemed to indicate he was still pro-communalism, but soon after the convention, he chose to support political action, leaving peeved utopian socialists behind.<sup>139</sup> The colonization movement soon deflated, even though it, very briefly, created a small community in Washington State.<sup>140</sup>

The pro-political action division of the former SDA formed the Socialist Democratic Party, and Debs supported it with customary vigor.<sup>141</sup> The party experienced a great deal of success in its early days, mostly because of Debs' fame and his endless schedule of lecture tours, in which he praised the new party to high heaven.<sup>142</sup> The Socialist Democratic Party, in the throes of early success, decided to run a candidate for the presidency in 1900.<sup>143</sup> Debs was the clear choice; while there was disagreement on his policies within the Socialist community, he was extraordinarily well-respected.<sup>144</sup> Many people, though, were uncertain whether Debs would consent to run, as he earlier had refused a presidential nomination with the terse telegram "PLEASE DO NOT PERMIT USE OF MY NAME FOR NOMINATION. E V DEBS."<sup>145</sup> Debs hesitated to accept the 1900 presidential nomination, as he still was on lecture tours to pay off the ARU's accumulated debt, and he felt his health was deteriorating.<sup>146</sup> At the Social Democratic convention, after listening to a laudatory speech by a delegate prior to his official nomination, he stood and declared he found himself unable to accept the nomination, due to illness.<sup>147</sup> After a moment of incomprehension and several minutes of disbelief, the delegates resorted to passionate pleading, but Debs remained steadfast.<sup>148</sup> However, the next morning, after a night filled with little rest for Debs, as delegates kept appearing at his hotel room to ask him to

reconsider, Debs accepted the nomination in a short speech.<sup>149</sup> He said the convention's "united voices" had led him to hear more clearly "the supreme command of duty."<sup>150</sup>

Yet again, after initial hesitation, Debs committed himself with unparalleled passion. In Chicago, Debs' skilled speechmaking electrified the first crowd he spoke to as a presidential nominee.<sup>151</sup> With little regard for his health, he covered Iowa, Missouri, Kentucky, Texas, Georgia, and Alabama in a single month, delivering approximately two-hour-long speeches at each stop.<sup>152</sup> His campaigning style was tiring and uncomfortable because he always slept sitting up on trains, having refused to use a Pullman berth on principle since the Pullman strike.<sup>153</sup> About halfway through his campaign, Debs was forced to slow to a halt, as he suffered "rheumatism, the result of exposure and overexertion."<sup>154</sup> This pause was welcomed by many socialists, who continuously fretted about Debs' health.<sup>155</sup> After a month of bed rest, Debs' embarked on a transnational lecture tour, during which he worked constantly, rarely taking time out of his schedule to sleep.<sup>156</sup>

When one considered the effort Debs expended during this campaign, the results of the election were discouraging. He won less than 100,000 votes, and, under scrutiny, it was clear socialist influence was confined to narrow portions of the United States.<sup>157</sup> He enjoyed relatively strong support in New York but was disappointed with his support in every other state.<sup>158</sup> Yet, after initial sadness, he came to view the election positively, expressing the uncrushable optimism so remarkable in Debs.<sup>159</sup> To his brother Theo, he wrote:

Thus closes the campaign--- and the results show that we got everything *except votes*. I am serene for two reasons: *1st*: I did the very best I could for the party that nominated me and for its principles. *2d*. The working class will get in full measure what they voted for. And so we begin the campaign for 1904.<sup>160</sup>

In the same letter, Debs later wrote, “I’ll stick to the party, through the gates of hell, till it stands on rock and defies the thunderbolts of Jove,” and while socialism never enjoyed the support of a majority of Americans, Debs’ zenith, and the corresponding prime of the Socialist Democratic Party, was yet to come.<sup>161</sup> In 1912, Debs won 901, 225 votes--- six percent of the popular vote cast that year.<sup>162</sup>

Clarence Darrow once described Debs by saying, “There may have lived some time, some where, a kindlier, gentler, more generous man than Eugene V. Debs, but I have never known him...he was the bravest man I ever knew. He never felt fear.”<sup>163</sup> These attributes are what made Eugene V. Debs such a remarkable, charismatic leader. Debs’ transformational years prepared him for greater national prominence, as he devoted himself mind, body, and soul to the cause he had chosen. Interestingly, even as Debs’ outward views changed drastically, his inward views remained constant, as he stayed eternally dedicated to fundamental unity and basic human rights. While his expression of this commitment altered, the commitment itself was unswerving. Debs’ experiences with the Great Northern Railroad, the Pullman Strike, and Woodstock Jail revealed and developed his socialistic beliefs, but those events did not create the passion and dedication with which Eugene V. Debs expressed his love for and belief in humanity.

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## Endnotes

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