

# How I Become a Socialist

Eugene Debs

## Introduction

Eugene Debs (1855–1926) was a forceful advocate of worker rights and a reluctant politician, running for president on the Socialist Party ticket five times. Debs began his career as Secretary of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and later helped organize the American Railway Union, the nation's first industrial union. After the Pullman Strike in 1892, Debs grew tired of ineffectual union tactics and became a leading figure in the Socialist Party. In this article from *The Comrade*, he explains his conversion.

Source: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs* (New York: Hermitage Press, 1948), 43–47.

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## Document:

As I have some doubt about the readers of *The Comrade* having any curiosity as to “how I became a Socialist” it may be in order to say that the subject is the editor's, not my own; and that what is here offered is at his bidding—my only concern being that he shall not have cause to wish that I had remained what I was instead of becoming a Socialist.

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 feeling 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.”

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 could 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 firemen 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 A. R. U. were well advanced. A series of small battles was fought and won without the loss of a man. A number of concessions was 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 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*. 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 was 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 mob; 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 the 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 Trumbull, 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 blood-thirstiness of the press and “public sentiment.” We were not sentenced to the gallows, nor even 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 “Co-operative 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.

16:10 N.F. Thompson, Testimony before the Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital and Labor (1900)

“Labor organizations are to-day the greatest menace to this Government that exists inside or outside the pale of our national domain. Their influence for disruption and disorganization of society is far more dangerous to the perpetuation of our Government in its purity and power than would be the hostile array on our borders of the army of the entire world combined.

“I make this statement from years of close study and a field of the widest opportunities for observation, embracing the principal industrial centers both of the North and the South. I make this statement entirely from a sense of patriotic duty and without prejudice against any class of citizens of our common country.

“If I could make this statement any stronger or clearer, I would gladly do so for it is not until an evil or a danger is made strongly apparent that adequate measures of relief are likely to be applied. That such a menace is real and not imaginary the most casual investigation of existing tendencies among the laboring classes will make the facts discernible. On every hand, and for the slightest provocation, all classes of organized labor stand ready to inaugurate a strike with all its attendant evils, or to place a boycott for the purpose of destroying the business of some one against whom their enmity has been evoked.

“In addition to this, stronger ties of consolidation are being urged all over the country among labor unions with the view of being able to inaugurate a sympathetic strike that will embrace all classes of labor, simply to redress the grievances or right the wrong of one class, however remotely located or however unjust may be the demands of that class. To recognize such a power as this in any organization, or to permit such a theory to be advanced without a protest or counteracting influence, is so dangerous and subversive of government that it may justly be likened to the planting of deadly virus in the heart of organized society, death being its certain and speedy concomitant.

“Organizations teaching such theories should be held as treasonable in their character and their leaders worse than traitors to their country. It is time for the plainest utterances on this subject, for the danger is imminent, and in view of the incidents that have occurred recently in strikes it can be considered little less than criminal in those who control public sentiment that such scenes are possible anywhere in this country.

“This language may seem needlessly harsh and severe, but in some classes of diseases it is the sharpest knife that effects the speediest remedy, and so, in this case, if the public are to be awakened to their real danger the plainest speech becomes necessary.

“No one questions the right of labor to organize for any legitimate purpose, but when labor organizations degenerate into agencies of evil, inculcating theories dangerous to society and claiming rights and powers destructive to government there should be no hesitancy in any quarter to check these evil tendencies even if the organizations

themselves have to be placed under the ban of law. That these organizations are thus degenerating is seen in the following facts:

“(1) Many labor leaders are open and avowed socialists and are using labor organizations as the propaganda of socialistic doctrines.

“(2) These organizations are weakening the ties of citizenship among thousands of our people in that they have no other standard of community obligations than what these organizations inculcate.

“(3) They are creating widespread disregard for the rights of others equally as entitled to the protection of organized society as their own, as evidenced in every strike that occurs and the increasing arbitrariness of labor demands on their employers.

“(4) They are destroying respect for law and authority among the working classes, as many have no higher conception of these than such as are embodied in the commands and demands of labor organizations and labor leaders.

“(5) They are educating the laboring classes against the employing classes, thus creating antagonisms between those whose mutuality of interests should be fostered and encouraged by every friend of good government; for the success of government hangs on no less a basis than the harmony and happiness of the people, embracing alike employers and the employed.

“(6) They are demanding of Federal, State, and municipal authorities class legislation and class discrimination utterly at variance with the fundamental principles of our Government, in that they are demanding of these various authorities the employment of only union labor, thus seeking to bring the power of organized society to crush out all nonunion workers.

“(7) They are destroying the right of individual contract between employees and employers and forcing upon employers men at arbitrary wages, which is unjust alike to other labor more skilled, and to capital, which is thus obliged to pay for more than it receives in equivalent.

“(8) They demand the discharge of men who risk life to protect employers' interests during strikes to reinstate those who were formerly employed, but who have been instrumental, directly or indirectly, in the destruction of life and property, thereby placing a premium upon disloyalty and crime.

“(9) They are bringing public reproach upon the judicial tribunals of our country by public abuse of these tribunals and often open defiance of their judgments and decrees, thus seeking to break down the only safeguards of a free people.

“*Remedies.*—The remedies or remedy for the foregoing evils lie particularly in a correct public sentiment touching the relations that should exist between labor and capital. Any



sentiment or legislation that does not recognize and is not based upon the mutuality of interests of these two factors of our industrial life is essentially wrong, and no just remedy can be expected until this relationship is established and maintained by a healthy public sentiment.

“The tendency among politicians and political parties to court the labor vote by denouncing capital, trusts, corporations, etc., may be called the accessory agencies that have made the foregoing conditions possible, and not until these factors of industrial existence are placed properly before the public and given the protection of such a sentiment as they merit will there be any material improvement in present affairs.

“Please understand that I plead only for equal and exact justice for both capital and labor, the establishment of correct relationship between them, and the correction of abuses in each.

“I do not believe capitalistic trusts should be anathematized to make political capital with anarchistic labor trusts. Neither do I advocate the possible oppression of the humblest workman in the land by the strongest combination of capital organized or used for that purpose. Both stand in the same relationship to the public, and the public should demand that both be treated with the same degree of impartial justice....

“A further law should be enacted that would make it justifiable homicide for any killing that occurred in defense of any lawful occupation, the theory of our government being that anyone has a right to earn an honest living in this country, and any endeavor to deprive one of that right should be placed in the same legal status with deprivation of life and property.

“The incorporation of labor unions should be required, and their members thus brought under legal surveillance and responsibility. In view of the close relationship existing among all classes of our citizens—the interdependency of all interests—strikes and boycotts should be made a felony, both by national and State legislation; and to secure adequate relief for the grievances for which strikes and boycotts are inaugurated, I would suggest the formation of State and national boards of arbitration, authorized and empowered to settle all matters of differences between labor and capital, whose decrees should be binding on the parties affected, granting an appeal, however, to the civil courts to either party dissatisfied with the arbitration; the national board to have jurisdiction over the interstate lines of transportation and their employees, and State boards to have jurisdiction over industrial interests confined within State limits.