

American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs—A fatally flawed documentary

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5 March 2018

In this bicentenary year of the birth of Karl Marx, the contradictions of capitalism he so clearly laid bare are more explosive than ever. Millions of workers and young people are searching for an alternative to a world of austerity, inequality and the threat of World War III. Under these conditions there is much to learn from the life and legacy of pioneer American socialist Eugene V. Debs.

Debs (1855-1926) is the subject of a new film documentary, *American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs*. The film, directed by Yale Strom (*The Last Klezmer*) and narrated by well-known actress Amy Madigan, is being shown in theaters around the US at various times in the course of the next few months. It is also available via the Kanopy video streaming service, accessible through many public libraries.

On the basic facts of Debs' life and career, Strom's film is accurate and informative. Its use of audio and video, combined with the reading of letters and speeches, makes much of this history come alive. There are also some useful comments by a number of scholars, including Debs biographer Nick Salvatore, the Maurice and Hinda Neufeld Founders Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations and Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

However, when it comes to the legacy of Debs—what his struggle means today—the movie should come with a giant warning sign. Using various means, some more brazen than others, it aims to turn Debs' revolutionary message into its opposite, claiming that the courageous fighter against imperialist war and the capitalist two-party system was a kind of forerunner of Bernie Sanders, the loyal Democrat and defender of imperialism today.

The main outlines of Debs' life are effectively depicted in Strom's film, including his birth in Terre Haute, Indiana to an enlightened immigrant couple from the Alsace region of France, his early adult years as a labor organizer and later a founder of the American Railway Union, and his six-month jail sentence after the bitter Pullman strike of 1894.

This latter experience was a turning point, because Debs—already almost 40 years old—became acquainted while in prison with some of the works of Karl Marx. His own experience with capitalist state repression and official strikebreaking was illuminated and explained by Marxism. He soon broke definitively with the Democratic Party and the kind of trade unionism later epitomized by Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). For the rest of his life Debs was, as he later put it, a “flaming revolutionist.”

There is much more to Debs' life of ceaseless and selfless struggle, as shown in some of the film's narration and illustrated by the audio,

video and photographic record. This includes Debs' role as chief editorial writer for the Kansas-based *Appeal to Reason*, which had a circulation in the hundreds of thousands; his close friendship with such figures as Lucy Parsons (the widow of Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons), Helen Keller and Big Bill Haywood; his five campaigns for the US presidency as the candidate of the Socialist Party, beginning in 1900; and his co-founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905, in bitter struggle for industrial unionism and socialism against the AFL. During this period, Debs traveled constantly, speaking to meetings of many thousands and rallying support for bitter strike struggles.

Debs won nearly one million votes in the election of 1912, 6 percent of the total, although perhaps closer to ten percent if one takes into account the votes that were stolen. But Debs' most heroic contribution to the international working class struggle came a few years later, with the conflict that would go down in history as World War One. American imperialism stayed out of the war for nearly three years, but President Woodrow Wilson brought the US into the carnage in early April of 1917—just one month after the February Revolution in Russia, and about seven months before the October Revolution that established the first workers' state in history.

Debs was past 60 and not in good health. He had opposed the war from the very outset, unlike the vast majority of the leaders of the European parties of the Socialist International. After US entry into the war, he refused to buckle under to the pressure of nationalism and chauvinism. He took a stand in total opposition to social-patriots—socialists in word but patriotic supporters of the capitalists in deed—like SP leader Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit, who feigned opposition to the war for a time. Meanwhile the Wilson government passed the Espionage Act in June, 1917, providing draconian penalties for speaking out against the war.

Debs welcomed the October Revolution later that year. In 1918, he gave his famous antiwar speech in Canton, Ohio, well aware that he courted arrest. He was charged with sedition, convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison, a possible death sentence for a man of his age and condition.

Running for the presidency from his maximum-security prison cell in Atlanta, Debs won more than 900,000 votes. In the face of mounting appeals for clemency, Wilson called Debs a traitor and declared publicly that he “will never consent to pardon this man.”

Meanwhile the Socialist Party split over the fundamental question of the Russian Revolution. Debs sought to maintain friendly ties to old comrades in both the old Socialist and new Communist Parties. He

was finally released from prison on Christmas Day of 1921, and greeted on his return home to Terre Haute by a crowd of 25,000.

Debs continued to defend the Soviet workers' state, and is quoted in the movie as declaring, after his release from prison, that "the revolution must protect itself" during the period of transition to socialism.

In his last years, a price was exacted for Debs' political weaknesses, however—above all his inability to recognize that the working class requires a revolutionary leadership, a party built in sharp and principled struggle against all forms of opportunism and reformism. Debs' conception of an "all-inclusive party," his refusal to take part in the necessary inner-party struggle, led him to remain in the Socialist Party rather than join in the fight to build a leadership based on the lessons and perspective of the successful revolution in Russia.

This does not negate the significance of the heroic struggles waged by Debs for more than a quarter-century. In the final analysis, his difficulties reflected those of the young and theoretically untrained American working class, while American capitalism was still in its ascendancy on the world stage.

Debs' legacy includes the fight for the political independence of the working class against class collaboration. Above all, it stands in the tradition of internationalism, the fight against imperialist war, and the understanding, as articulated by German revolutionary leader Karl Liebknecht, that "the main enemy is at home."

Debs' dedication to the cause of socialism was recognized by both Lenin and Trotsky. Trotsky, writing about his brief period in the United States in early 1917 in *My Life*, his 1932 autobiography, concisely described Debs' weaknesses but also his strengths: "Old Eugene Debs stood out prominently among the older generation because of the quenchless inner flame of his socialist idealism. Although he was a romantic and a preacher, and not at all a politician or a leader, he was a sincere revolutionary; yet he succumbed to the influence of people who were in every respect his inferiors. Hillquit's art lay in keeping Debs on his left flank while he maintained a business friendship with Gompers. Debs had a captivating personality. Whenever we met, he embraced and kissed me; the old man did not belong to the 'drys.' When the Babbitts proclaimed a blockade against me, Debs took no part in it; he simply drew aside, sorrowfully."

Lenin, writing in his *Letter to American Workers* in August of 1918, as the revolution was fighting for its life against more than a dozen foreign imperialist armies of intervention, explained, "I...recall the words of one of the most beloved leaders of the American proletariat, Eugene Debs, who wrote in the *Appeal to Reason*, I believe towards the end of 1915, in the article 'What Shall I Fight For' (I quoted this article at the beginning of 1916 at a public meeting of workers in Berne, Switzerland)—that he, Debs, would rather be shot than vote credits for the present criminal and reactionary war; that he, Debs, knows of only one holy and, from the proletarian standpoint, legitimate war, namely: the war against the capitalists, the war to liberate mankind from wage-slavery.

"I am not surprised that Wilson, the head of the American multimillionaires and servant of the capitalist sharks, has thrown Debs into prison. Let the bourgeoisie be brutal to the true internationalists, to the true representatives of the revolutionary proletariat! The more fierce and brutal they are, the nearer the day of the victorious proletarian revolution."

The filmmakers want to bury this understanding of Debs' legacy. Instead they try to soften Debs' revolutionary message.

This is done indirectly in some scenes. The pro-war role of such figures as Berger is alluded to only briefly and very politely. Reporting that the SP reached a membership of 118,000 in 1912 and elected Socialist mayors in cities across the country in this and subsequent years, the film illustrates this with photos of some of these mayors, including such "sewer socialists" as Jasper McLevy of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and ending with...none other than Bernie Sanders, the mayor of Burlington, Vermont for much of the 1980s.

But the filmmakers save the worst for last. Frances Fox Piven, the veteran Social Democrat and professor at the City University of New York, appears on screen and begins speaking, with no apparent context or explanation, about the right-wing populists of the Tea Party. According to Fox Piven, these are "ordinary people aroused and organized by a section of the elite" because they are angry about the "whole series of changes" of the past five decades, including "women's liberation, an African-American president, gay and lesbian movement," etc.

Although the 85-year-old middle class academic, a longtime member of the Democratic Socialists of America, doesn't spell it out, her remarks amount to the reactionary insinuation that Debs was a kind of predecessor of today's identity politics!

At the end of the film we hear from Hendrik Hertzberg, the longtime writer for the *New Yorker*, one of the major media voices of left-liberalism and identity politics, including the current #MeToo campaign. According to Hertzberg, if Debs had lived in a less repressive era than the 1890s, when he was originally sent to prison and discovered socialism, "he might have gone on to become a standard though extraordinary Democrat." He might "today have his own show on MSNBC," or been someone like Ohio Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown. How disgusting!

These outrageous, politically obscene comments are not minor flaws. Both Fox Piven and Hertzberg are leading figures in the upper middle class liberal and pseudo-left milieu centered around academia and the media. Their prominence in *American Socialist* reflects a definite political aim: to use the reputation of Debs to channel the anger and growing leftward movement among workers and young people back into the same Democratic Party that Debs spent so many years mercilessly fighting, the Democratic Party that has abandoned whatever reformist or populist policies it espoused in Debs' day, and today is leading the anti-Russia campaign and the charge for imperialist war.

American Socialist can be recommended only for its valuable historical background. Only the Trotskyist movement takes forward the struggle for socialism to which Debs dedicated himself, and can therefore honestly explain his life and heritage. For an understanding of this historical period the work of James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism and an active participant in the socialist movement in the period of the war and the Russian Revolution, is indispensable, especially his 1956 article written on the centennial of Debs' birth, and his book, *The First Ten Years of American Communism*.



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