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# Debs Speaks from Atlanta

by Irwin St. John Tucker

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“What will Cox and Harding do about coal? I challenge them to answer. That is the liveliest question before the American people today. The League of Nations is a dishonest issue. What will they do about coal?” With these words, Eugene V. Debs, Socialist candidate for President, issued a flat challenge to his rival candidates for the Presidency from the visitors’ room in the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta today.

“Our Socialist solution,” Debs continued, “is simple and clear. We will take possession of the mines for the people. To every miner who digs coal, we will give the full value of all the coal he digs — enough to maintain for himself and his children a decent home with the best of clothes and the best of food; enough to provide an ample education for his children, and a comfortable old age for himself, and then we will sell the coal to the people for exactly what it costs to produce and distribute it with now profit for anyone.”

“The Attorney General has stated that it costs \$2.76 a ton at the mine mouth, including all salaries and overhead to produce coal; and yet that it is selling to the people at \$12 and \$16 a ton. Coal mine owners are making profits of from 8 to 10,000% on their total capital stock, while the homes and the industries of the country are facing the disaster of a coal shortage. Unless there is sufficient coal mined there will be hundreds of thousands of lives lost this winter, for there is not enough wood in the continent to keep American homes warm this winter.”

“They say that the trouble is a shortage of cars, that they cannot get enough cars; and yet Mr. Wilson has had made by special executive order 4,000 cars of a special design to aid the aristocracy of Poland crush out the only genuinely democratic government on the face of the earth.”

Debs’ lean face is sunburned and his movements are quick and vigorous. He has lost the nervousness which was noticeable when he first entered the Federal Prison and his voice is clear and his eyes undimmed. In a ringing voice he outlined his views of the campaign, evincing a perfect acquaintance with the issues and developments of the hour.

The guards and other prisoners regard Debs with a kind of reverence. He has steadfastly refused to accept any favors, such as better food or more privileges than the rest of them. Concerning those who are responsible for his imprisonment, Debs spoke more in pity than in condemnation.

“I do not think there is any man in history who will be visited with more permanently enduring contempt than Woodrow Wilson,” he said. “When he went to Europe he was possessed with the most inordinate ambition that ever inflamed the heart of man. Napoleon was to be but a pygmy to him. And then when he came back and went about the country calling those who disagreed with him snakes and vipers, the voice of God said, “That will do from you,” and the hand of God struck him down; and he lies there now the object of the pitying contempt of the whole world’s scorn.”

“What do you think of the Farmer-Labor Party?” I asked.

“The Farmer-Labor party is a one campaign party,” he said, “they will never survive this campaign. People are too far along now to hold to any halfway measures or programs. [Parley] Christensen, their candidate, seems to be a splendid fellow and I have written him my congratulations for his courageous stand on many public questions.”

Speaking of the railroad situation, he said, “I have

been pleased to find that there were so many of the old American Railway Union men with the so-called outlaw strikers of the Chicago Yardmen's Association. The switchmen not merely had against them the railroad companies and all the departments of the government, but it was their own people, their own organizations, their own officials, that were the worst thing they had to contend with. They were scabbed on by their fellow unionists. There was a tri-party alliance against them. The Interstate Commerce Commission had its smaller officials scattered throughout the country working in every locality and warning their men and the public alike against the "outlaws." Then there are the railroad union officials who are the real traitors — men like W.G. Lee — in the places of power. They are not reachable by the rank and file. Self-perpetuating oligarchs that re-elect themselves, with their princely salaries of \$8,000 to \$12,000 a year — what do they care for the struggles of the ordinary members of their unions? Think of it — \$1,000 a month for being a labor leader; old line unionism has pampered its officialdom for the purpose of keeping the workers themselves in subjection and in want. These officials worked together with the railroad and the government officials in a combination that is against all efficient and legitimate organizations.

"The present great upheaval has been growing and developing since the ARU strike [June-July 1894]. This thing of demanding unity in organization and a rational leadership controlled by the rank and file themselves is the big new note; and it is bound to win. It has been gaining gradually and officialdom has been in combination against it. When finally after their officials had deceived them for 2 years, told them repeatedly they were just about to get something, then finally and spontaneously the thing went off.

"The railroad strike was as just a strike as ever occurred in the United States. And the organization in which they have been paying dues and the 'grand' officials — how they love to call themselves 'grand chiefs' — those very grand officials turned on them and put scabs in their places. Gompers and those like him have proclaimed the imperial decree — there can only be a lawful strike when it has received the royal seal."

I showed him a clipping from a Washington newspaper in which Gompers pledged the assistance

of labor to the Wilson administration in every effort to make war against Russia. Debs read it and for a short time seemed unable to speak. Then he said slowly, "If anything was needed to put the finishing touch of infamy to the apostasy of Gompers, this has done it.

"I noticed in the papers that Gompers was going to assume personal leadership of the Federations in New York and Brooklyn and is going to unify them under one general head. This is evidently to get rid of the radical spirits who have been too active in advancing the cause of labor in those cities. The more he and those like him resist the evident movement of these days, the more they oppose the radical movement in their organizations, the more certainly and completely will it triumph. We know that that very resistance is a factor in its development. If you are lukewarm and somebody tries to hold you back, it arouses your fainting spirit. Now all those radicals who are not thoroughly aroused and active will become so. Gompers is doing more to promote radicalism than we are. The thing is too great to be halted for any considerable time and it will make up for delay when it is finally aroused.

"The people of this country now understand pretty well what is wrong; they are pretty clear as to what is needed. The principal thing now is to show them how they can get it. And in doing that, we ought to deal with them with great candor, and without any reservations whatever. I never could find it in me to make a speech and withhold anything for fear that I might shoo away a voter. If a man is shooable, I do not want him. I want those who are responsive to my message and who will stick when the crisis comes.

"We have some comrades in our Party who have been too timid and who have patterned after the capitalist politicians whom I utterly detest. These comrades have no convictions about anything and are willing to say or omit almost anything for the purpose of corraling votes. To them I want to say that if we get votes we are not entitled to, the crisis is coming when we have got to stand by our principles with our lives and if we invite a lot of people who are not ready to stand and fight, when the crisis comes, it will have been a calamity that we have had them at all. It will be the easiest thing in the world to get out in an average community and paint to them such rosy ideals that they will all want it, and then the first thing that goes

wrong they will all turn and leave us. There we have a peril, soft bricks with which we cannot build securely. Our object is not to build too rapidly, but to build permanently and for all time.”

[Tucker:] “What do you think of the suffrage situation?”

“I guess that will go through this time. How different the situation is now from what it was when I was hooted and jeered because as City Clerk of Terre Haute I went to the station, met Susan B. Anthony, and walked with her to my home. I was a boy then, only about 23. You can have no conception how much bitterness, how much ridicule and hatred we brought upon ourselves then by demanding suffrage for women. Most of all the women of our town were furious with us for bringing that creature to town. Now the Presidential candidates of the two parties who have reviled suffrage all these years, who have kept women in serfdom all the time since our Republic was founded — these men are eagerly striving to see who can get the votes of the newly enfranchised women by racing for the privilege of persuading the 36th state to cast the ratifying vote.

“And the pity of it is that so many women do not know that the old parties, the Democratic and Republican Parties, were forced to take up suffrage by reason of the continued insistence of the Socialists upon it. Yet I am sure that many millions of them will remember to whom it is that they owe the ballot and will cast it for their own emancipation from the profit system by voting the Socialist ticket.

“Gov. Cox and Sen Harding remind me of two humpty dumpties. They are stuffed people, not real; like John L. Sullivan and Kilrain, old, bald, and toothless, who used to go through the country for years after they were senile, illustrating how they used to do things when they were young. They have not a single idea for a man who is alive. They get their inspiration from the tombs. The whole performance is artificial.

“When the tide of life surges into a man, he is buoyed up and sustained by it in all his trials, if it be the spirit of life which inspires him. But if that has gone out of him and he is sustained only by artificial means, as these campaigns are now sustained by artificial and dishonest means, by persistently forcing issues which no longer exist — then corruption both of the body and of the spirit has already set in. Such is

this false issue about the League of Nations. That is completely dead — has been for a long time. Our entry into it could not revive it, could only still further putrefy the corpse. And men who are fighting on an issue such as that are degrading themselves. They can no longer enlarge or expand either intellectually or in any other way. But it is only such men as that who could function in such a political atmosphere as that which chokes the old parties.

“Were I campaigning in this election I believe I should dismiss most of the technical terms and speak in the clearest possible language. I should say, ‘There can be no change as long as a few people own this country, its industries, and its resources — as long as they are in control of its wealth and therefore of its politics.’

“Take for example the situation in my own town of Terre Haute. Terre Haute is surrounded by coal, is built over a coal deposit, yet it is impossible to get coal at any price. A few owners have taken possession of the coal mines. They say, ‘This is ours’; and they have shut out the people. The miners are at their mercy and they cannot dig the coal even to keep themselves warm, unless the mine owners give them permission. To the coal miners these owners say, ‘I will permit you to enter my mines and dig coal for me on my terms. Out of what you produce for me I will give you as your share just enough for you to breed upon.’ For the miner has no home in any true meaning of the word ‘home,’ he has only a breeding place. And to the people the coal mine owner says with a smile, ‘Come to see me. This is my price. You may take it or leave it.’

“This is capitalism. This is what both the Democratic and Republican Parties stand for. If you like it, vote for it; but don’t complain when you have received what you have voted for.

“The Socialist proposition is this: we are proposing to take possession of the coal fields, to pay the miners at work the full value of all the coal they dig, so that they may build decent homes, educate their children, and live in comfort; and then charge to the public exactly what it costs to dig and distribute the coal. The Attorney General says that it costs just \$2.76 a ton to bring coal to the mine mouth, whereas it is sold at the mine mouth for \$12 and \$15 a ton — as a result of which coal mine owners are making profits of 7 and 8,000 percent. [Attorney General Mitchell] Pal-

mer proposes to put a few profiteers in jail. But that does not interest us. What we want is the coal — and we want it cheap and plenty — and that can never be accomplished until the nation owns its coal and sells it to itself at what it costs to produce it. This proposition is so simple that a child can understand it.

“To the miners we say, ‘For whom are you working? For plutocrats who do not live here, who do not care anything about you or your home! They are interested in you for just one purpose — to get out of you all they can for themselves. Whether you get coal to keep your own family warm does not concern them in the least. They are not interested in that. Whether the country gets enough coal to keep its industries running, its schools open, its houses warm, they do not care. All they want is the profit to be made out of private ownership of coal.’

“Where do Harding and Cox stand on that issue? What will they do about the coal problem? What will they do with the mines? That is the supreme and vital issue of the campaign. The country can exist whether or not the League of Nations is endorsed, but it cannot exist if its coal supply is cut short, for there is not enough wood on the continent to keep our homes warm this winter.

“The two old parties have controlled the country for 100 years. Both of them stand for the private ownership of public utilities, for exploitation of labor for higher prices, for capitalism.

“Mr. Cox and Mr. Harding, as well as other representatives of and apologists for the existing system, have been telling us that the trouble with the coal mines is that they cannot get cars with which to haul the coal to market. And yet the United States can build 4,000 railroad cars of a special design by the special order of Mr. Wilson and can ship them to the Polish government in order to enable the aristocrats of Poland to fight and crush the only genuinely democratic government on the face of the earth — the Russian Soviet. If we can send 4,000 cars to Poland, why can we

not get a few thousand cars to supply coal to the imperative needs of the American people?

“The people of this country have not known what their government was doing in opposing the Russians. It was kept a very private secret until it was revealed by the foreign dispatches, and then Secretary of War [Newton] Baker was forced to confess that the War Department had loaned \$100 million on credit to the Polish government on the basis of notes which are not worth the paper they are written on. He presented them with \$20 million worth of American bacon which was ‘not available’ for the American people — although bacon is 65 cents a pound at home — not available because the beef trust objected that it would check the rise in prices. Millions of dollars worth of supplies, including meat, was turned over to the French and they were not allowed to be brought home because they were afraid it might ‘reduce prices’ to the American people and so check the profits of our trusts. That is the policy of the Wilson administration.

“It seems to me that this is a time when, if I were campaigning, I would spend my time and energy in placing before the people such facts as these. They are far more receptive than heretofore and more responsive. The material is more nearly ready than ever before. Both Cox and Harding have admitted in interviews that they expect the Socialist ticket will receive 2 or 3 million votes. I am sure we will receive more than 3 million.

“I am constantly getting letters from the comrades who are continually trying to cheer me up. They seem to feel that I need encouragement. I was never so encouraged in my life as I am now. I am in more complete possession of myself, my consecration is more perfect than ever in my life. I do not need cheering up, but there are a great many comrades who need not only cheering up but encouragement and stiffening up. Our victory approaches apace — if we are but strong enough to stand erect and greet the dawn.”

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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