



84.1976.01 Eugene Victor Debs 1855-1926
84.1992.01 Home of Eugene Debs
Vigo County
Marker Text Review Report
09/20/2012

Marker Text

Eugene Victor Debs 1855-1926

Debs (1855-1926) was leading pioneer in industrial unionism, social reformer, and peace advocate. Founded American Railway Union, 1893; cofounded American Socialist Party, 1900; and ran five times for United States presidency. Home built in 1890; declared National Historic Landmark, 1966.

Home of Eugene Debs

Father of industrial unionism, five time Socialist candidate for President of the United States, pacifist, humanitarian. Birthplace marker, one block east on North Fourth Street; home, 451 North Eighth Street.

Report

While the Eugene Debs marker text is correct and lists many of his accomplishments, the text's ambiguous language and lack of context obscures the significance of Debs' life achievements. The marker also fails to mention several of Debs' most important contributions to the development of American unionism, politics, and social reform. This report will provide additional information on the differences between industrial unionism and craft unionism, Debs' progressive views on equal rights for women and minorities, his anti-war stance, and his role in the American Railway Union and Industrial Workers of the World.

The marker text's claim that Debs was born in 1855 and died in 1926 is accurate. The 1900 U.S. Federal Census marks his birth month and year as November 1855.¹ Secondary sources including Ray Ginger's seminal biography on Debs, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs*, agree on November 5, 1855 as Debs' birth date.² These monographs, as well as several obituaries, also verify his death date as October 20, 1926.³

Debs first garnered regional, and later national, recognition as a union organizer for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the American Railway Union.⁴ He was a "pioneer in industrial unionism," as the marker text asserts; but this statement fails to place the industrial union movement within the context of broader union history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries workers predominantly formed craft unions, or unions that exclusively represented one trade. However, Debs and other proponents of industrial unionism advocated a new form of union representation in which workers organized by industry rather than by trade.⁵ They argued that traditional craft unions like those represented in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) "divide the working class and make it the prey of the capitalist class."⁶ Only through a unity of efforts within whole industries could workers hope to maintain bargaining power with capitalists.

To this end, Debs was instrumental in founding the American Railway Union (ARU), one of the nation's first industrial unions which aimed to organize all white railroad workers.⁷ The marker's statement that Debs founded the ARU in 1893 is corroborated by secondary sources.⁸ Further primary research is needed, but is outside the scope of this review. However, the text does not mention Debs'



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central role in the nationwide [Pullman Strike](#) orchestrated by the ARU in 1894. In response to the Pullman Sleeping Car Company's decision to slash workers' wages in Pullman, Chicago, railroad workers across the nation boycotted trains carrying Pullman cars. Although Pullman crushed the strike, this nationwide effort on behalf of local workers was an important step toward achieving worker unity within an industry. For additional information on the strike see Richard Schneirov's article "To the Ragged Edge of Anarchy": The 1894 Pullman Boycott."⁹

Throughout his time as a labor organizer, Debs' union activities increasingly reflected the tenets of socialism, especially the idea of working class struggle. He viewed industrial unions as a vehicle through which he could foster class unity and promote a working class revolution to replace the capitalist system.¹⁰ In 1905, Debs furthered his goals when he helped form the [Industrial Workers of the World](#) (IWW). Debs explained that through IWW "all of the workers, totally regardless of occupation, are united compactly within one organization, so that at all times they can act together in the interests of all."¹¹ This umbrella union organization would provide the class cohesion necessary to challenge capitalism.

Debs officially converted to socialism in 1897,¹² and it was in pursuit of the socialist agenda that he acted as the "social reformer" the marker text describes. In addition to advocating workers rights and class struggle, Debs later espoused progressive ideas on African American and Women's rights.¹³ Socialists argued that in order to end classism and break the chains of capitalism, society must first achieve complete social equality, including gender and racial equality. Many of Debs' speeches and correspondence as well as newspaper articles express the socialist party's belief in the equality of all.¹⁴ For example, in an article published in the November 1903 issue of the *International Socialist Review*, Debs explained that "as a social party we receive the Negro and all other races upon absolutely equal terms."¹⁵ The socialist party platform also favored women's suffrage.¹⁶ Additionally, Debs championed prison reform and argued that in a Socialist state, crime would diminish and prisons would no longer be required.¹⁷ For more information on Debs' thoughts on the U.S. prison system see his book [Walls and Bars](#).

While the marker text's claim that Debs was a "peace advocate" is technically correct, this ambiguous term fails to convey the extent of the socialist leader's pacifist activities. Debs was a staunch anti-war advocate, but his pacifist stance in his union activities was less consistent. He often employed militant rhetoric in his speeches and even encouraged workers "to strike together, vote together and, if necessary, fight together";¹⁸ yet Debs favored peaceful strikes and other forms of non-violent protest to achieve union and socialist goals.¹⁹ He was also an outspoken opponent of U.S. involvement in the First World War, as he believed that this imperialist war promoted capitalist interests at the expense of the working class.²⁰ Debs' anti-war campaign captured national attention after he delivered his infamous [anti-war speech](#) in Canton, Ohio on June 16, 1918. The U.S. government indicted Debs for violating the [1917 Espionage Act](#), and he served three years in prison.²¹

While secondary sources acknowledge Debs' early involvement and leadership in the Socialist Party of America (SPA), none support the marker's assertion that Debs co-founded it.²² Further primary research beyond the scope of this report is required. The text also fails to specify that SPA began as the Social Democratic Party in 1900.²³ Debs ran for president once on the Social Democratic ticket in 1900 and four times on SPA's ticket in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920 (from prison).²⁴ The marker's final two



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statements about the Eugene V. Debs House are also correct. A National Register of Historic Places nomination form indicates that his home was built in Terre Haute in 1890. Further research beyond the scope of this report is required to confirm this assertion. According to the National Historic Landmark (NHL) online database and several newspaper articles, the house received an NHL designation on November 15, 1966.²⁵ The [Eugene V. Debs Foundation](#) maintains his home which is open to the public as a museum.

¹ "Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947," *AncestryLibrary.com* (Accessed 23 August 2012); "1900 United States Federal Census," *AncestryLibrary.com* (Accessed 23 August 2012).

² Ginger, *Bending Cross*, 6; Harold W. Currie, *Eugene V. Debs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 17; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1982), 9.

³ "Eugene V. Debs, Noted Hoosier, Socialist, Dies," *Indianapolis Star*, October 21, 1926, p.1; "Eugene V. Debs, Noted Hoosier Socialist, Dies," *Indianapolis News*, October 21, 1926 in "Eugene V. Debs," Indiana State Library Clipping File; "10,000 Pay Tribute to Debs at Funeral," *New York Times*, October 24, 1926, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 5 September 2012).

⁴ Debs is listed as the Grand secretary and treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in 1890 and 1892 in Terre Haute, Indiana Directories, 1890, 1892, *AncestryLibrary.com* (accessed 9 September 2012). He is also recorded as a labor organizer and editor in the Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947, *AncestryLibrary.com* (accessed 12 September 2012). See footnotes 7 and 8 for sources on Debs and the American Railway Union.

⁵ Eugene Debs, "Industrial Unionism," speech delivered December 10, 1905, printed in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, edited by Jean Y. Tussey (New York, Pathfinder Press, 1970), 121-144.

⁶ Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 126. Debs expands upon the notion of "industrial unionism" in other speeches. See "Revolutionary Unionism," *Debs: Great Lives Observed*, 29-36 (November 25, 1905) and "Craft Unionism," <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/archive/debs/works/1905/craft.htm> (accessed 5 September 2012).

⁷ According to Ray Ginger's biography of Debs, all railroad brotherhoods and unions at the time denied membership to black workers. More primary research is needed to determine Debs's personal views on the ARU's membership restrictions. Harold W. Currie, *Eugene V. Debs* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 25; Richard Scheirow, "'To the Ragged Edge of Anarchy': The 1894 Pullman Boycott," Vol. 13, No. 3, *The Progressive Era* (Spring, 1999): 26-7; Ginger, *Bending Cross*, 93.

⁸ Richard Scheirow, "'To the Ragged Edge of Anarchy': The 1894 Pullman Boycott," Vol. 13, No. 3, *The Progressive Era* (Spring, 1999): 27; Ginger, *Bending Cross*, 90-92. Currie, *Debs*, 24-5; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 115.

⁹ Richard Scheirow, "'To the Ragged Edge of Anarchy': The 1894 Pullman Boycott," Vol. 13, No. 3, *The Progressive Era* (Spring, 1999): 26-30.



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¹⁰ "Industrial Unionism," Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 121-144.

¹¹ "Industrial Unionism," Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 132.

¹² In an article published in the April 1902 issue of *The Comrade*, Debs explains that his conversion to socialism occurred during his six-month imprisonment for his leadership role in the Pullman Strike of 1894. While in prison, he read widely from books, pamphlets, and letters written by socialists such as Laurence Gronlund and Karl Kautsky. Eugene Debs, "How I Became a Socialist," *The Comrade*, April 1902, reprinted in Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 48.

¹³ "Negro Resolution," printed in Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 97-104; Eugene Debs, "Woman-Comrade and Equal," pamphlet, printed in *Great Lives Observed: Debs*, edited by Ronald Radoush (Chicago: Socialist Party, n.d.), 63-5.

¹⁴ Debs, "Negro Resolution"; Debs, "Woman-Comrade and Equal,"; Debs, "Industrial Unionism"; New York Times, "The Socialist Convention," May 18, 1912, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 5 September 2012); "What Debs's Party Wants: Social Democrats' Platform Declares for Revision of Our Antiquated Constitution and Women's Rights," New York Times, March 8, 1900, 7, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 5 September 2012) .

¹⁵ Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 93.

¹⁶ Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 131; "The Socialist Convention," New York Times, May 18, 1912, p. 12, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 6 September 2012). The New York Times article indicates that the Socialist Party of America adopted resolutions "favoring woman suffrage."

¹⁷ Eugene Debs, "Socialism and the Prison," *Walls and Bars*, reprinted in Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 315-320.

¹⁸ "Industrial Unionism," Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 134.

¹⁹ See Currie, *Eugene V. Debs*, 69-75. Good examples of Debs's militant rhetoric can be found in "Arouse Ye Slaves," reprinted in Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 145-8, and in "The Gunmen and the Miners" in *Debs: Great Lives Observed*, edited by Ronald Radosh (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 44-7. In "The Gunmen and the Miners," Debs actually encourages members of the United Mine Workers and the Western Federation of Miners to arm themselves for defense against the attacks of gunmen hired by corporations to break up strikes. However, in his speech "Socialist Tactics, The IWW, and Defense Against Repression," Debs denounces "any tactics which involve stealth, secrecy, intrigue, and necessitate acts of individual violence," in *Debs: Great Lives Observed*, edited by Ronald Radosh (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 40. Also, a New York Times article mentions that the socialist National Convention agreed on a "platform plank denouncing violence and riot." In "The Socialist Convention," New York Times, May 18, 1912, p. 12, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 6 September 2012).

²⁰ Eugene Debs, "The Canton, Ohio Speech," delivered at Nimisilla Park, Canton, Ohio, June 16, 1918. In Tussey, *Debs Speaks*, 71-2. Debs, "Peace on Earth," *The American Socialist*, Vol. 1, No. 26, p.1 (accessed 7 September 2012 <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/history/usa/parties/spusa/1915/0109-debs-peaceonearth.pdf>). Debs, "The Majority Report," *New Times* (Minneapolis), Vol. 7, No. 29 (May 26, 1917), p. 4. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/archive/debs/works/1917/majority.htm>



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²¹ "Eugene Debs in Jail," Washington Post, July 1, 1918, p.1, *Newspaperarchive.com* (accessed 7 September 2012); "Debs Espionage Case Hearing is Advanced," Reno Evening Gazette, November 25, 1918, p.1, *Newspaperarchive.com* (accessed 7 September 2012); "Find Debs Guilty of Disloyal Acts," New York Times, September 13, 1918, p.1&4, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 31 August 2012); "Debs's Penalty is Ten Years," Indianapolis Star, September 15, 1918, p.2; "Weeps Like Child When 2,300 Convicts Cheer his Departure from Prison," Indianapolis Star, December 26, 1921, p. 1.

²² See Ginger, *Bending Cross*, Chapter 11; Currie, *Debs*, Chapter 2 and 3; Salvatore, *Citizen and Socialist*, 167-177 and 185-190.

²³ Miriam Z. Langsam, "Eugene Victor Debs, Hoosier Radical," in *Gentlemen from Indiana national Party Candidates, 1836-1940*, edited by Ralph D. Gray (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1977), 277.

²⁴ "Debs for President," New York Times, March 10, 1900, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 31 August 2012); "Debs for President," New York Times, May 6, 1904, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 31 August 2012); "Debs and Hanford Chosen: Indiana and New York Candidates on the Socialist Ticket," New York Times, May 16, 1908, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 31 August 2012); "Debs and Seidel Nominated," New York Times, May 18, 1912, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 31 August 2012); "Debs is Nominated by the Socialists," New York Times, May 14, 1920, *Proquest Historical Newspapers* (accessed 31 August 2012). For more information on Debs' campaign from prison during the 1920 election, see Salvatore, *Citizen and Socialist*, 324-5.

²⁵ "Debs, Eugene V., Home," National Historic Landmark Program, National Park Service, <http://tps.cr.nps.gov/nhl/detail.cfm?ResourceId=11&ResourceType=Building>; "Eugene Debs Home Receives National Landmark Designation," Anderson Herald, November 27, 1966, n.p., *NewspaperArchive.com* (accessed 12 September 2012); "Debs Home National Historic Site," Terre Haute Tribune-Star, November 27, 1966, p.1, *NewspaperArchive.com* (accessed 12 September 2012).