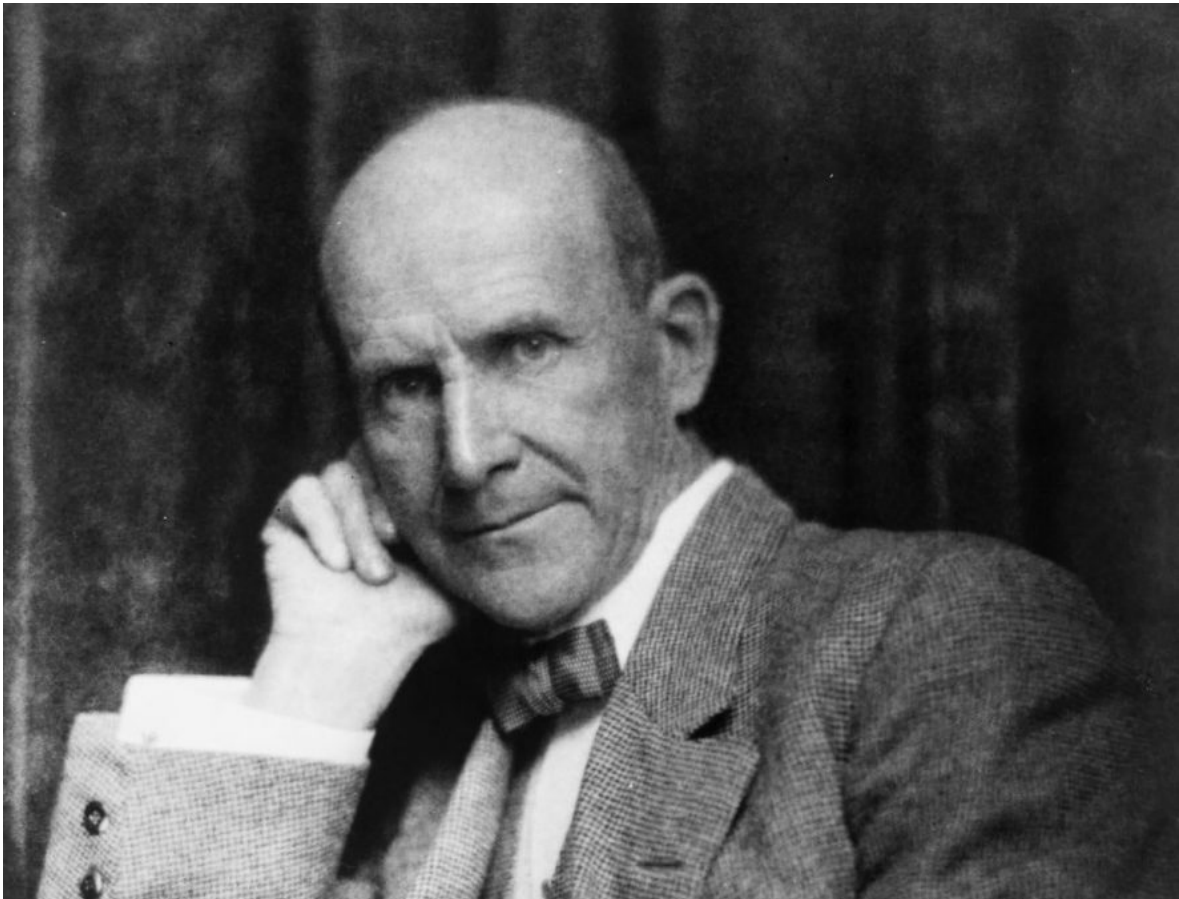


Eugene V. Debs: Socialism Will Free Workers From Private Tyranny

For the great labor leader Eugene Debs, socialism and freedom went hand in hand. In a 1920 article entitled “The Genius of Freedom,” reprinted here for the first time, he explained that socialism would free workers from the bonds of their capitalist masters.



Eugene Debs in 1920: “Freedom in Socialism is the one thing worth striving for. Without freedom civilization will crumble and hope die.” (Universal History Archive / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The twentieth century, according to the prophecy of Victor Hugo, is to be the century of humanity.

In all the procession of the centuries gone, not one was for humanity. From the first, tyranny has flourished; the few have ruled, the many have served; the parasite has worn the purple of power, while honest labor has lived in poverty and died in despair.

But the eternal years, the centuries yet to come, are for humanity, and out of the misery of the past will rise the civilization of the future. The present time will witness the culmination of slavery in the crash of despotism and the rise of the worldwide democracy, freedom, and brotherhood.

Viewed today from any any intelligent standpoint the outlook of the Socialist movement is full of promise — to the capitalist, of struggle and defeat; to the worker of coming freedom.

It is the break of dawn upon the horizon of human destiny, and it has no limitations but the walls of the universe.



Members of the Socialist-led Southern Tenant Farmers Union at an outdoor meeting in September 1937. (Kheel Center/ Flickr)

We know that Socialism is necessary to the emancipation of the Working Class and to the true happiness of all classes and that its historic mission is that of a conquering movement. We know that day by day, nourished by the misery and vitalized by the aspirations of the workers, the area of its activity widens, it grows in strength and increases its mental and moral grasp, and when the final hour of Capitalism and wage slavery strikes, the Socialist movement, the greatest in all history — great enough to embrace the human race — will crown the struggles of centuries with victory and proclaim freedom to all mankind.

The Capitalist system has separated labor from ownership and reduced the workers to a condition of wage slavery. They throng the labor market eager and anxious to find a purchaser who will buy their labor power.

Under the Capitalist system a small part of the people are capitalists and the vast mass workers.

The capitalists get the profit, grow rich, live in palaces, ride in yachts and automobiles, gamble at Monte Carlo, drink champagne, choose judges, buy editors, corrupt politics, build universities, endow libraries, preach morals, get the gout, and bequeath the earth to their lineal descendants.

To speak of freedom in such a system is a mockery; to surrender is a crime.



Steelworkers by Winold Reiss (circa 1919). The four-panel composition shows two scenes: steel workers on a beam and walking with lunch buckets. (Library of Congress)

The workers work early and late, in heat and cold, they sweat and groan and bleed and die — the steel billets they make are caskets. They build the mills and all the machinery; they man the plant and the thing of stone and steel begins to throb. They live in cottages just this side of hovels, where gaunt famine walks with despair and “*Les Miserables*” leer and mock at civilization. When the mills shut down, they are out of work and out of food and out of home; and when old age steals away their vigor and the step is no longer agile, nor the sinew strong, nor the hand quick; when the frame begins to quake and quiver and the eye to grow dim, and they are no longer fit as labor power to make profit for the masters, they are pushed aside into the human drift that empties into the gulf of despair and death.

The swarms of vagrants, tramps, outcasts, paupers, thieves, gamblers, pickpockets, suicides, confidence men, fallen women, consumptives, idiots, dwarfed children; the disease, poverty, insanity and crime rampant in every land where Capitalism rules[;] rise up and cry out against it, and

hush to silence all the pleas of its mercenaries and strike the knell of its doom.

Freedom in Socialism is the one thing worth striving for. Without freedom civilization will crumble and hope die.