

The Life of Socialist George Woodbey Must Not Be Lost to History

This May Day, we're celebrating the life of George Woodbey, a former slave who became a leading socialist. Though he's often forgotten today, Woodbey's life speaks to the crucial connection between labor struggles and fights against racial oppression.

George Woodbey (1854–1937) held that socialism would finish the work of emancipation by destroying wage slavery. (Wikimedia Commons)
In the Socialist Party of [Eugene Debs's era](#), members had a nickname for the indispensable organizers who did the thankless work that makes a political movement possible. They called such people "Jimmie Higgins," after a character popularized by Ben Hanford, Debs's running mate in the 1904 and 1908 presidential campaigns. Jimmie Higgins put up the flyers, rented the halls, made sure the speaker found the venue, and carried out all the other unglamorous, often unappreciated work crucial for the party's success.

[George Washington Woodbey](#) was one of these socialist organizers whom history has largely forgotten. Though Woodbey wasn't a Jimmie Higgins exactly — he was an intellectual and lecturer rather than an anonymous organizer — he also did essential work for the socialist movement. Woodbey was one of the pioneering black socialists in the United States, and a stalwart defender of radical principles. Like the Jimmie Higgins of his time, he deserves to be remembered.

From Slavery to Socialism

Woodbey was [born into slavery](#) in Tennessee in 1854, shortly before the Civil War. In 1874, he was ordained as a Baptist minister and jumped into politics. As with virtually all black political activists of the time, he was a Republican. After reading Edward Bellamy's utopian socialist novel *Looking Backward*, and reading some copies of the [Appeal to Reason](#), he drifted toward socialism, with a brief stop in the Populist Party. Upon hearing Debs speak in the mid-1890s, Woodbey resigned from the pulpit and dedicated his life to the socialist cause.

Woodbey soon moved to California and quickly became a leading Socialist orator on the West Coast. At this time, cities like Los Angeles and San Diego were [basically company towns](#), and state politics had been dominated for decades by the Southern Pacific Transportation Company. Here socialists confronted conditions more akin to remote mining towns than the industrial cities of the East.

When Woodbey spoke of the state as an instrument of the ruling class, he was speaking from personal experience. In his first few years in California, he was hospitalized multiple times after police attacks on his meetings. In 1905, after an

officer broke up a street-corner meeting, Woodbey led a march on the police station to lodge a complaint, which ended with the cops throwing him out of the station. Throughout the country, Woodbey developed a reputation as a fearless advocate for socialism and one of the movement's most effective agitators for freedom of speech.

In 1908, he spearheaded an important free speech fight in San Francisco — which, in the wake of successful socialist organizing, had banned all nonreligious public meetings. The Socialist Party launched a civil disobedience campaign in response, which saw speaker after speaker ascend the soapbox, attempting to exhaust the police's ability to arrest them all. A half century later, the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) would use similar "[fill the jails](#)" tactics in the Civil Rights Movement.

"Woodbey developed a reputation as a fearless advocate for socialism and one of the movement's most effective agitators for freedom of speech." When Woodbey was arrested as part of this campaign, a coalition of liberal and labor groups coalesced to fight for free speech in San Francisco and won the repeal of the censorious ordinance. Just a few years later, however, the battle in San Francisco would be eclipsed by an even more dramatic battle in San Diego.

At the beginning of 1912, the San Diego City Council passed a law outlawing all public speaking in the center of town. The Industrial Workers of the World, a radical union, had recently come to town, and San Diego elites were determined to stamp them out. The Socialists and Wobblies vigorously contested the law before it even went into effect, leading one local paper to write, "SOCIALISTS PROPOSE FIGHT TO THE FINISH FOR FREE SPEECH."

Woodbey was a leading figure in the Free Speech League, the group that coordinated the resistance. Later that year, he narrowly escaped a likely assassination attempt when comrades taking him home from a fundraiser noticed a car parked across the street. The vehicle, they found out, was full of armed vigilantes. Though it would take two years, and many more police and vigilante attacks, Woodbey and his comrades eventually won the San Diego free speech fight in 1914.

The Wobblies were again able to hold open meetings. And Woodbey again took the stage as a frequent speaker.

"The Slavery of Capitalism"

The early socialist movement in the United States was largely cut off from black Americans. While many party members and leaders, particularly [Eugene Debs](#), were dedicated foes of racial prejudice, others sought to accommodate American racism, [even organizing segregated locals in the South](#). At the same time, most black Americans lived in the South as sharecroppers or tenant farmers, isolated and largely unorganized.

Woodbey sought to bridge this gap. He wrote agitational material specifically for a

black audience. Woodbey's most famous work was the pamphlet *What to Do and How to Do It*, which takes the form of a dialogue between the author and his mother. His mother, somewhat skeptical of socialism, asks if her son has abandoned his religious career for socialism. In response, Woodbey argues that it is precisely because of his Christian values that he became a socialist.

In discussing the "race question," Woodbey advanced a few different arguments. First, he held that black Americans should vote Socialist because "nearly all [black Americans] are wage workers," and as such, would benefit disproportionately from socialism. Second, he asserted that since the Socialist Party needed workers' votes, it opposed any methods of disenfranchising workers, including those directed against blacks in the South. Third, he insisted in a number of tracts, socialism was not an anti-religious ideology. Woodbey understood that it would be impossible for socialism to gain a hearing among early twentieth-century black Americans if socialists forced them to choose between socialism and religion.

Perhaps most interestingly, Woodbey noted the increasing class differences within black America and warned against [relying on upper-class African Americans](#) for the salvation of the race. While many believed "the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few Negroes will solve this problem," he wrote, "a few white men have all the wealth and the rest of their brothers are getting poorer every day."

For Woodbey, the race problem had one solution: "Give the Negro along with others the full product of his labor by wrenching the industries out of the hands of the capitalist and putting them into the hands of the workers." As such, Woodbey was an early critic of the conservative black leader Booker T. Washington, describing him as "a good servant of capitalism . . . educating other servants for capitalism."

"Woodbey saw the struggle for socialism as an extension of the struggle against slavery."

Like many of the early socialist "race radicals," Woodbey [saw the struggle for socialism](#) as an extension of the struggle against slavery. Where the Civil War had destroyed chattel slavery, socialism would finish the work of emancipation [by destroying wage slavery](#). He directly compared the institutions of contemporary capitalism with those of slavery, writing: "In the days of chattel slavery the masters had a patrol force to keep the negroes in their place and protect the interests of the masters. Today the capitalists use the police for the same purpose."

The link between the revolutionary struggle against slavery and the revolutionary struggle against capitalism appears again and again in Woodbey's work. During his free speech fights, he connected the repression he and his comrades faced to the abolitionist movement, recounting how, "for attempting to overthrow the slave system, [Abraham] Lincoln and [\[Elijah\] Lovejoy](#) were shot, John Brown was hung, while [William Lloyd] Garrison, [\[Wendell\] Phillips](#), and Fred Douglass were mobbed." The dedication to *What to Do and How to Do It* reads:

This little book is dedicated to that class of citizens who desire to know what the Socialists want to do and how they propose to do it. By one who was once a chattel slave freed by the proclamation of Lincoln and wishes to be free from the slavery of

capitalism.

Though many of the most compelling socialists of these years also invoked the revolutionary Civil War, not even Eugene Debs could match Woodbey's ability to place socialism in the country's radical traditions.

Woodbey's Legacy

Unfortunately, Woodbey's historical record mostly ends in 1915. We don't know how he responded to the [tremendous repression](#) the Socialist Party faced during World War I, or to the party's collapse (and the Communist Party's ascent) after the war. Records suggest he died in 1937, but very little evidence remains of his activity in the final two decades of his life.

The one exception is a [letter](#) that Woodbey sent to Eugene Debs in March 1921, when the socialist leader was [in prison for delivering an antiwar speech](#). "Dear comrade," Woodbey's message opened, "[I] am writing to extend my heartfelt thanks for your brave stand for our cause, which is that of the workers throughout the world."

Balatico Bab.
March 31st 1921.

Mrs. E. W. Debs

Dear Comrade, am writing you
to extend my heartfelt thanks for your brave
stand for our cause, which is that of the workers
throughout the world. My sympathy goes out for you
at your age because I was 66 years old Oct. 31st
last, but am still as able and anxious as ever
for the fight. You made the first socialist speech
I ever heard in Omaha in 1896 which set me
to thinking, as you know, a socialist since.
I've. As a Baptist preacher I was a firm believer
in that passage of scripture concerning the first
Jerusalem, which says "they had all things com-
mon, and no one lacked anything." This is what
they were striving for. Russia I was filled with of read-
know, when a boy by listening to the fiery speeches
of 4th of July orators, tell about the glory of
the American revolution.

You can console yourself up the fact that even the
founder of the Christian religion for the salvation
of men, was put to death. Christ told his followers
"I send you out as lambs among wolves and some
of you they will kill, and think they have done
God service" if Christ had been here and said as He did
"but up the sword and he that fights with it shall
perish with it," he would now be with you in the
prison. Galileo was put in prison for his astronomical
discoveries, many of the advocates of religious liberty are

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The 16th century lost, ^{still} I was once a slave; and
John Brown was hung, and many abolitionist died
in prison because they said I ought to be free.
you are making history, and being right, the course
for which I stand is bound to triumph. Like you I have
no bitterness against the men who once enslaved me.
May God speed the time, when you and all the
other misty prisoners will be at liberty.

yours in the course of humanity.
G. Woodbey

Ed. We are now standing at the death bed of capitalism.

Rev. G. W. Woodbey
Calexico
Calif.

Woodbey, writing from the border town of Calexico, California, informed Debs that he was still preaching the radical Gospel, and that, despite being sixty-six years old, he was “still as able and anxious as ever for the fight.” Debs could “console” himself knowing that “even the founder of the Christian religion for the salvation of man was put to death” and that countless others had been martyred in the quest for justice. “I was once a slave; and John Brown was hung and many abolitionists died in prison because they said I ought to be free. You are making history, and being right, the course for which you stand is bound to triumph.”

Woodbey signed his letter, “Yours in the course of humanity,” before dashing off a hopeful prediction: “PS: We are now standing at the death bed of capitalism.” Upon receiving the laudatory letter, Debs [returned the praise](#): in a note to his brother Theodore, who handled much of his correspondence while in prison, Debs

commended Woodbey for his “excellent” political pamphlets. “He has always been a favorite speaker and a warm and true friend.”

Like the party’s Jimmie Higginses, George Washington Woodbey undoubtedly made many other contributions to the movement that have been lost to history. But even from what we know, his impact was immense.

He paved the way for future black socialists like [Hubert Harrison](#) and [A. Philip Randolph](#). And he pushed the socialist movement to stay true to core principles like racial justice, internationalism, and civil libertarianism, even when the temptations to abandon them were strong.

Woodbey was one of the United States’ exemplary socialists — and he deserves to be celebrated today.