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What Did Debs Say?



"Ten Years in Jail for a Two Hour Speech! A day in jail for each four words that he spoke. That must have been SOME speech. He must have said terrible things!" A great many inquiries have been made regarding what Debs really said. While it is impossible to reproduce every word spoken during a two hours' discourse, the gist of the speech will be given, with special emphasis on those parts mentioned by the Supreme Court in affirming his sentence.

DEBS DID NOT COURT ARREST

Debs was not out looking for trouble. He was a Socialist speaker and writer, addressing Socialist meetings. He was purposely careful of his language, but he refused to prostitute his life-long loyalty to the workers in the interest of the profiteers. At the very opening of his speech he said:

"I realize there are certain limitations placed upon the right of free speech.
* * * I may not be able to say all that I think but I am not going to say anything that I do not think. I would rather a thousand times be a free soul in jail than be a sycophant and coward on the streets."

This is no doubt the attitude that caused President Wilson to write "Denied" across Attorney General Palmer's recommendation for Debs' release, because he was an "unrepentant prisoner". If Debs were repentant it would mean either that he had committed a crime, in which case he should not be pardoned; or it would mean that he had turned back on his belief, in which case the workers would despise him. Debs will never repent of a word that he has spoken. It is for the people to decide whether ten years of jail life shall be the alternative to repentance for telling the following truths to the working class.

SYMPATHY FOR FRIENDS IN JAIL

The Supreme Court severely condemns Debs because he sympathized with some of his friends who were in jail. He placed himself in their class. They say, so why should he not be taken at his word? Debs mentions eight names of such people in his speech. Three of them, arrested for their speeches during the municipal election campaign in Cleveland, served out their term over two years ago. Debs is still in jail. Two were acquitted by juries. Another, whose crime consisted of saying, "A government that is for the

profiteers cannot be for the people. I am for the people", had her conviction set aside by a higher court—but Debs is still in jail. Still another, the victim of a political frame-up, was released months ago on order of President Wilson, but Debs is still in jail. Of the eight, the only one still in prison is Tom Mooney, whose unjust conviction has aroused the labor movement of the entire world, for whom even Woodrow Wilson has asked a new trial, whose freedom now seems a little closer thanks to additional "frame-up" evidence given by one of the policemen in the case. Debs' remarks concerning Mooney are typical of his position toward the others mentioned:

"We are disloyalists and traitors to the real traitors of this nation; to the gang that, on the Pacific Coast, are trying to hang Tom Mooney, in spite of the protest of the whole civilized world. I know Tom Mooney intimately, as if he were my own brother. He is an absolutely honest, innocent man. He had no more to do with the crime with which he is charged than I have. And, if he ought to go to the gallows, so ought I. If he is guilty, every man who belongs to a labor organization, or to the Socialist Party, is likewise, guilty. What is he guilty of? I'll tell you. I am familiar with his record. For years he has been fighting the battles of the working class on the Pacific Coast. He refused to be bribed or browbeaten. He continued loyally in the service of the working class, and for this reason he was marked. They said: "He can't be bought, he refuses to be bribed, and he cannot be intimidated. Therefore he must be murdered."

Any decent union man would have said as much for Tom Mooney, and for the others, too, had they known as much about the cases as Debs did. But those Debs spoke for are now out—Debs is still in jail.

WHAT DID DEBS SAY ABOUT THE WAR?

The Supreme Court sustained the charge that he was obstructing or attempting to obstruct the recruiting service of the United States, notwithstanding the fact that our armies were at that time being raised by conscription rather than volunteering.

The only direct reference to the world war, or any other, is cited in the Supreme Court opinion, and if there had been any other they surely would have found it:

"Wars have been waged for conquest, for plunder. In the Middle Ages the feudal lords, who inhabited the castles whose towers may still be seen along the Rhine—whenever one of those lords wanted to enrich himself then he made war upon the other. But they did not go to war any more than the Wall Street junkers go to war. The feudal lords—they declared all the wars. Who fought the battles? Their miserable serfs. But in all the history of the world you, the people, never had a voice in declaring war. You have never yet had. The working class, who fight the battles, who make the sacrifices, who shed the blood, who furnish the corpses, the working class have never yet had a voice in declaring war. They have never yet had a voice in making peace. It is the ruling class that does both. They declare war, they make peace.

*'Yours not to reason why,
Yours but to do and die.'*

This is their motto, and we object to it on the part of the awakened workers. If war is right let it be declared by the people, by you, who have your lives to lose, you certainly ought to have the right to declare war if you consider war necessary".

That is all. The right of the people to declare their own war! You, who read this, can you imagine any man evading the draft law because of listening to that statement? Is that anything on which to imprison a man for ten years? President Harding is reported to be considering the idea of a referendum on war before it can be declared by Congress. But Mr. Harding is not going to prison—he did not commit the real crime of which Eugene V. Debs is guilty. That crime consists of showing the workers of America that they were being robbed by a gang of exploiters who were economic kin to the junkers of Germany, and of appealing to the people to organize politically and industrially so that they might be free. He said:

“Don’t think for a minute that the Junkers are confined to Germany. It is precisely because we refuse to believe this that they brand us as disloyalists. They want our eyes so focused on the Junkers of Berlin that we will not be able to see those within our own borders. I hate, I loath, I despise Junkerdom. I have no earthly use for the Junkers of Germany, and not one particle more use for those of the United States.

“They are talking about your patriotic duty to cultivate a war garden. While they are doing this a government report shows that practically 52% of the arable, tillable soil is held out of use by the profiteers, by the land manipulators—held out of use! They, themselves, do not cultivate it. They could not if they would. They don’t allow others to cultivate it, they keep it idle to enrich themselves. What is it that makes the land valuable while it is fenced and kept out of use? The people. Who pockets the tremendous value? The landlord. ‘Lord of land!’ This lord of the land is a great patriot! . . . We have got to save wheat so that we can export more to the soldiers who fight on the other side—while half your tillable land is held out of use by the profiteers. What do you think of that?”

THE COAL FAMINE AND ITS REMEDY

Again, in referring to the reported coal famine that resulted in the enforced closing of thousands of factories, schools, etc., Debs said:

“They tell you there is a coal famine now. The State of Indiana, where I live, is largely underlaid with coal. There is an inexhaustible supply of it. The coal is under our feet. It is within touch, all that we can use. And there is the machinery ready to be put into operation to increase the output to any desired capacity. And yet only three weeks ago a national officer of the United Mine Workers issued and published an appeal to the Labor Department of the United States Government to the effect that six hundred thousand coal miners in the United States, at this time, when they tell us of a famine, are not permitted to work more than half time. In the meantime, scarcity of coal. They tell you that you ought to buy your coal right away, you may freeze to death next winter if you do not—and they charge you three prices for coal! Now we have private ownership of coal mines, and this is THE RESULT OF THE PRIVATE OWNERSHIP of this great social utility.

“The coal mines are privately owned and the owners WANT A SCARCITY OF COAL. Why? So they can boost prices indefinitely. They make more money out of a scarcity of coal.

“Under the present system the miner goes down into a pit three hundred feet and digs a ton of coal. He doesn’t own a solitary bit of it. That ton of coal belongs to some plutocrat who lives in New York, Vienna, or Paris. It doesn’t make any difference where he is, he doesn’t have to keep at the work. He owns the tools and he might as well own the miner.

“I’ll tell you what we Socialists say: ‘Take possession of the mines in the name of the people. Call the miner to the coal mines. Let him mine the coal, every ounce. He, himself, is entitled to the full product of his labor.’ Then he can build himself a comfortable home, live in it, enjoy it; he can provide himself and his wife and children with good clothes, not shoddy;

good food in abundance, and the people will get coal at just what it costs to mine it. . . . a change is needed . . . a change from despotism to democracy, wide as the world. A change from slavery to freedom. A change from brutehood to brotherhood, and to accomplish this you have got to organize.

"Get together. United, your power becomes invincible. Organize"

TO THE WORKERS

That is the crime of Eugene V. Debs: Not that he interfered with "recruiting". Not that he was guilty of espionage (spying), the law under which he was convicted. All German spies and plotters, even when caught red-handed, have long since been released. He told the truth about the land ownership, and coal-mine ownership and exploitation in this country. He urged the workers to organize, to put an end to the private ownership of social property. Shall he remain in jail ten years for this "crime"? It is up to the workers to answer this question. There are many things they can do. They can sign the national petition to Congress for the release of political prisoners which is now being circulated, and send resolutions of protest to the President. They can arrange big protest meetings so that the people of the country can really learn why Debs is in jail. They can distribute leaflets such as these by the hundreds of thousands in every city and town in the United States. They can contribute financially to maintain the Debs Amnesty Committee that is working for the release of all political prisoners in this country. **BUT ABOVE ALL THEY SHOULD HEED DEBS' APPEAL — THEY SHOULD ORGANIZE, INDUSTRIALLY AND POLITICALLY, TO PUT AN END TO THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM THAT PRODUCES BOTH THE ROBBERY OF LABOR AND THE IMPRISONMENT OF THOSE WHO PROTEST AGAINST IT.**

Debs was but one of several hundred victims of war-time persecution. If it can be done to-day, the same measures can be invoked against any champion of Labor's rights on the wish of enemies. **THE RELEASE OF DEBS** and his fellow prisoners will not solve our problem. The laws that made his imprisonment possible must be wiped from the books, and the working class, the masses of the people of this country, must get governmental power into their own hands to make such a condition forever impossible.

This leaflet issued by the **DEBS AMNESTY COMMITTEE** of the Socialist Party. Address all communications concerning this work and contributions to help finance it to Otto Branstetter, Executive Secretary, 220 South Ashland Blvd., Chicago, Ill.