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. 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. These monographs, as well as several obituaries, also verify his death date as October 20, 1926.

Debs first garnered regional, and later national, recognition as a union organizer for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the American Railway Union. 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. 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.” 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. The marker’s statement that Debs founded the ARU in 1893 is corroborated by secondary sources. Further primary research is needed, but is outside the scope of this review. However, the text does not mention Debs’
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
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. The Eugene V. Debs Foundation maintains his home which is open to the public as a museum.


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.


“Industrial Unionism,” Tussey, Debs Speaks, 121-144.

“Industrial Unionism,” Tussey, Debs Speaks, 132.

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.


Tussey, Debs Speaks, 93.


“Industrial Unionism,” Tussey, Debs Speaks, 134.


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

