

Eugene v debs the american union leader history essay



Eugene Victor Debs was born on November 5, 1855 and was raised in Terre Haute, Indiana. He was named after his French parents, Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie Bettrich Debs, who both immigrated to the United States from Colmar, Alsace, France. An interesting fact about Eugene Victor Debs was that he was named after the French authors Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo. Due to the need for employment, Debs dropped out of high school at the age of fourteen and set out on local railroads as a painter. His thoughts changed as he became a boilerman in 1870, during this period he also took night classes at a local business school. In 1874, he returned home and worked as a grocery clerk.

While he was living at home and working as a clerk, he founded a new lodge of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Through vigorous work and active support in the society of the Brotherhood, being both its Grand Secretary and editor of Locomotive Firemen's Magazine, he managed to be elected as a Democrat to the Indiana State Legislature in 1884, serving for one term. " Demonstrating a change in his organizational philosophy, Debs became the president of the American Railway Union in 1893, the first effective industrial union in the United States." The ARU successfully struck the Great Northern Railway on April 1894, winning most of its demands. During all of this, Eugene Debs managed to find time to engage in a relationship with Kate Metzel. On June 9, 1885, Eugene Debs married Kate Metzel. The couple had no children.

On May 11, 1894, the Pullman boycott and strike in Chicago began. Debs became involved in the Pullman Strike, which was over wage cuts where workers who made the Pullman railway cars shut down production and ARU
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members refused to handle the cars, even those that attained U. S. mail. Eugene Debs tried to persuade the Union members that the strike was too risky. The membership ignored his warnings and continued to not work the cars. Debs finally decided to step in on the strike, which was followed by all members of the ARU. With Debs' leadership, the strike came to be also known as " Debs' Rebellion".

On May 1895, Debs and the leaders of the ARU were taken to jail, but for contempt of court in connection with the Pullman Strike. President Grover Cleveland sent the United States Army to enforce the injunction. The presence of the Army was more than enough to break the strike. Debs was represented by Clarence Darrow, a corporate lawyer for the railroad company, who switched sides to represent Debs. Darrow, a leading American lawyer and civil libertarian, had resigned his corporate position in order to represent Debs, making a substantial financial sacrifice in order to do so. While in his cell, Debs read widely and was deeply impressed by the writings of Karl Marx. Eugene Debs' sentence finished in November of that year. He emerged from federal prison convinced that the plight of the worker was most accurately viewed as a class struggle.

Already famous for his work as a union leader with the American Railway Union, Debs continued to gain popularity when he helped to found the Social Democracy of America. One year later this group split and Debs went with the majority faction to found the Socialist Democratic Party of the United States, also called the Social Democratic Party. Debs was elected chairman of the Executive Board of the National Council, the board which governed the party. Although the party did not have a sole figure that governed its actions, <https://assignbuster.com/eugene-v-debs-the-american-union-leader-history-essay/>

Debs' position as chairman and his notoriety gave him the status of party figurehead. Debs' popularity with the party led to his nomination as a candidate for president of the United States in 1900 as a member of the Social Democratic Party. Along with his running mate Job Harriman, Debs received 87,945 votes - 0.6% of the popular vote - and no electoral votes. He was later the Socialist Party of America candidate for president in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920. In his showing in the 1904 election, Debs received 402,810 votes, which was 2.98% of the popular vote. Debs received no electoral votes, and, which vice presidential candidate Benjamin Hanford, ultimately finished third overall.

In the 1908 election, Debs again ran on the same ticket as Benjamin Hanford. While receiving a slightly higher number of votes in the popular vote, 420,852, he received 2.83% of the popular vote. Again Debs received no electoral votes. Debs received 5.99% of the popular vote in 1912, while his total of 913,693 votes in the 1920 campaign remains the all-time high for a Socialist Party candidate. Running alongside Emil Seidel, Debs again received no electoral votes.

Although he received some success as a third-party candidate, Debs was largely dismissive of the electoral process; he distrusted the political bargains that Victor Berger and other "Sewer Socialists" had made in winning local offices. He put much more value on organizing workers into unions, favoring unions that brought together all workers in a given industry over those organized by the craft skills workers practiced. Debs saw the working class as the one class to organize, educate, and emancipate itself by itself.

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After his work with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and the American Railway Union, Debs' next major work in organizing a labor union came during the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). On June 27, 1905, in Chicago, Illinois, Debs and other influential union leaders including Big Bill Haywood, leader of the Western Federation of Miners, and Daniel De Leon, leader of the Socialist Labor Party, held what Haywood called the "Continental Congress of the working class...".

Although the IWW was built on the basis of uniting workers of industry, a rift began between the union and the Socialist Party. It started when the electoral wing of the Socialist Party, led by Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit, became irritated with speeches by Haywood. The Cooper Union speech was the beginning of a split between Bill Haywood and the Socialist Party, leading to the split between the factions of the IWW, one faction loyal to the Socialist Party, and the other to Haywood.

The rift presented a problem for Debs, who was influential in both the IWW and the Socialist Party. The final straw between Haywood and the Socialist Party came during the Lawrence textile strike when, disgusted with the decision of the elected officials in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to send police who subsequently used their clubs on children, Haywood publicly declared that "I will not vote again" until such a circumstance was rectified. Haywood was purged from the National Executive Committee by passage of an amendment that focused on the direct action and sabotage tactics advocated by the IWW. Debs was probably the only person who could have saved Haywood's seat.

In 1906, when Haywood had been on trial for his life in Idaho, Debs had described him as “ the Lincoln of Labor” and called for Haywood to run against Theodore Roosevelt for president of the United States. But times had changed and Debs, facing a split in the Party, chose to echo Hillquit’s words, accusing the IWW of representing anarchy. Debs thereafter states that he had opposed the amendment, but that once it was adopted it should be obeyed. Debs remained friendly to Haywood and the IWW after the expulsion, despite their perceived differences over IWW tactics. Prior to Haywood’s dismissal, the Socialist Party membership had reached an all-time high of 135, 000. One year later, four months after Haywood was recalled, the membership dropped to 80, 000. The reformists in the Socialist Party attributed the decline to the departure of the “ Haywood element”, and predicted that the party would recover. It did not; in the election of 1912 many of the Socialists who had been elected to public office lost their seats. Debs would spend the rest of his life trying to recover his health, which was severely battered while in prison confinement. He still wrote numerous articles and made several speeches, until 1926, when he was admitted to Lindlaur Sanitarium just outside of Chicago. He died there on October 20, and his body was brought back to Terre Haute for burial. Debs was regarded by many, perhaps unfairly, as a wild-eyed radical. Socialism and unionism were highly suspect in his day. Debs was a man of great personal charm, who by the end of his life had gained the grudging respect of many of his former opponents.