

---

# **From Atlanta Prison: A Letter from a Prisoner with a Warning**

**by Eugene V. Debs**

Published in *The New Age* [Buffalo, NY], vol. 11, whole no. 515 (July 6, 1922), pg. 7.

I have received a letter from a prisoner in the United States penitentiary in Atlanta that makes interesting and profitable reading. The name of the writer for the present at least must remain unknown. The letter would never have been permitted to go out of the prison in the regular way. not a word of criticism of the prison or of anyone connected with its management is allowed to pass the censor. No matter what practices may prevail or what outrages may be perpetrated, no report thereof is permitted to pass the walls. The general public, which supports the prison, is not allowed to know what goes on there except as it may please the officers in charge to let the people know what a fine place it is and what a privilege to be locked up there.

Just at this writing a huge scandal has been uncovered at the United States penitentiary at Atlanta. A "dope ring," headed by a prison physician and several guards, has been long operating there making dope fiends of young prisoners and supplying all who could pay for it at robber rates with the poisonous drug that would ruin them for life. And this is the benevolent United States government institution where drug addicts are sent to be reformed. And truly it is a fine bourgeois reformation they get at this walled-in inferno.

## **Underground Kite.**

The letter, which follows, was sent out underground or it would never have left the prison. It is from a man who served a term of years in the navy and has been rewarded for his patriotism by a long prison sentence. There are several hundred inmates at Atlanta who were soldiers, marines, and sailors, some of them of many years standing, who

for more or less trifling offenses were court-martialed by their “superiors” and sent to the penitentiary to contemplate the beauty of their reward for putting on a uniform and fighting to make their country “safe for democracy.” The writer of this letter is one of those victims and the letter speaks eloquently for itself. Here it is:

Through your many friends and comrades in prison here I have learned of your suffering for the noble cause of the human race. Your martyrdom will blaze the trail to the goal which the working class are destined to reach. With a few more such martyrs the cause will be won. Your undying devotion to your noble principles and your untiring efforts to secure liberty and justice for all, to make this country a fit place to live in, will be crowned with victory at last. From now on my life belongs to your cause.

Having thrown away 11 years in the navy, the lessons of experience have at last been a blessing to me. I have learned what our navy really stands for and that is not for the protection against invasion, but simply a school that teaches the doctrines of the rich.

The struggle of the oppressed will be won in time and then your name shall be a household word to the new generation.

To help in this struggle in which the truth must be known by the masses, I am writing you of conditions which exist in the Navy, wishing everyone to know the truth. Candidly I would rather serve time here than in the navy. One cannot imagine the tyrannical rules which govern in our navy. In this letter I shall speak by the truth and I shall stand prepared to defend my statements.

Every father and mother should know of the conditions that exist in the navy and if they did they would never consent to their sons' enlistment. There are few, if any, of the enlisted personnel who are of wealthy parents. The majority are of the working class. The glowing advertisements showing scenes of foreign countries and depicting the fascinating life as related by men who have been instructed in this art are intended to lure young lads into the trap. These glowing inducements draw the young away from home. The majority of those who first enlist are young and adventurous, desiring to travel. Some of them never see foreign soil.

An enlisted man has no rights, only privileges, and these are granted by the commanding officers. Everything is at their discretion. The maxim first inculcated in the minds of new recruits is “Fear your superiors more than you do your enemy.” This is the basis of discipline. If the young men knew the truth, they would never enter the navy. The wide distinction between officers and

enlisted men means a big break when the latter begin to think for themselves.

The officers of the navy belong to a class or clique with an idea that this clique must have its way in everything. They do as they please in their palaces on the high seas. Some wonder why a man is not chosen from the military to be Secretary of the Navy. With a military head their power would be complete.

### **Naval Officers Not Gentlemen.**

The officers of our navy are snobs, looking upon the enlisted men as curs. The following are a few rules which the recruit never learns until he has signed his rights away. Whistling is prohibited aboard ship. Captain Gilmore, USN, was made Governor of Guam. He at once prohibited whistling on the island. Your hair must be cut according to the style which the captain sets. If during recreation you are reading or writing and the captain heaves in sight, you must drop everything and stand at attention until he passes. To speak to the captain you should first try to have an interview with the Sultan. Never forget the Sir to your superiors, as they are termed. You are taught to obey your superiors without question.

I worked in the Navy Yard at Portsmouth, Virginia, then under control of a tyrant, Admiral Phillip Andrews. He looks upon the working class as slaves and he treats them as such. His idea is that of a slave-driver. His purpose is to have all enlisted men working in Navy Yards. He can then train them to be driven.

The people outside do not hear much of the immoral practices existing in the navy. I am an honorably discharged man and my last three months were on recruiting duty. There are many incidents I could relate from my experience did space permit.

The military machine must be smashed and then only will the working men win their long struggle for liberty and justice.

The warning voice of this imprisoned marine, whose eyes are now opened and who would save other young men from sharing in his lamentable experience is well worthy of serious consideration.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · February 2012 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.