
Report on Visit to Eugene V. Debs of March 25, 1922.

by “Jack Travis”

From a document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 93, l. 31-34.

Chicago, Monday, March 27, 1922

I met D. [*Debs*] by appointment at 9 a.m. Saturday, March 25th, and was with him until 11 a.m. His brother T. [*Theodore*] being present at the interview.

I presented a letter from Martin [*Alfred Wagenknecht*] along with some reasons why D. should see proposed committee consisting of W. [*Wagenknecht*], R.P.S. [*Rose Pastor Stokes*], J.L. [*Jay Lovestone*], J.P.C. [*James P. Cannon*], and J.C. [???], Chi.

Main argument was as follows:—

1. We wish to present to you our side of the developments in the workers' organizations of America while you have been in prison.

2. Particularly because we know you have not yet heard our side.

3. We wish to bring you personal greetings from Russia and from Germany.

4. We wish to give you this information and these greetings BEFORE you address the Cleveland Convention of the Socialist Party in April.

Debs' answers:—

1. I have not yet promised definitely to address the SP of A convention, but I may do so.

2. I have promised first to see a committee consisting of Borden [*William Z. Foster*] and M.P. [*Marguerite Prevey*] of Ohio before seeing any other of your people.

3. After I have seen Borden and M.P., I will consider seeing your other committee.

4. I desire very much to go to Russia whenever I am able to go.

5. I must have absolute rest and quiet in order to recover my strength and cannot say WHEN I can meet your committee.

6. I would request you (Travis) to see me again on your way East.

My impressions are that D. is very much incensed over the condition of the workers' movement in America. He is very weak, high strung, and nervous as a result of his long incarceration in jail and the attacks that have been made against him during the past five years by the patriots and the flag wavers have to a degree twisted his vision and taken his attention away from the main points at issue in the world problem today. He is urging Unity, Unity, Unity at any cost, apparently. Saying, “I will not line up with any faction, but when I am well, I will shame the shameless factions into Unity.”

“The members of the different factions in America today present a deplorable spectacle of factionalism, intrigue, and backbiting that would disgrace a bunch of the lowest guttersnipe politicians.”

“Some groups (CP) propose to take orders from men in Moscow who know absolutely nothing about American conditions. I know more about American psychology and conditions in five minutes than all the leaders in Russia know in five years, and I will not accept my orders from a maniac like Z. [*Zinoviev*].”

“I am more of a revolutionist than I ever was.”

“The SP of A is at fault in their attack upon W. and I will make Branstetter either retract or prove his charges.† But the other side is also at fault, and have made just as wild and vicious statements against the SP as the SP has made against the CP.”

“The best of the factions in America today is the PP [*Proletarian Party*], but that is a sect only and scarcely anyone knows of their existence.”

“CP is at last waking up to the fact that they should work in the unions. But perhaps they do this

with the wrong motive — not to build up a vigorous labor movement, but simply to use the unions as channels of CP propaganda.”

“CP through their organs never raised a hand to secure my freedom. Apparently they were content for me to stay in prison for the time being, because they feared I would be against them if I was released.”

“I wish very much to go to Russia, and would do so if my finances, my physical and other conditions would permit.”

“Since when, however, I want to know, has Socialism become synonymous with Communism? I am not a Communist and I don’t want to be one, and I do not believe in MINORITY RULE.”

The above quotations, which I have culled from a rapid fire conversation of seventy minutes, after I had outlined our program to D., will serve to show you something of his outlook and his present position. After D. had talked, I pointed out that had the CP organs openly espoused the campaign for his release, that he would be in jail yet. This argument seemed to have some weight.

I asked him to consider that the factions were started by the Executive Committee of the SP of A, when they expelled large sections of their organization in the spring of 1919. This, he admitted, was lamentable but true.

I insisted that if he could survey the wide field of work among the working class of America today, he would see the beginnings of a new and vigorous, and militant workers’ movement.

I urged him to note the fact that all his old friends are now outside of the SP of A, and the party machinery is in control of men whose policies he has fought throughout the entire history of the SP of A.

Argument on my side was somewhat limited as Dave K. [*Karsner*] and others from NYC were waiting outside his office for an interview with D.

I recommend:

a. That Borden and M.P. be instructed to urge a meeting with D. without delay. (They might just as well occupy his time as the other elements who are clamoring for a hearing with him.)

b. That Borden and M.P. insist that D., at the very earliest opportunity, (before he goes to Cleveland), should interview a full committee as suggested in NYC on the morning of March 23rd.

c. That as many as possible of the said committee go to interview D. at the very earliest opportunity and urge him by every means in their power to go to Russia this summer. As this, I am convinced, is the only means of showing D. the rightness of our position, and every nerve must be strained and every possible means used to show him that we are in the right before our efforts in this direction cease.

If these suggestions do not seem feasible to your committee, whatever plans they may settle upon ought to be put into motion immediately and without delay, as it is imperative and essential that D. should go to Russia at the very earliest possible opportunity.

Travis.

Chicago, March 27/22.

† - Debs seems to have made good on this promise, writing to SPA National Executive Secretary Otto Branstetter a hot letter on March 25, 1922: “You recite the outrages perpetrated by the communists upon the Socialist Party but unfortunately the outrages were not confined to one side. I have never approved but have opposed and condemned the disruptive and destructive tactics that certain elements have resorted to in their insane attempts to destroy each other. You publicly charged Wagenknecht with being a thief. You were called upon to produce a proof or retract the charge. So far as I know you have done neither. I am assured that the charge is an infamous slander and it certainly is unless you have evidence to sustain it [and if not you] should retract the charge.” J. Robert Constantine (ed.), *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 3, 1919-1926*, pp. 300-301.

Edited and Explanatory Notes by Tim Davenport.

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