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# “Death for Me or Release for All,” Says Debs: “I Trust in My Comrades.”

by Joseph W. Sharts

Unsigned article in the *Missouri Valley Socialist* [Dayton, OH],  
v. 7, whole no. 394 (Sept. 26, 1919), pp. 1, 3. Attributed to editor Joseph W. Sharts.

Again Eugene V. Debs has refused to attempt to gain his release from prison with habeas corpus.

Joseph W. Sharts of Dayton, Ohio, sent by the Ohio Socialist movement through Alfred Wagenknecht, State Secretary, interviewed him a second time on September 20 [1919], in company with Samuel M. Castleton, the Atlanta Socialist lawyer.

This was in compliance with Debs' request at the former interview that the committee return after 30 days.

At this interview Debs was greatly moved, but said with intense earnestness and firmness:

**“I have studied this matter for 30 days. Every instinct in me is against my making an individual fight for liberty while my comrades rot in jail! Woodrow Wilson and his political crowd sent me here from Moundsville [WV] to kill or break me. I shall stay until I die or he is forced to release us all. My faith is in the rank and file of my comrades.”**

He was surprised, when brought down from the prison-hospital to the warden's office in custody of a guard, to find Sharts and Castleton there, and was much affected.

“I sent word,” said he, “almost 10 days ago to Terre Haute to tell you not to make the trip, as I had reached a final decision.”

He is allowed but one sheet of paper a week

for correspondence; and of course he sends that letter home.

He spoke of the recent split in the Socialist movement as being more on the surface than in the depths.

**“The rank and file of the Socialist movement have no quarrel with each other,” he declared. “It is the leaders always, and those who want to be leaders, who keep up factional differences and stir up new ones.”**

The stay in the prison-hospital has done Debs some good; it has at least arrested the rapid loss of weight which was so alarming a month ago.

“I have lost a few ounces of gristle in this prison, he remarked, smiling, “but I have gained tons in spirit.”

The thing on which he commented with the most enthusiastic admiration was the revelation of splendid, sterling traits of manliness and unselfishness in his fellow-prisoners, and not merely the political prisoners.

**“They have put me among murderers and rape fiends,” said he, “but this experience has been absolutely priceless to me in enabling me to appreciate the magnificent qualities that sparkle in these men who are supposed to be the hopeless dregs of humanity.**

“Think of a man risking 130 days in the ‘hole’ to smuggle a piece of pie to me!” he ex-

claimed.

It was evident from the incidents he told that Debs is the idol of the prisoners. They wave their hands to him across the prison-yard, even though the gesture costs them a severe punishment.

He is often called upon to write letters for them, to advise them in their private and personal troubles.

One man he spoke of as a most promising recruit for Socialism, whom he had converted. This man is in for murder, but Debs spoke enthusiastically about this man's virgin qualities of intellect and his extraordinary force of character.

The committee drew him back to the purpose of his visit. It urged many reasons for his making the fight for individual liberation — the strong probability that in any event he would be released for some time on bail and could go before the public with a message of his own on behalf of his imprisoned comrades.

He listened carefully, interrupting at intervals to express his strong disgust at making another appeal to the Supreme Court, for which he can not find words sufficient to express his disgust as a servile organ of capitalism which prostitutes its collective intellect and twists and turns facts and legal principles to serve its master re-

gardless of truth and justice.

But when all was said, he reiterated his position that he could not make an individual fight for his own liberty now; it would be in a sense a desertion of his fellow political prisoners, a subordinating of the general fight for amnesty to his individual fight.

He was familiar with the incidents of Woodrow Wilson's lecture tour on the Pacific coast, and expressed his belief that although the capitalist press tries to conceal or belittle the facts, the politicians of Washington and even the President are well aware of the rising tide of public opinion against further incarceration of political prisoners. He said he believed they knew they were sleeping over a volcano, and were merely looking for a favorable moment to declare a general amnesty; but they wanted to do it in such a way as would prevent the public from realizing they were yielding to necessity, and would gain them some little political advantage and glory for their supposed magnanimity.

"But when they release me," he said earnestly in conclusion, "it will be because they are forced to. And I trust to the rank and file of my comrades for that — not to the leaders — but to those in the ranks."

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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