
A Day With Debs in Jail at Woodstock:

How the Imprisoned Labor Leader and His Associates Lived in Confinement...

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Published in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 7, 1895.
Reprinted in *St. Louis Labor*, vol. 6, whole no. 404 (Oct. 31, 1908), pp. 5-6.

Staff Correspondence of the *Post-Dispatch*.

WOODSTOCK, ILL., July 6 [1895].— Boarding a Northwestern train in Chicago one can be whirled away through the frog ponds and cabbage patches and prairie sloughs that form the drabbed drape of that great city, and within a two-hours' ride through the green fields and pleasant pastures of the country land is the sequestered little town of Woodstock. The depot is on the northern limits of the town and a walk of only two blocks to the south leads one to the public square, which is a beautiful grove of maple and oak, with serpentine pathways winding across the green sward.

Varying from the usual custom, the big brick courthouse does not stand in the center of the public square, but is located across the street to the west. Beside the courthouse and separated from it by a grassy yard, stands the county jail, a two story red brick structure with white stone trimmings.

This little jail out here in this quiet country town is today famous the world over. Behind the bars and bolted doors is confined a man who not many months ago, by one stroke of his pen, paralyzed the railway traffic of this great continent. Chicago, that vast city of 1,500,00 souls, only two hours distant by steam from here, was stagnated and crippled in business and practically cut off from the outside world. Along its streets was heard the tramp of soldiery and the air was filled with the great jeers of mobs. It was a fight between Labor and Capital — Labor, bleeding and crushed down by the oppression

of plutocrats — or it was a fight between Anarchy and Good Government, just as men look at the struggle from different viewpoints.

Eugene Victor Debs, President of the American Railway Union and Commander-in-Chief of the forces of Labor in that desperate struggle, sits in his cell in the Woodstock jail today; serving a sentence for contempt of the laws and branded by the courts of the land as a malefactor. With him are six of his colleagues, who also have been placed behind the bars by a Federal Judge. Still, notwithstanding the law says these men are malefactors, thousands upon thousands of workingmen regard them as martyrs and heroes for the cause of labor.

I visited the jail here today and spent two hours in pleasant chat with Debs and his imprisoned associates. A little, slim, nervous man of low stature, who has passed through middle age, greeted me cordially at the door. He was George Eckert, the Sheriff of McHenry County, who has charge of the distinguished Debs and the other labor leaders under sentence. Mr. Eckert used to sell groceries in this town, but this is his second term as Sheriff. The front portion of the jail building is the Sheriff's residence, and the cells from prisoners are in the rear. The Sheriff led the way down a board sidewalk in the jail yard to a door that leads into a vestibule of the jail proper. Once inside and a heavily barred door opens from the vestibule into a long corridor, which is separated from the row of cells by a latticed partition made of iron bars.

It was in this corridor that I found Mr. Debs and his associates. Debs and one or two of his followers were sitting at a table busily engaged in writing, while the others were comfortably seated in big wooden chairs, reading newspapers and books. Debs jumped from his seat and bounded down the corridor to give me a hearty welcome at the door.

"Now you must take a seat and make yourself at home," he spoke, smiling over his application of that old Hoosier greeting to these iron-barred surroundings.

But under the influence of Debs' manner I had soon become oblivious to my surroundings and felt as if I were "covering an assignment" at a conference in labor headquarters. This lack of feeling of restraint for the time being was also largely due to the liberal rules of Sheriff Eckert, who allows his distinguished prisoners all the liberty possible under the circumstances. They were allowed to walk into the yard and take exercise. No handcuffs and no balls and chains and no guards have been considered necessary.

Debs' personal magnetism is a quality that first impresses a visitor. The moment one is in his presence and hears him talk it seems that an electric battery is at work, and that the very atmosphere is crackling with electricity. He is fully six feet in stature, has a good physique, a long head and a high forehead, which is increased by baldness, bright gray eyes, a long nose, firmly set lips, and a broad chin that tell of determination and will power; dark hair that is cut to a feather edge. He wore a black vest and cutaway coat of diagonal material, dark gray trousers and a pair of easy slippers, immaculate white shirt with lay-down collar, and a black satin bow tie. In fact, his appearance could have been but slightly improved if he had been prepared for receiving callers in the parlors of his Terre Haute residence.

The pictures of Mr. Debs that have appeared in the newspapers give him a younger appearance than he possesses. He is but 39 years old and has a complexion noting good health, but his gold-rimmed spectacles and the few wrinkles across his forehead give him a much older appearance than his pictures have suggested. It has been often noted that he resembles Bob Ingersoll in appearance. This is true.

When he becomes warmed to his favorite topic of labor reform he really becomes an enthusiast. The impression is sometimes made that he "allows his ideas to carry him away," as the saying goes. But he is intelligent, eloquent; his perceptive powers are keen and all the faculties of his mind are well oiled. On his favorite topic he never lacks an idea, nor hesitates for an expression of it. He has a nervous temperament. During a moment of heated interest in conversation he will suddenly arise from his chair, his gray eyes will sparkle, and he will make rapid gestures with his hands, his left hand, with fingers half bent and outstretched like an eagle's claw, as if to demonstrate that the listener must "grasp the idea."

Since the great strike has ended, and the wheels of traffic have been moving again for several months, and the public press has but little to say about the ARU, and Debs and his associates are now languishing in jail, some persons may believe that the labor movement under ARU auspices has been given its death blow. But according to Debs such persons are reckoning without this host. He will not admit that he is vanquished. He is still defiant. His incarceration is only a small incident in a great battle for the right.

And Debs' life in this jail shows that his dream is not broken. He will not emerge from behind these bars disenchanting. He is carrying on his work, as a propagandist from his cell. He is even editing his

newspaper, *The Railway Times*, from the jail. When he is released he will plunge into work again, and on the lecture platform he hopes to wield a greater influence owing to the sympathy aroused from the very fact of his serving a sentence in jail.

On the second days of their confinement here Debs and his six associates organized themselves into a Cooperative Colony, and they named their present abode "Liberty Jail." They have taken up the study of political economy, their dream of cooperation, mutualism, Socialism. All of them hold virtually to the same opinions, for all are infidels in religion, populists in politics, and labor agitators in general. Their one redeeming feature is that all believe in free silver.

Debs is president of this little cooperative colony. Each man has been assigned a duty. Martin J. Elliott has been made inspector, in charge of bunks and quarters. When the little alarm clock strikes at 6 o'clock every morning Inspector Elliott goes to the door of each cell and yells, "Six o'clock!" If a man is not up and dressed within 15 minutes he is subject to a fine. William E. Burns, who has been made "turnkey," unlocks the door leading into the corridor of the jail. All march out in line, under command of James Hogan, who has been given the title of Colonel. Sheriff Eckert has loaned them an old army musket, which he carried through the Civil War. Colonel Hogan gives the orders and each man in turn takes this old musket and goes through the manual of military tactics. The prisoners have provided themselves with a punching bag, dumb-bells, and an elastic exerciser. This military and gymnastic exercise lasts until 7:30 o'clock, when all go to breakfast. By the courtesy of Sheriff Eckert they are allowed to step out of the jail proper and take their meals in his private dining room, a privilege which is not accorded to the five other prisoners in the jail. Breakfast lasts 30 minutes, with or without grace.

From 8 o'clock to noon is the study hour, with Debs in charge. All study economics. Every man takes a book. Absolute silence prevails and one could hear a pin drop. The jail corridor is a veritable schoolroom.

At 15 minutes after 12 o'clock the men take exercise by walking in the jail yard. At 1 o'clock dinner is announced.

From 2 pm to 5 pm are study hours again in the corridor. During this time Mr. Debs writes editorials and clips exchanges for *The Railway Times*, his paper, which he publishes at his home in Terre Haute, Ind. It is a semi-monthly, and he prepares all his "copy" in jail and sends it by mail to be "set up" in the home office. All his exchanges

come to the jail, and they are read by his associates, whom he has trained for exchange editors for the time being. Mr. Debs' "editorial desk" is a pine table, which was made by his imprisoned associate, Sylvester Keliher, who is a carpenter by trade. It was made in the basement of the jail. He also made several shelves for the library, which contains the works of Shakespeare, Poe, Lowell, Wendell Phillips, and such books as Carlyle's *French Revolution* and economic works by the score. Debs' table is covered with papers, ink, paste pot, scissors, and all the panoply of an editorial sanctum, except the cockroaches.

At 5 pm Col. Hogan again assumes command, and the men go through the manual of arms, with a squad drill. From 7 to 8 o'clock pm is pent in social chat, when no one is allowed to "talk shop."

L.W. Roberts, who was a school teacher in Hillsdale, Iowa, 15 years ago, before he became a brakeman on the C.B. & Q. road, has been dubbed the "Professor." He has the men in charge from 8 to 10 o'clock pm, when they turn into a regularly organized debating society. Prof. Rogers announces a subject the previous evening and assigns two men, one for the affirmative and one for the negative. After the principals close their speeches all then engage in this discussion. At 10 o'clock pm sharp all retire to their cells for the night. Here Sheriff Eckert's rule is enforced and not a word is allowed to be spoken after 10 o'clock.

"You would think it is a graveyard here five minutes after 10," remarked Mr. Debs. Then he added, with a sarcastic smile, "Perhaps some people wish it was a graveyard."

Such is the daily routine of life of Mr. Debs and his associates in jail. They declare that they bury themselves in study and become entirely oblivious to their surroundings. They are often visited by labor reformers and sympathizers from various parts of the Union. Last Sunday a delegation of 50 citizens from Belvidere, Ill., came to Woodstock to call on them. The prisoners are daily flooded with a heavy mail.

Mrs. Debs has not been able to visit her husband in jail, as she is an invalid from rheumatism and is now at Hot Springs, Ark.

No preachers call at the jail. Debs declares the church is in sympathy with the money power, anyway, and labor need look for no substantial help from that source.

As is well known, Debs will spend six months here. His associates, Hogan, Kelliher, Elliot, Rogers, Burns, and Goodwin, will spend three months.

Asked for an interview, Debs first paid Sheriff Eckert a high compliment for the cleanliness of the jail. And it certainly is one of the best jails in the country. Debs, who spent eight days in the Chicago jail, says that place is a “rotten hole,” and his lurid description of filth leads one to believe it is a legalized Libby prison.¹

“Do you still believe in strikes as a means of success for labor?” was asked.

“No, sir!” replied Mr. Debs, and he tied a string to his answer:

“But I would not entirely abolish the provision for strikes. The dread of a strike has a powerful restraining effect upon that class of employers who regard their employees as so many chattels or cattle. Without the provision for strikes workingmen would be absolutely helpless. I don’t like strikes any more than I like war. Are the people of this country ready to abolish war?”

“As to arbitration, if it is ‘compulsory,’ it is vicious in principle, and if it is voluntary it can’t be enforced. Still, while the competitive system lasts, I am willing to admit that boards of arbitration can do and have done some good, and I am willing to aid in the work of arbitration to adjust labor difficulties.”

“How do you and your associates regard your incarceration?”

“We feel that a cruel wrong has been perpetuated upon us in that we have been denied a trial by jury in flagrant disregard of the Constitution. Palliate it as they may, the haggard fact remains that any Federal Judge can at will strike down the Constitution, stab to death the right of trial by jury, and with autocratic defiance of law and justice imprison the victim of his displeasure. This is precisely what has been done in our case. We committed no crime, we violated no law, we have not been tried, and yet we are sentenced to a term in jail, and the Supreme Court of the United States gives its negative affirmation to this outrageous proceeding by declaring that the court below had final jurisdiction and that its monstrous perversion of justice can not, therefore, be reversed. Every Federal Judge now constitutes a Tsar.

“If we have committed any crime why are we not tried and convicted by due process of law? If we are responsible for the fires and riots of last summer, if half the charges of the plutocratic press are only half true, we merit, at least, a life sentence;

¹ Infamous Confederate prison located at Richmond, Virginia.

but if we are absolutely innocent, if we acted entirely within the bounds of our constitutional rights and violated none of the prerogatives of citizenship, we ought to be free men and every day we are deprived of our liberty in a plutocratic bastille is a burning disgrace to the Federal judiciary and makes 'old glory' a 'flaunting lie.' But we accept the inevitable with becoming composure. No question is ever settled until it is settled right. The mills of the gods are at work and in due course of time the 'decision' which assassinated American liberty and inaugurated Russian despotism will be ground to atoms, and those who rendered it will be remembered only for the sternity of odium that attaches to their names.

"Our only crime is that we sought by lawful means to rescue 14,000 famishing men, women, and children from a suburb of hell known as Pullman. When every attempt to secure arbitration had failed, when Pullman had defied the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois, our men resolved not to handle the cars bearing his infamous name. That was the head and front of our offending. The railroad companies insisted that the Pullman cars should run if not a wheel turned and if the whole country writhed and groaned in irretrievable ruin. Unless a widely accepted theology is sadly at fault, we shall some day ascertain which is of greater importance, viz., thousands of immortal souls or the ruining of a few palatial cars. We have no difficulty in arriving at a conclusion as to what side Christ would have been on had he been on earth."

"What is the future for labor?"

"We look hopefully into the future, for 'the right is not to be forever on the scaffold, nor the wrong forever on the throne.'² The same soulless power, in the form of trusts, syndicates, and monopolies, that is today squeezing the life current out of labor and coining their groans into dividends on watered stock will soon begin to oppress and grind the middle classes. The small farmers and small tradesmen are to be driven to the wall. The few will be extremely rich and the masses extremely poor. The few will have absolute sway and their subjects, the common people, will be in

² A reference to a stanza from "The Present Crisis" (1845) by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891):

*Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record;
One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.*

abject slavery. Is the picture overdrawn? Wait and watch! The grinding, crushing, enslaving forces are in operation, and unless men are deaf as adders and blind as bats they must see the inevitable result.

“If the people are awakened from their lethargy, if they can be aroused from their stupor, there will be a change of program and the reign of right will be inaugurated. Liberty will be preserved in this country at any cost. If peaceable means do not suffice, if prudent councils do not prevail, the plain people will be heard from, and heaven forbid that they shall be required to talk French.

“Respecting our plans for the future, I have to say that we shall work all the harder to achieve success. The obstacles that have been thrown in our way but serve to increase our ardor, strengthen our determination, and intensify the necessity for the solidarity of labor. Divided and at cross-purposes, labor becomes the sport and prey of its exploiters, but united, harmonious, and intelligently directed, it rules the world. The trend is toward the unification of all classes of workingmen and women, subdivided as may be required, to preserve trade autonomy yet compactly united for concerted action in all matters pertaining to the common welfare. The trades, one after another, are disappearing. In a few more years ‘skilled labor’ will be a thing of the past, for machinery will do the skilled work of the world. The machine continues to take the places of men, and in the march of invention the idle increase and the army will grow larger year by year. There never will be a time in this country when there will be jobs enough to go around. The competitive system is nearing its close — the death gurgle is in its throat. It is dying hard, but it has got to go, for the Eternal Truth is pledged to destroy every system not founded upon its immutable laws.

“We propose to change our lodge rooms into school rooms. We propose to teach our members that politics is the science of government, and that any citizen who does not take an active interest in the politics of his country is fit only for chain and collar — for slavery and degradation. We shall try to convince them that so long as they vote the same ticket as their masters they will forge their own chains and perpetuate the social and industrial serfdom of which they complain.

“We shall first seek to unify and harmonize the workers of the country. We shall have no ‘grand’ mogul as chief to carry the organization in his vest pocket, but shall have at the head of this great organization a congress of representatives elected from the ranks, who shall have supervision of its affairs. The Initiative and Referendum will doubtless be adopted and ‘we the people’

will rule. Representative government, upon the apportionment plan, has proved to be an abortion and is little, if any, better than plain, unvarnished monarchy.

“The night of capitalism will be dark, but the dawn of Cooperation will be near. All the antagonisms begotten of the competitive conflict, all its extremes of wealth and pauperism, gluttony and starvation, bejeweled fraud and famished industry will disappear. Mutualism will be the means and universal happiness the end. If this is not true then the moral philosophy of Christ is a sham and the ‘brotherhood of man’ a myth. Thousands of the ‘better classes’ affect to believe that social regeneracy is a hallucination, and that those who advocate it are fit candidates for a feeble-minded institute. In spite of this, and in spite of troops and courts, jails and injunctions, and all the pains and penalties the degenerate parasites of plutocracy can impose, the right will at last prevail and humanity will sweep onward and upward until ideal elevations are reached, where all men and women shall have not only equal rights, but equal opportunities and every human being shall have and enjoy all the fruits of his toil.

*“O man, bowed down with labor!
O woman, young yet old!
O heart, oppressed in the toiler’s breast
And crushed by the power of gold!
Keep on with your weary battle
Against triumphant might;
No question is ever settled
Until it is settled right.”³*

When Inspector Elliott yelled “6 o’clock” at President Debs’ cell door on the morning of the Glorious Fourth the great labor leader jumped from his bunk, grabbed Sheriff Eckert’s old army musket, poked its muzzle between the iron bars of a raised window, pulled the trigger and “let ‘er go.” During the natal day Debs made a speech, Professor Rogers read the Declaration of Independence, and the “Co-operative Colony of Liberty Jail” celebrated the Fourth in the spirit of freedom for all and slavery for none.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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³ From Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919), “An Inspiration.”