
Mr. Debs' Reception: Speech by Eugene V. Debs at Terre Haute, Indiana, May 3, 1894

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President Eugene V. Debs, of the American Railway Union, returning home from the scene of his late triumph in the Northwest, was given such a reception by the people of Terre Haut last night [May 3, 1894] that will live in his memory for many years.

The members of the local union arranged the celebration yesterday in a few hours. At 7:30 yesterday evening the Brazil cornet band headed the Typographical Union, the Cigar Makers' Union, and the ARU to the station where the C&EI train was soon to arrive.

There was a goodly turnout of marchers, but a tremendous crowd had preceded the parade and before the train pulled in the station was crowded as it has never been before. A solid mass of people of all ages and sexes blocked the space between the east fence and the building. The windows of the depot were filled and the overflow extended back on each side. As the train pulled in under the shed the band struck up and a mighty cheer went up from the crowd causing the passengers in the train to wonder what had broken loose..

Another roar of applause went up as Mr. Debs emerged from the car escorted by a number of friends. The several policemen formed about the party and an entrance was forced through the dense crowd in front. There was a terrific crush at this point, many hundreds of people trying to reach the hand of Mr. Debs. The labor chief was placed in a carriage and the parade reformed and marched up town. The march was up Sycamore to Seventh, south to Chestnut, west to Sixth, to Main, and east to the Terre Haute. In the handsome lawn at the rear of the hotel a temporary stage was erected. Over the front was suspended the statement in bold relief: "The American Railway Union consecrates itself to the cause of Industrial Emancipation." In

the parade the transparencies read as follows: "Hurrah for the ARU," "We have made the Stand," "Hereafter we will Pull Together," "1st Victory, UP Ry.," "2nd Victory, Great Northern," "Welcome to our President."

When the crowd had gathered about the stand the band finished a selection. Mr. Samuel M. Huston called the multitude to order. In the following brief manner:

Mr. Debs:—

I have been requested by the local members of the American Railway Union to deliver a welcome address to you on this your return from a great struggle that has ended in victory, but the labor organizations and the people of Terre Haute of all occupations and conditions by this outpouring have given you a more welcome and eloquent address than I or any other man can offer.

The work performed by you and the great good accomplished by you in behalf of organized labor in the United States entitles you to an affectionate place in the hearts of those who love justice and desire the advancement of their fellow men. The success achieved by the organization of which you are the founder justifies and gratifies the men who have always given you their confidence and assistance. Scorning offers that would have turned the heads of many, you have seen fit to devote the best days of your life to the service of your fellow laborers, and the results accomplished by you within the last few days have exceeded the greatest anticipations of your most enthusiastic supporters and now, sir, on behalf of these organizations and the citizens of Terre Haute here assembled, I take pleasure in welcoming you once more to your home.

When Mr. Debs arose to respond the applause was loud and continued. Unfortunately the light furnished by Mr Baur failed as the speaking began and it was impossible to secure a complete report of the address, but in abstract Mr. Debs spoke as follows:

Mr. Chairman, Friends and Neighbors:—

From the depths of my heart I thank you for this generous, for this grand reception, this great expression of your confidence and esteem. I assure you that I had no idea that such a magnificent demonstration awaited me upon my arrival at my home. I cannot see what I have myself accomplished to merit such applause and coming as it does from my fellow citizens and friends it touches my heart. As a rose bud yields to the tender influences

of the summer shower so I now open my heart to receive your benedictions. This demonstration, I take it, is a testimonial to the great, manly, and honest men on the Great Northern, who carried the banner of organized labor to victory, (*Applause.*) carried it to a victory that has no parallel in history. Those brave men who realizing how serious the result might have been, decided to risk all in the struggle between labor and plutocracy.

One of the remarkable features of this victory is that the great idea of arbitration has been firmly established in America. Arbitration means mutual concessions; it means peaceful adjustment of all difficulties between the employee and the employers; it means justice to honest toil that labor will hereafter receive its honest dues. These men on the Great Northern made a noble stand. The solid ranks of capital were met with solid ranks of labor.

The contest lasted 18 days and at the end the men received 97½ percent of what they claimed as their just rights. The men agreed to submit their grievances to arbitration. They felt their demands were just and that their cause could be left in honest hands. Fourteen representatives — businessmen of the Twin Cities, with Charles Pillsbury, the prince of millers, at the head — was selected as the committee. After remaining in session for just one hour they returned with a verdict for the men by which decision \$146,000 more is distributed among the men on the system each month than before. The men were naturally delighted with the victory. Along the line of the Great Northern, from end to end, are little vine-clad cottages. From every one of these thousands the “God Bless Yous” go out for organized labor. We received many tokens of esteem in St. Paul but what touched me most was the scene as we entered the yards at St. Paul. The humble track men, who had formerly worked for 80 cents per day, with bent and distorted bodies stood in line at the side of the trains with hats in hand and blessed those who had helped to better their miserable existence.

Another remarkable feature of this very remarkable victory is that not a drop of blood was shed on the system. No deed of violence, no crime marred the 18 days’ struggle. This fact triumphantly terminates the view that no great permanent reform can be achieved [without being marred] by violence and force. The American Railway Union believes only in the force of education. (*Applause.*) Another good feature was the pleasant manner in which the struggle terminated, the kindly expressions, the exchange of good will at the close of the conference was gratifying indeed to all concerned. At the close of the business Mr. Hill called the leaders to his office and said: “you have fought a brave

fight for what you think are your rights and I respect you for it. Hereafter there will be no differences between us. Any dissatisfaction on this system will be met fairly and honestly by me before a strike becomes necessary.”

To this I responded: “If this shall be your policy I give you my word and honor there will never be another strike on the Great Northern. (*Applause.*) The ARU will not allow Mr. Hill to treat them any better than they will treat Mr. Hill.”

This strike will not be without its good results all along the line. I am glad to say I believe the sky of labor is brightening. I am not one of those who believe the sun of labor has set. I believe I can see in the distance the time when there will be a more equitable distribution of the products of labor, when there will be more justice among all men and employee and employer shall stand side by side and strikes will not be known. This strike demonstrates the folly of going to war when differences exist between capital and labor.

It has been said that the chasm between capital and labor is widening. I am not one to believe this, I have too much faith in American manhood. I do not believe that there are but two classes — those who rule and those who are ruled. The action of those 14 millionaire merchants of the Twin Cities during the late strike did much to destroy the distrust existing between the laborer and the employer. It demonstrates that faith in the honesty of mankind is not dead yet. When the strikers placed the question at stake in the hands of these men it was an expression of their faith in their honor and integrity that can not be mistaken. I believe I see in the future bright blessings upon organized labor; when there shall no longer be any discord; when men will meet and treat as men; when a grievance shall be handled with justice to both sides; when strikes will be no longer necessary but every man will be moved by a desire to do the just and honest thing by his fellow man; when there shall be no line between the producer and the product.

This demonstration tonight to me is like a dream. You are too generous, too magnanimous. There are times in life when the tongue refuses to respond to the promptings of the heart and this is one of them. I appreciate your kindness, your words, and your applause far beyond the power of speech to express. Your generous words touch my heart. I can only say I thank you one and all, every manly man among you, every lovely woman, and every child within the sound of my voice. Had I the eloquence of an Ingersoll it would be inadequate to express what I feel. It is a case where silence would perhaps be more expressive than

speech. Once more, with gratitude trembling upon my lips I bid you all good fortune and good night.

Mr. Debs' speech was followed at the close by a storm of applause and then three cheers. His address was a beautiful piece of eloquence and was intercepted very frequently by applause. Mr. Huston in behalf of the local ARU thanked the organizations and the people of Terre Haute for assembling in making the affair a success.

Mr. Debs spent the day at his home looking over an accumulation of correspondence. Over 1,300 messages of congratulation have been received by him. President George Scholz and A.C. Claren, of the local union, made the arrangements for the demonstration last night.

Eugene V. Debs was confined to his bed this afternoon. He will not be able to leave home for several days yet. The constant strain of the past two weeks and loss of rest left such an impression as could readily be seen by his friends last night.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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