

Labor Profile: Eugene V. Debs

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Wed Nov 13 22:49:52 2002

Eugene Victor Debs was born on the 5th of November, 1855, to French Immigrant parents in Terre Haute. His parents gave him the works of Hugo, Voltaire, and Rousseau to chew upon, and the authors' revolutionary influence may be seen throughout his life. He started to work on the railroad when he was 14, and by the age of 19 he was supporting himself with various jobs around his town while working for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF).

Early in his life, he tended to side with the management in labor relations—the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen largely ignored strikes, and he was a member. After the Great Railway Strike of 1877, which he had condemned, though, his thoughts began to change. The railway companies began using labor spies, blacklists, and other nasty tools to fight against unions. In 1885, the BLF renounced its no-strike policy. So did Debs.

He helped to organize the various Brotherhoods and unions for different railway crafts into a single union, the American Railway Union (ARU), which was born in 1893. Early in 1894, the ARU conducted a successful labor action against James J. Hill and the Great Northern. The Pullman massacre, though, destroyed the ARU.

While he was in jail for his part in the Pullman strike, he became more acquainted with Socialism. For the rest of his life, he would be an important leader of the Socialists in America.

In 1901, most of the major Socialist factions, usually given to infighting, united behind Debs, who ran for President several times, to form the Socialist Party of America. This party elected many local officials all over the country, mainly appealing to farmers and workers. By 1916, a Socialist United States congressman was elected. Debs was also a leader in the Industrial Workers of the World, a huge union that made some important gains for Labor.

In short, Debs was regarded as a labor saint, and his life was a struggle for the working class. He campaigned across the nation, spreading his own brand of Socialism, and helping the workers to gain rights.

My information comes mainly from the book Harvey Wasserman's History of the United States. Wasserman has also written a biography of Debs.