
A Message From Debs:

Letter to the NEC of the Socialist Party of America, October 9, 1919.

by William Henry

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To the National Executive Committee.

Comrades, Greeting:—

I have just returned from the Atlanta Federal Prison. I visited the prison on the morning of Oct. 5 [1919], and was given one hour with Gene. Warden was not present, and the other officers refused to leave the documents with Gene, but said they thought the Warden would allow them to be sent in when he returned. I had taken a box of candy, but they refused it to Gene and I brought it back home.

I found Gene in good spirits, and he told me he had lost some weight, but was feeling fine. I could see he had lost weight from the time I met him before going to prison.

“I am not in touch with the outside world,” said Gene. “No Socialist or radical paper or magazine reaches me; all I get is what filters through” (meaning by visitors). Gene was somewhat posted as to what happened at the national convention [Aug. 30-Sept. 5, 1919], and asked me for particulars. I explained the main points of interest, and he seemed to be interested in it all.

“I have seen this coming for some time,” said

Gene, “and am not at all surprised. Everything will come out all right; the rank and file are all right. The principle is the big thing.” I explained the action of the convention in recommending his nomination to head the ticket next year, and explained the position of Stedman on the matter.† He said that was right. “There is plenty of time,” he said.

I asked him if he cared to make a statement, and he said not, for he was not in a position to know what is doing, and would be unable to stand his ground and uphold his statement.

Gene was much interested in the work of the Freedom Convention [Chicago: Sept. 26-28, 1919], and asked what numbers it represented, having been given a report from his brother [Theodore]. I explained to him what the party had planned, and he seemed to be fully in accord. He told me that the head of the prison reform movement was much interested in his case, and had visited him and talked matters over. He also told me of the interest being taken by Clarence Darrow, and seemed to have confidence that some action would be taken in the near future. He said he expected [Adolph] Germer would call to see him.

“When I get out, I shall start where I left off, and make the fight of my life, but I would

†- Socialist Party leader Seymour Stedman sought to defer the formal decision on the SPA's nominee for President until 1920, limiting the 1919 Emergency National Convention to the internal controversy sweeping the party, the question of international affiliation, and the composition of a new “Declaration of Principles” for the organization.

rather see the young men out than myself for I am now a man of 63. If I should agree to say nothing, and crawl through a small hole, sacrificing principle and my conscience, then I could get out; but if I should crawl out through a small hole, then I would be only the size of the hole when I did get out. I am coming out of here all right. Tell the comrades to be in good cheer, and work for the cause. Tell them I love them all. Tell them I feel good, and the authorities of the prison are treating me as well as the rules will permit.”

Gene Debs is the big man of the prison with everyone in the institution. The guard who sat by us while we talked told me there would be no need of guards if all were like Gene Debs. “I like to hear Debs talk,” said the guard.

After my interview, I went to the outside gate of the prison grounds and met a large crowd of people waiting to go through the prison. This crowd were southern people, and they were talking about Debs to the guard who sat on an erected shack with a protector by his side. The guard told the story above mentioned that Debs would not want to be the size of a knot hole by lying to get out. Everyone in the crowd of about 30 people wanted to see Gene, but they were not taken to him. I got to go through a part of the prison with the visitors, but nothing of importance did we see that was of the slightest interest to me as a Socialist. A building was pointed out in the grounds where the guard said they kept the IWW and Bolshevik prisoners, but we did not go through that

building.

There should be more strenuous work toward liberation of Gene and the rest. If every Socialist in America could see that man with his prison garb, locked up like a criminal, serving time for standing for what he knows to be just, then there would be letters and telegrams going into Washington sufficient to cover the capitol building. The workers would time the nation up right in strikes until the gates of prisons would be swung open and these noble souls given their freedom in the sunshine.

It might be well to state that Gene does not care to see many visitors, for he does not want to ask any favors. People sometimes coming a long distance are not permitted to see him. The thing for us outside to do is work for the liberation of Gene and all the rest; for, if we don't act, and act with a determination to convince the authorities, then Gene and many others will not be able to stand the torture of a prison life very long. The Socialist should give every penny and moment of time to get freedom for these noble souls. Only those privileged to experience a separation from Gene in his cheap prison garb, and have his arms around you when he tells you good-bye and asks that all the comrades keep up the work without ceasing — can you understand just what our duty is? Can you feel how traitorous we on the outside are unless we do a thousand times more in the future than in the past?

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