

A 1918 Anti-War Speech Sent Eugene V. Debs to Prison

Do Today's Activists Face the Same Threat?

Fifth Estate Collective
Eugene V. Debs

2003

On June 16, 1918, four months before World War One's end, prominent labor organizer and political activist, Eugene V. Debs, delivered a speech at a Socialist Party convention in Canton, Ohio. The speech led to his prosecution under the Espionage Act for interfering with the draft. He received a 10-year prison sentence and was stripped of his US citizenship. He eventually served two years and eight months behind bars before President Harding commuted his sentence.

Debs ran for President on the Socialist Party ticket five times, with the last occurring in 1920 while he was in prison. He received nearly one million votes.

The anti-war portions of this speech reprinted below are as relevant now as they were 85 years ago. They are excerpted here. The full text is available at www.thememoryhole.org

from the Anti-War Speech by Eugene V. Debs

Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder. In the Middle Ages, when the feudal lords who inhabited the castles whose towers may still be seen along the Rhine, concluded to enlarge their domains, to increase their power, their prestige and their wealth, they declared war upon one another. But they themselves did not go to war any more than the modern feudal lords, the barons of Wall Street, go to war.

The feudal barons of the Middle Ages, the economic predecessors of the capitalists of our day, declared all wars. And their miserable serfs fought all the battles. The poor, ignorant serfs had been taught to revere their masters; to believe that when their masters declared war upon one another, it was their patriotic duty to fall upon one another and to cut one another's throats for the profit and glory of the lords and barons who held them in contempt. And that is war in a nutshell.

The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose—especially their lives.

They have always taught and trained you to believe it to be your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at their command. But in all the history of the world you, the people, have never had a voice in declaring war, and strange as it certainly appears, no war by any nation in any age has ever been declared by the people.

And here let me emphasize the fact—and it cannot be repeated too often—that the working class who fight all the battles, the working class who make the supreme sacrifices, the working class who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses, have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace.

It is the ruling class that invariably does both. They alone declare war and they alone make peace. Yours not to reason why; Yours but to do and die. That is their motto and we object on the part of the awakening workers of this

nation. If war is right, let it be declared by the people. You who have your lives to lose, you certainly above all others have the right to decide the momentous issue of war or peace.

You need, at this time especially, to know that you are fit for something better than slavery and cannon fodder. You need to know that you were not created to work and produce and impoverish yourself to enrich an idle exploiter. You need to know that you have a mind to improve, a soul to develop, and a manhood [sic] to sustain.

They are continually talking about your patriotic duty. It is not their, but your patriotic duty that they are concerned about. There is a decided difference. Their patriotic duty never takes them to the firing line or chucks them into the trenches.

And, now for all of us to do our duty! The clarion call is ringing in our ears and we cannot falter without being convicted of treason to ourselves and to our great cause. Do not worry over the charge of treason to your masters, but be concerned about the treason that involves yourselves. Be true to yourself and you cannot be a traitor to any good cause on earth.



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Fifth Estate #360, Spring, 2003

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