

Eugene Debs

I write this testimony from jail where I serve a 10 year sentence for speaking my views in what I believed was a democratic society. I am a socialist because I believe the profits of a business should be enjoyed by not only the owner of the business but also the laborers whose sweat made the product possible. Capitalism is an oppressive and selfish system where a few very wealthy and powerful men control all the sources of power and wealth, keeping the masses of common laborers away from that access. They tell us we can achieve the American dream and publicize the very small percentage of people who really do to keep the laborers believing in this corrupt system. In reality most workers are born poor and will die poor. I'm not even opposed to people being poor. I'm opposed to a few being so wealthy they have more money than they know what to do with, like J.P. Morgan, who dreamt of building himself a pyramid in Egypt to fill with his treasures priceless treasures and keep his possessions around him in death. There is no reason Mr. Morgan should not share his wealth with his laborers who are working 12-14 hour days for so little pay they can't feed or clothe their families. His workers are sharing apartments made for one family with two or three families while he owns numerous homes and has the most expensive luxury goods. This is what I oppose, these ridiculously extreme differences between rich and poor. My system, socialism, allows everyone to "own" the company and make decisions democratically by electing representatives from each department of the company. This allows all workers an opportunity to share their views and share in the profits.

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer these questions:

1. Is this character real or fictitious? What is his current situation?
2. What is Debs' view of capitalism? Provide an example of why he feels this way.
3. What is Debs' political and economic system called? Why does he like it?

One example of how the wealthy control world events is the Great War. The industrial nations of the world sent the sons of the laboring class to the battlefields of Europe in order to control the most colonies and resources around the world. They say this war was to preserve the honor and integrity of their nations, but we say it was a land grab among the powerful nations. Why would the nations do this? Because the governments are controlled by the wealthy businessmen like Henry Ford who rely on cheap raw resources from Africa, South America, and Asia to ensure the highest profits for themselves. It is my moral duty to speak out against this kind of war. America should only go to war to defend itself. It should not be going to war to line the pockets of businessmen like Henry Ford and J.P. Morgan, especially not with the blood of the sons of the laboring class.

To quote one striker at a trial for Sedition like mine, he said: "You ask me why the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World) is not patriotic to the United States? If you were a bum without a blanket; if you had left your wife and kids when you went

west for a job, and had never located them since; if your job had never kept you long enough in a place to qualify you to vote; if you slept in a lousy, sour bunkhouse, and ate food just as rotten as they could give you and get by with it; if deputy sheriffs shot your cooking cans full of holes and spilled your grub on the ground; if your wages were lowered on you when the bosses thought they had you down; if there was one law for Ford, Suhr, and Mooney, and another for Harry Thaw; if every person who represented law and order and the nation beat you up, railroaded you to jail, and the good Christian people cheered and told them to go to it, how do you expect a man to be patriotic? This war is a business man's war and we don't see why we should go out and get shot in order to save the lovely state of affairs we now enjoy." (Zinn 1999, p. 373)

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

4. Describe Debs' reasons for speaking out against the war. Why does he feel the United States should not be involved?

In order to get me to stop discussing my views, the government has passed the Espionage Act. It made it a crime to interfere with the government's recruiting of troops or to give information that dealt with national defense. You could be fined \$10,000 and put in jail for up to 20 years for violating any of these vague laws. If a person refused to perform a military service, you could also be punished. I was jailed for speaking out against the war and the draft. Could there be a more prominent example of a dictatorship than the government forcing someone to go die in a war in a foreign country for a cause in which you do not believe. I believe in a democracy where the government is controlled by the wishes of the people. Forcing people to fight in a war against their will is not a democracy. For criticizing this law because it violates our basic freedom of speech, I was jailed in 1918 for 10 years.

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

5. What is Debs' complaint about the Espionage Act? Why did he feel he must break this law?

The other reason I am constantly under suspicion is the Sedition Act which makes it a crime to speak or write against the government or the Constitution. I break this law because it is immoral. The one frustration I have is that the government constantly accuses me of being a Russian Bolshevik who is trying to spread communist revolution to America and overthrow the government. It is only through my writing and speaking that I can hope to explain that I denounce the Bolshevik movement as also corrupt. I am not a member of the communist party in America for that very reason. However, no one will listen to my speeches or read my editorials long enough for me to make this clear to them. Instead they use their paranoid hysteria about the Russian revolution to blind them to the very real and important criticisms I make of this country's powerful wealthy elite and my very real suggestions for peaceful solutions. This is what free speech is supposed to protect, a free exchange of ideas so we can find

solutions to our social ills. If I and others like me are constantly stifled and silenced, how can we grow and ethically prosper as a nation?

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer this question:

6. What is Debs' complaint about the Sedition Act? Why did he feel he must break this law?

One of my main complaints is the government is violating the First Amendment to the Constitution by limiting my rights to free speech, press, and assembly. They say they are defending democracy, but actually they are the biggest destroyers of it. Democracy does not mean everyone will agree. Democracy means we allow people to disagree in public. A. Mitchell Palmer and J. Edgar Hoover are shredding your Constitution and denying our basic freedoms. You may be tempted to put up with it because you don't like my views. However, if they can take my freedoms, what would stop them from taking yours?

With your group, pause in your reading to discuss and answer these questions:

7. List some individuals whom Debs singled out as leaders of the problems he addresses and explain his complaint about each individual.
8. What is Debs' most important point about why he should not be in jail? What is he using to defend himself?